Thank You, Ma'am (by Langston Hughes)

She was a large woman with a large purse that had everything in it but hammer and nails. It had a long strap, and she carried it slung across her shoulder. It was about eleven o'clock at night, and she was walking alone, when a boy ran up behind her and tried to snatch her purse. The strap broke with the single tug the boy gave it from behind. But the boy's weight and the weight of the purse combined caused him to lose his balance so, intsead of taking off full blast as he had hoped, the boy fell on his back on the sidewalk, and his legs flew up. the large woman simply turned around and kicked him right square in his blue-jeaned sitter. Then she reached down, picked the boy up by his shirt front, and shook him until his teeth rattled.

After that the woman said, "Pick up my pocketbook, boy, and give it here." She still held him. But she bent down enough to permit him to stoop and pick up her purse. Then she said, "Now ain't you ashamed of yourself?"

Firmly gripped by his shirt front, the boy said, "Yes'm."

The woman said, "What did you want to do it for?"

The boy said, "I didn't aim to."

She said, "You a lie!"

By that time two or three people passed, stopped, turned to look, and some stood watching.

"If I turn you loose, will you run?" asked the woman.

"Yes'm," said the boy.

"Then I won't turn you loose," said the woman. She did not release him.

"I'm very sorry, lady, I'm sorry," whispered the boy.

"Um-hum! And your face is dirty. I got a great mind to wash your face for you. Ain't you got nobody home to tell you to wash your face?"

"No'm," said the boy.

"Then it will get washed this evening," said the large woman starting up the street, dragging the frightened boy behind her.

He looked as if he were fourteen or fifteen, frail and willow-wild, in tennis shoes and blue jeans.

The woman said, "You ought to be my son. I would teach you right from wrong. Least I can do right now is to wash your face. Are you hungry?"

"No'm," said the being dragged boy. "I just want you to turn me loose."

"Was I bothering *you* when I turned that corner?" asked the woman.

"No'm."

"But you put yourself in contact with *me*," said the woman. "If you think that that contact is not going to last awhile, you got another thought coming. When I get through with you, sir, you are going to remember Mrs. Luella Bates Washington Jones."

Sweat popped out on the boy's face and he began to struggle. Mrs. Jones stopped, jerked him around in front of her, put a half-nelson about his neck, and continued to drag him up the street. When she got to her door, she dragged the boy inside, down a hall, and into a large kitchenette-furnished room at the rear of the house. She switched on the light and left the door open. The boy could hear other roomers laughing and talking in the large house. Some of their doors were open, too, so he knew he and the woman were not alone. The woman still had him by the neck in the middle of her room.

She said, "What is your name?"

"Roger," answered the boy.

"Then, Roger, you go to that sink and wash your face," said the woman, whereupon she turned him loose—at last. Roger looked at the door—looked at the woman—looked at the door—*and went to the sink.*

Let the water run until it gets warm," she said. "Here's a clean towel."

"You gonna take me to jail?" asked the boy, bending over the sink.

"Not with that face. I would not take you nowhere," said the woman. "Here I am trying to get home to cook me a bite to eat and you snatch my pocketbook! Maybe, you ain't been to your supper either, late as it be. Have you?"

"There's nobody home at my house," said the boy.

"Then we'll eat," said the woman, "I believe you're hungry—or been hungry—to try to snatch my pockekbook."

"I wanted a pair of blue suede shoes," said the boy.

"Well, you didn't have to snatch *my* pocketbook to get some suede shoes," said Mrs. Luella Bates Washington Jones. "You could of asked me."

"M'am?"

The water dripping from his face, the boy looked at her. There was a long pause. A very long pause. After he had dried his face and not knowing what else to do dried it again, the boy turned around, wondering what next. The door was open. He could make a dash for it down the hall. He could run, run, run, run, *run!*

The woman was sitting on the day-bed. After a while she said, "I were young once and I wanted things I could not get."

There was another long pause. The boy's mouth opened. Then he frowned, but not knowing he frowned.

The woman said, "Um-hum! You thought I was going to say *but*, didn't you? You thought I was

going to say, *but I didn't snatch people's pocketbooks.* Well, I wasn't going to say that." Pause. Silence. "I have done things, too, which I would not tell you, son—neither tell God, if he didn't already know. So you set down while I fix us something to eat. You might run that comb through your hair so you will look presentable."

