

LEVELED BOOK • Q

Emily



Written by Katherine Follett
Illustrated by John Kastner

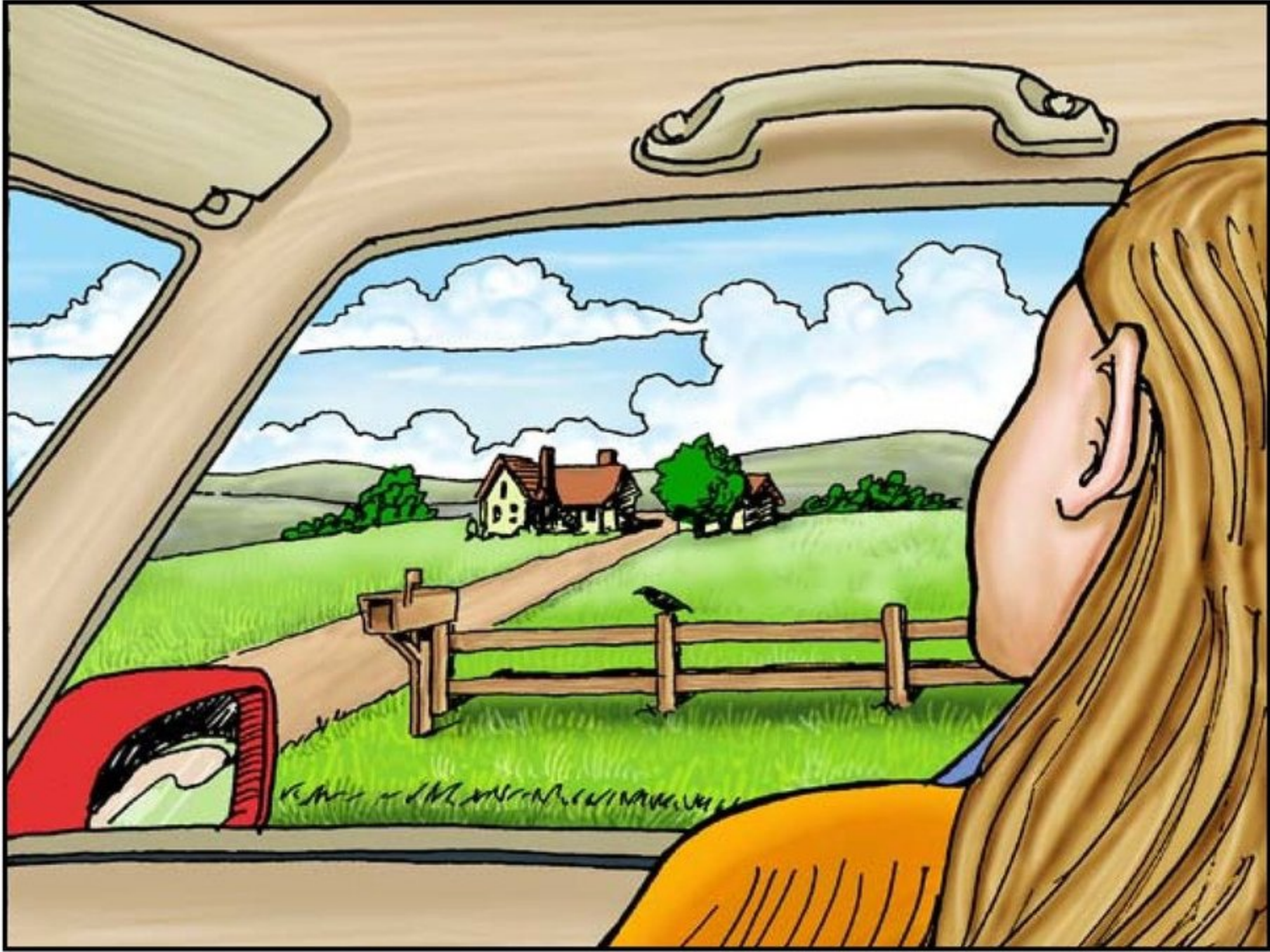
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I sat motionless in the passenger seat, feeling trapped in my tight seat belt while Mom sang along with her tapes and pointed at everything she spotted on the roadside. She even read the signs aloud, as if I couldn't comprehend them on my own.

"Crawford, fifty kilometers—there it is, Baby, that's the town we're headed to. How many miles is fifty kilometers, Mary?"

"I dunno," I sulked, folding my arms.

"Oh, Mary, please don't be moody, not today. I told Harry all about how polite and intelligent and cheerful you are," she said.

Harry was my mother's new boyfriend, her "significant other," she called him. She'd met him at a business meeting when her company bought the company Harry worked for, and since then she'd been driving over the border to Canada every weekend to see him, leaving me at Dad's. Don't get me wrong, I loved staying with Dad, but I missed my Mom-weekends. We used to make popcorn and watch late-night TV, then sleep in and eat cold breakfast cereal together.

Now, when she came to pick me up on Sunday afternoons, she always looked glowing and energetic—and much happier than she ever looked after a weekend spent with me. Last Monday she said something about her and Harry getting married, and that this trip might be the time when he pops the question. The only obstacle before him was meeting me.

"I'll be sugar and spice and everything nice, I promise," I said sarcastically, staring out at the Canadian countryside. It pretty much resembled the American countryside only . . . it was more Canadian, somehow. Bigger and emptier, just as I imagined Harry; bigger than Dad, with an enormous head with lots of empty space inside.

The landscape started to get more hilly, with houses and buildings visible. Mom exited off the highway and drove into a town that looked like any boring American town; no guys in flannel logging shirts or those big ridiculous hats with earflaps. Mom seemed to get fidgety and excited, singing even more loudly as we drove through the neighborhoods. She pulled into the driveway of a gray, two-story house with a big front porch.

“Please be cooperative,” Mom said, drawing me toward her to plant a big kiss on my forehead before getting out of the car. Onto the porch of the house stepped a man, a man who was kind of slight, with wire-rimmed glasses and thinning hair. Mom sprinted up the steps and flung her arms around him, kissing him hello, and he said something I didn’t hear.

“Not yet,” my mother replied. I got out of the car and stood by it for a second. “Come on, Mary,” Mom said, motioning me forward. I went onto the porch and shook Harry’s hand, not wanting to admit to myself that he sort of had a nice smile.

“Nice to finally meet you, Mary,” he said. “Are you ready for your surprise?” I waited for a moment, not reacting until I could figure out what was going on.

“Emily!” he called into the house. No one had told me about meeting anyone else. I looked to my mom, who smiled nervously. I thought maybe Emily was a new puppy Harry had bought to make me like him, but then a girl stepped from behind the door. She was about my height, with brown hair and the same neat little nose as Harry. There was a tense moment when we all stood still, Mom and Harry waiting while Emily stood with both arms behind her back, holding one elbow with the opposite hand.

From the look on Emily’s face, I knew that Harry had given her exactly the same speech that my mother had given me. He hoped she would be nice and get along so the two of them could continue being happy together. I wasn’t sure about the idea of Mom and Harry getting married, but Emily and I were in the same boat—there was no reason for us not to be friends. I smiled at her, and when she looked up, she smiled back.

“Want to come up and see my room?” she asked, releasing her hands from behind her back.

“Sure,” I said, and I could hear Harry and Mom sigh with relief. Emily smiled again, taking my hand and leading me inside the house.

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