In another corner of the room behind a screen was a gas plate and an icebox. Mrs. Jones got up and went behind the screen. The woman did not watch the boy to see if he was going to run now, nor did she watch her purse which she left behind her on the day-bed. But the boy took care to sit on the far side of the room where he thought she could easily see him out of the corner of her eye, if she wanted to. He did not trust the woman *not* to trust him. And he did not want to be mistrusted now.

"Do you need somebody to go to the store," asked the boy, "maybe to get some milk or something?"

"Don't believe I do," said the woman, "unless you just want sweet milk yourself. I was going to make cocoa out of this canned milk I got here."

"That will be fine," said the boy.

She heated some lima beans and ham she had in the icebox, made the cocoa, and set the table. The woman did not ask the boy anything about where he lived, or his folks, or anything else that would embarrass him. Instead, as they ate, she told him about her job in a hotel beauty-shop that stayed open late, what the work was like, and how all kinds of women came in and out, blondes, red-heads, and Spanish. Then she cut him a half of her ten-cent cake.

"Eat some more, son," she said.

When they were finished eating she got up and said, "Now, here, take this ten dollars and buy yourself some blue suede shoes. And next time, do not make the mistake of latching onto *my* pocketbook *nor nobody else's*—because shoes come by devilish like that will burn your feet. I got to get my rest now. But I wish you would behave yourself, son, from here on in."

She led him down the hall to the front door and opened it. "Good-night! Behave yourself, boy!" she said, looking out into the street.

The boy wanted to say something else other than "Thank you, m'am" to Mrs. Luella Bates Washington Jones, but he couldn't do so as he turned at the barren stoop and looked back at the large woman in the door. He barely managed to say "Thank you" before she shut the door. And he never saw her again.

Excerpts from **CRASH**

by Jerry Spinelli

It was a sunny summer day. I was in the front yard digging a hole with my little red shovel. I heard something like whistling. I looked up. It was whistling. It was coming from a funny-looking dorky little runt walking up the sidewalk. Only he wasn't just walking regular. He was walking like he owned the place, both hands in his pockets, sort of swaying lah-dee-dah with each step. *Strollll*-ing. Strolling and gawking at the houses and whistling a happy little dorky tune like some Sneezy or Snoozy or whatever their names are.

And he wore a button, a big one. It covered about half his chest. Which wasn't that hard since his chest was so scrawny.

So here he comes strolling, whistling, gawking, buttoning, dorking up the sidewalk, onto my sidewalk, my property, and all of a sudden I knew what I had to do, like there was a big announcement coming down from the sky: Don't let him pass.

The stands were empty. A school bus moved in the distance beyond the football goalpost. Under the crossbar and between the uprights, like in a framed picture, stood three people.

For once, Webb's parents didn't look so old, not compared to the man standing between them. He was shorter than them, and real skinny, like the prairie winds were eroding him away. But he was standing straight and by himself—no cane, no walker, just two legs. Ninety-three years old. Maybe it was the Missouri River mud.

The thought came to me: they would have liked each other, Scooter and Henry Wilhide Webb III. Two storytellers. Both from the great flat open spaces, one a prairie of grass, one of water. Both came to watch when no one else was there.

Why exactly was he here? Did he know about me? Did he know his great grandson could not win the race-off, and so would not run in the Penn Relays?

I wondered if Webb felt safe in his great grandfather's bed.

The cinder track crunched under my feet. There were five of us in the race: me, Webb, two other seventh graders, and a sixth grader. The coach put us in lanes. Me and Webb were side by side.

Again, he hadn't said a word to me all day. We milled around behind the starting blocks, nervous, shaking out our arms and legs, everything as quiet as if the coach had already said, "Ready."

The other team members—jumpers, throwers, distance runners—had all stopped their practicing to watch. A single hawk, its wingtips spread like black fingers, kited over the school, and suddenly I saw something: a gift. A gift for a great grandfather from North Dakota, maybe for all great grandfathers. But the thing was, only one person could give the gift, and it wasn't the great grandson, not on his fastest day alive. It was me.

I hated it being me. I tried not to see, but everywhere I looked, there it was.

The gift.

"Let's go, boys," said the coach.

A voice closer to me said, "Good luck."

It was Webb, sticking out his dorky hand, smiling that old dorky smile of his. No button. I shook his hand, and it occurred to me that because he was always eating my dust, the dumb fishcake had never won a real race and probably didn't know how. And now there wasn't time.

"Don't forget to lean," I told him. His face went blank. The coach called, "Ready."

I got down, feet in the blocks, right knee on the track, thumbs and forefingers on the chalk, eyes straight down—and right then, for the first time in my life, I didn't know if I wanted to win.

"Set."

Knee up, rear up, eyes up.

The coach says the most important thing here is to focus your mind. You are a coiled steel spring, ready to dart out at the sound of the gun. So what comes into my head? Ollie the one-armed octopus. He didn't disappear till the gun went off.

I was behind—not only Webb, but everybody. No problem. Within ten strides I picked up three of them. That left Webb. He was farther ahead of me than usual, but that was because of my rotten start.

At the halfway mark, where I usually passed him, he was still ahead, and I still didn't know if I wanted to win. I gassed it. The gap closed. I could hear him puffing, like a second set of footsteps. Cinder flecks from his feet pecked at my shins. I was still behind. The finish line was closing. I kicked in the afterburners. Ten meters from the white string we were shoulder to shoulder, breath to breath, grandson to great grandson, and it felt new, it felt good, not being behind, not being ahead, but being even, and just like that, a half breath from the white string, I knew. There was no time to turn to him. I just barked it out: "Lean!" He leaned, he threw his chest out, he broke the string. He won.

Excerpts from **A LONG WALK TO WATER**

by Linda Sue Park

Salva lowered his head and ran.

He ran until he could not run anymore. Then he walked. For hours, until the sun was nearly gone from the sky.

Other people were walking, too. There were so many of them that they couldn't all be from the school village; they must have come from the whole area.

As Salva walked, the same thoughts kept going through his head in rhythm with his steps. *Where are we going? Where is my family? When will I see them again?*

There were now three women giving water to the men on the ground.

Like a miracle, the small amounts of water revived them. They were able to stagger to their feet and join the group as the walking continued.

But their five dead companions were left behind. There were no tools with which to dig, and besides, burying the dead men would have taken too much time.

Salva tried not to look as he walked past the bodies, but his eyes were drawn in their direction. He knew what would happen. Vultures would find the bodies and strip them of their rotting flesh until only the bones remained. He felt sick at the thought of those men—first dying in such a horrible way, and then having even their corpses ravaged.

If he were older and stronger, would he have given water to those men? Or would he, like most of the group, have kept his water for himself?

It was the group's third day in the desert. By sunset, they would be out of the desert, and after that, it would not be far to the Itang refugee camp in Ethiopia.

I am alone now.

I am all that is left of my family.

His father, who had sent Salva to school . . . brought him treats, like mangoes . . . trusted him to take care of the herd. . . . His mother, always ready with food and milk and a soft hand to stroke Salva's head. His brothers and sisters, whom he had laughed with and played with and looked after. . . . He would never see them again.

How can I go on without them?

But how can I not go on? They would want me to survive . . . to grow up and make something of my life . . . to honor their memories.

Excerpts from **RIDING FREEDOM**

by Pam Muñoz Ryan

"Thanks, Vern. I wish I could stay with you and work with the horses, but . . . I'd be in the kitchen and I'd be missin' Justice and frettin' 'cause I wouldn't get to see Charity's foal . . . or help you name it."

"I know. I know, Miss Charlotte," said Vern. "You gotta do what your heart tells you."

"I won't ever forget you," said Charlotte.

"I guess I'm not likely to forget you, Miss Charlotte."

"Here were six strong horses waiting for her commands, her tugs on the reins, to tell them which way to go. She yelled, "Haw" and "Gee" to get them to bear left and right, like she did when she was riding one horse or driving two.

She wished Hayward could see her. And Vern. Vern would have never let her get out of that wagon until she figured out the turns. Just like when he taught her to ride, he kept putting her back on Freedom [her horse] after each fall, saying, "Every time you fall, you learn somethin' new 'bout your horse. You learn what not to do next time."

"What are you blabberin' about? The mail's gotta go through, same as them passengers."

Ebeneezer put his hand on Charlotte's shoulder. "Now listen, don't you pay them passengers no mind. You are what you are. And what you are, is a fine horseman. And the best coachman I ever saw. You remember that. Under the circumstances, there ain't nothing left for you to do but your job. So get to it."

Charlotte looked square at Ebeneezer.

Ebeneezer looked square back at Charlotte and said, "You're the coachman. You're in charge, so load 'em up."

The Chaser, by John Collier

Alan Austen, as nervous as a kitten, went up certain dark and creaky stairs in the neighborhood of Pell Street, and peered about for a long time on the dime landing before he found the name he wanted written obscurely on one of the doors.

He pushed open this door, as he had been told to do, and found himself in a tiny room, which contained no furniture but a plain kitchen table, a rocking-chair, and an ordinary chair. On one of the dirty buff-colored walls were a couple of shelves, containing in all perhaps a dozen bottles and jars.

An old man sat in the rocking-chair, reading a newspaper. Alan, without a word, handed him the card he had been given. "Sit down, Mr. Austen," said the old man very politely. "I am glad to make your acquaintance."

"Is it true," asked Alan, "that you have a certain mixture that has-er-quite extraordinary effects?"

"My dear sir," replied the old man, "my stock in trade is not very large-I don't deal in laxatives and teething mixtures-but such as it is, it is varied. I think nothing I sell has effects which could be precisely described as ordinary."

"Well, the fact is. . ." began Alan.

"Here, for example, "interrupted the old man, reaching for a bottle from the shelf. "Here is a liquid as colorless as water, almost tasteless, quite imperceptible in coffee, wine, or any other beverage. It is also quite imperceptible to any known method of autopsy."

"Do you mean it is a poison?" cried Alan, very much horrified.

"Call it a glove-cleaner if you like," said the old man indifferently. "Maybe it will clean gloves. I have never tried. One might call it a life-cleaner. Lives need cleaning sometimes."

"I want nothing of that sort," said Alan.

"Probably it is just as well," said the old man. "Do you know the price of this? For one teaspoonful, which is sufficient, I ask five thousand dollars. Never less. Not a penny less."

"I hope all your mixtures are not as expensive," said Alan apprehensively.

"Oh dear, no," said the old man. "It would be no good charging that sort of price for a love potion, for example. Young people who need a love potion very seldom have five thousand dollars. Otherwise they would not need a love potion."

"I am glad to hear that," said Alan.

"I look at it like this," said the old man. "Please a customer with one article, and he will come back when he needs another. Even if it is more costly. He will save up for it, if necessary."

"So," said Alan, "you really do sell love potions?"

"If I did not sell love potions," said the old man, reaching for another bottle, "I should not have mentioned the other matter to you. It is only when one is in a position to oblige that one can afford to be so confidential."

"And these potions," said Alan. "They are not just-just-er-"

"Oh, no," said the old man. "Their effects are permanent, and extend far beyond the mere casual impulse. But they include it. Oh, yes they include it. Bountifully, insistently. Everlastingly."

"Dear me!" said Alan, attempting a look of scientific detachment. "How very interesting!"

"But consider the spiritual side," said the old man.

"I do, indeed," said Alan.

"For indifference," said the old man, they substitute devotion. For scorn, adoration. Give one tiny measure of this to the young lady-its flavour is imperceptible in orange juice, soup, or cocktails-and however gay and giddy she is, she will change altogether. She will want nothing but solitude and you."

"I can hardly believe it," said Alan. "She is so fond of parties."

"She will not like them any more," said the old man. "She will be afraid of the pretty girls you may meet."

"She will actually be jealous?" cried Alan in a rapture. "Of me?"

"Yes, she will want to be everything to you."

"She is, already. Only she doesn't care about it."

"She will, when she has taken this. She will care intensely. You will be her sole interest in life."

"Wonderful!" cried Alan.

"She will want to know all you do," said the old man. "All that has happened to you during the day. Every word of it. She will want to know what you are thinking about, why you smile suddenly, why your are looking sad."

"That is love!" cried Alan.

"Yes," said the old man. "How carefully she will look after you! She will never allow you to be tired, to sit in a draught, to neglect your food. If you are an hour late, she will be terrified. She will think you are killed, or that some siren has caught you."

"I can hardly imagine Diana like that!" cried Alan, overwhelmed with joy.

"You will not have to use your imagination," said the old man. "And, by the way, since there are always sirens, if by any chance you should, later on, slip a little, you need not worry. She will forgive you, in the end. She will be terribly hurt, of course, but she will forgive you-in the end."

"That will not happen," said Alan fervently.

"Of course not," said the old man. "But, if it did, you need not worry. She would never divorce you. Oh, no! And, of course, she will never give you the least, the very least, grounds for-uneasiness."

"And how much," said Alan, "is this wonderful mixture?"

"It is not as dear," said the old man, "as the glove-cleaner, or life-cleaner, as I sometimes call it. No. That is five thousand dollars, never a penny less. One has to be older than you are, to indulge in that sort of thing. One has to save up for it."

"But the love potion?" said Alan.

"Oh, that," said the old man, opening the drawer in the kitchen table, and taking out a tiny, rather dirty-looking phial. "That is just a dollar."

"I can't tell you how grateful I am," said Alan, watching him fill it.

"I like to oblige," said the old man. "Then customers come back, later in life, when they are better off, and want more expensive things. Here you are. You will find it very effective."

"Thank you again," said Alan. "Good-bye."

"Au revoir," said the man.

Excerpts from **HOPE WAS HERE**

by Joan Bauer

We walked across the street to the old Buick that was packed to the hilt with everything we owned and had a U-Haul trailer chained to the back.

It was May 26. We were heading to Mulhoney, Wisconsin, to start work in a diner there that needed a professional manager and cook (Addie), was short on waitresses (me), and was giving us an apartment. The man we were going to work for had been diagnosed with leukemia and needed help fast. I don't mean to sound ungenerous, but working for a close-to-dying man didn't sound like a great career move to me. I had to leave school right before the end of my undistinguished sophomore year, too.

I hate leaving places I love.

We were about to get into the car just as Morty the cabdriver double-parked his Yellow taxi.

Good old Morty. The first time I waited on him, he unloosened his belt a notch before he even looked at the menu. I knew I had a true believer.

I raised my hand to a great tipper.

"You always took care of me, kid!" He shouted this from across the street as a UPS truck started honking at him to move his cab.

"I tried, Morty!"

"Wherever you go, you'll do okay. You got heart!"

The UPS driver screamed something heartless at Morty, who screamed back, "Watch your mouth, big man in a brown truck!"

I didn't know what kind of customers I'd get in Wisconsin.

She grabbed my hand and gave it a squeeze.

Addie never promised that life would be easy, but she did promise that if I hung with her the food would be good.

Believe me when I tell you, I know about survival.

I was born too early and much too small (two pounds and five

ounces). For the first month of my life I kept gasping for air, like I couldn't get the hang of breathing. I couldn't eat either; couldn't suck a bottle. The doctors didn't think I would make it. Shows what they know. My mother didn't want the responsibility of a baby so she left me with Addie, her older sister, and went off to live her own life. I've seen her exactly three times since I was born—when she visited on my fifth, eighth, and thirteenth birthdays.

Each time she talked about being a waitress. What made a good one ("great hands and personality"). What were the pitfalls ("crazed cooks and being on your feet all day"). What was the biggest tip she ever got ($300 from a plumber who had just won the instant lottery).

Each time she told me, "Hon, leaving you with Addie was the best thing I could have done for you. You need constants in your life." She had a different hair color each time she said it.

Addie's been my number-one constant. . . .

Because of this, I don't buy into traditional roles. My favorite book when I was little had pictures of baby animals, like foxes and lambs and ducklings, who were being raised by other animals, like dogs, geese, and wolves.

Addie said it was our story.

I stared out the window as the Buick roared west to whatever.

Harrison Beckworth-McCoy, my best male friend at school, . . . had given me a goodbye present, and I was opening it now as Addie pushed the Buick through Ohio. Inside the box was a small glass prism that caught the sun. A hand-printed note from Harrison read, "New places always help us look at life differently. I will miss you, but won't lose you."

Harrison was always saying sensitive things like that, which put him instantly on Jocelyn Lindstrom's male sensitivity chart. He was the only male either of us knew who had made the chart consistently over twelve months. Donald Raspigi, who occasionally said sensitive things like "Nice sweater," had been on twice.

Enter memories, sweet and sour.

Harrison and me baking enormous mocha chip cookies for the high school bake sale and having them stolen on the Lexington Avenue subway.

Harrison's African fighting fish, Luther, who ate Chef Boyardee ravioli without chewing.

Harrison reading my mother's photocopied annual Christmas letter that she sent to family and friends—"Dear Friends. . . ." (She'd cross out "Friends" and write in "Addie and my little Tulip.") Harrison commenting that motherhood should be like driving a car—you should have to pass a test before you get to do it legally.

I held the prism up to the light. The sun hit it and showered colors through the windshield. "Now isn't that something?" Addie said, smiling at the sight. "Yeah." I looked out the window, trying not to cry.