

Middle Grade Story - Copy and line editing sample by permission of author Leah McClellan, Editor

Li picked up a pebble and tossed it toward the glowing eyeball. The light slowly closed and went away. I squinted and tried to see better, but I could only see worse. Now there was nothing. I thought I saw some movement, like maybe something was happening in there, but I couldn't really tell. But I wasn't about to get closer.

"Hey, did it move?" I asked.

"I think so," Li whispered.

"Let's follow it!" Lu said, excited but still hushed.

I didn't have a verbal response to that, but I gave him my best Are you crazy? look with my mouth contorted and eyes wild. I looked up to Li who was higher up than both of us, and he gave me his embarrassed smile that said I'm not really going to smile, but I can't help it because it's actually pretty funny. He's very talented. He can say about seven different sentences with just a look.

While I was reading Li's face, Lu moved down and slid into the den. The eyeball was gone. Lu started sliding faster, and I grasped for his arm, then his hand, then anything I could get. I grasped the collar of his shirt, but I couldn't get hold of it.

"Lu!" I screamed.

"Dad!" he screamed. The top of his head changed from a sparkle of sun-streaked blond to darkness in an instant. He was gone.

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Chapter 3

The Heart of Parkness

“Lu!” I screamed.

“Lu!” Li screamed and looked at me. But there wasn't a sound.

Pepper looked up to announce his decision and bolted in the next instant. Since Kite Park is so small, we hadn't used his leash, and he knew it. He was gone, lost in the depths of the deep, dark cave.

Unlike a dog, however, Li and I had to make a rational decision. I was pretty sure we had to go in. The seconds ticked by, and I weighed our options. But did we have any options? Lu and Pepper had just disappeared in a cave. There was no more time to think.

Li made the decision and clambered in. He stopped, still in the entrance, and looked back at me. He said nothing. There was nothing to say. He faced the darkness and slid into the cave. He was gone.

Within half a second, I thought about calling the police, looking around for help, screaming, yelling, or ... what? How could anyone help now? There was no time. There was now and there was later. It had to be now.

I scooted toward the darkness and didn't look back. And with one big push, I was in. I was gone.

The last of the evening light was behind me, and within two seconds and ten feet, I was sliding down a tunnel of complete darkness. I didn't know if I should scream to alert the kids or even the dog, and in my hesitation I did nothing. Nothing but slide. I was somehow comfortable on my butt, and I could keep my head up to see where I was going. It was slippery, and I wasn't sure I could slow down even if I dragged my hands, but then again, why stop? I had no idea where I was. I had no reason to stop.

It was a surprisingly smooth ride, and I glided easily. Too easily, in fact. Was I the first? Not the last as I thought? Was it a trick? Where did the tunnel lead? Where were my boys? I floated deeper into the mountain.

Up ahead, a glow appeared, and I squinted. Not that squinting ever helps. Within another second, I could see that the tunnel opened wider, and something was situated to the right. I could see some sort of path or chute, a deep groove that I was sliding in, but over to the right was something that looked like a den. How could there be a glow? What was the light source? It looked like a candle.

I couldn't stop sliding, but again I had no reason to. And it was a candle, a white candle that burned on top of a rock and lit up an area covered with straw. There was something on the straw,

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Commented [LM3]: When you see a bunch of little words like those that follow, it's usually a "preposition salad" that needs to be trimmed.

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but I couldn't make it out. A body? An animal? A person? A blanket? Beyond the straw and the candle, it looked like there was another opening, maybe a passageway. It was hard to tell, and I was sliding fast in a dirt groove, so it's not like I had time to whip out my iPhone, snap a photo, and check the facial recognition or the GPS coordinates.

And something else glowed: the eye of an animal. Or was it human? Then another glow. Another eye. They followed me as I zoomed by. I kept sliding, and they were soon behind me as I entered once more into darkness.

I zipped down for another few seconds when a glow like the sunset color of the world above surrounded me. It was the never-appreciated-until-now light at the end of the tunnel, and I skidded to a halt under a bush surrounded by trees, more bushes, daylight, and cement slides. I was out and to my left was Li. To my right was Lu.

Before I could say anything, I discovered the hierarchy of our own family kingdom when Li stared with enormous eyes and screamed, "Where's Pepper?"

Commented [LM8]: Not sure what you mean here. Pepper comes first? Or since he asked about the dog and not you then dog comes first? Unsure...maybe add a brief sentence to explain. Or maybe reword. "our own family kingdom" sounds like a comparison to another one, but which one?

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Chapter 4

Do We Stay or Do We Go?

“But Pepper slid down before you,” I said to Li.

“And after me,” said Lu.

We all looked around. Maybe Pepper had scampered into the bushes or, if he were really smart, he would have run as far as possible from the spooky tunnel. He was somewhere, just not here.

“Pepper!” we cried one by one. “Pepper! Treat! Treat!” But there was nothing: no people, no dogs, and only the sound of our valiant cries.

“He must still be in the cave,” said Lu.

We took turns peering into the tunnel of darkness. Li screamed into the opening.

“Pepper! Come on, boy! Pepper!”

We waited for a response—a yelp, a cry, a bark, or a whimper, but there was nothing.

Li scrambled a short distance into the cave. It was maybe three feet tall and three feet wide. How had we never noticed this? That it was obscured by bushes in a corner of the little city park didn’t matter. We had walked right by it many times.

“Pepper!” Li shouted. Nothing.

“I could climb back in,” Li said, as he moved deeper into the cave. He took a few steps, then fell and slid back down. He started up again.

“Press your hands against the sides,” I suggested.

He followed my advice and moved a few more steps. He made slow progress, but I had an adult thought: *What are we doing? I’m supposed to be the adult, and now Li is crawling into a dark cave to find our dog. We need to stop, think, plan, call the police, or at least call their mother. We can’t just scamper back into a cave. It’s just not a grown-up thing to do without thinking first.*

Li made his way slowly but surely. We could only see his shoes.

“I can see a little bit of light,” he said.

I wasn’t sure that was a good thing or a bad thing. Was that the candle we saw before? Who puts a candle in the middle of a tunnel in the middle of ... I looked around. Where were we anyway?

“Li,” I yelped. But I didn’t know what to say. Should I let him go in? Or not? What were our options? Call for help? Were we in danger? It’s just some old tunnel, right? Maybe it was left over from a war. War? What war? There weren’t any wars in San Francisco. Who built this thing and who was inside?

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Commented [LM12]: Added this early on to establish setting.

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“Yeah?” Li answered, but I couldn't see his feet anymore. I had to decide whether he should keep going or we should stop, think and ... what?

“What can you see now?” I asked. My logical, rational adult disappeared once again with my curiosity. Thinking, planning, worry, hurry? What for? We had a tunnel to explore! And a dog to find. I reminded myself sternly.

“I see that little light,” Li said, from somewhere up ahead. His words had barely been uttered when he slid back down and slammed into my knees. He was shaken, but when he looked up, he smiled his *I'm embarrassed-but-this-is-fun* smile.

“Did you hear anything?” I asked.

“No,” he said, “But I saw that little light. Maybe Pepper is up there.”

“Maybe.” I rubbed my chin.

“We need to save him,” he pleaded.

We often played Hero and Victim in Distress; it was one of our favorite games. Sometimes just falling from the bed to the floor qualified as a victim who needed a hero. It was great fun. Save me, save me! The victim yelled.

Maybe they thought this was a game. Li was extraordinarily loving and kind when it came to, well, certain people and animals. But when he was on your side and you might be in harm's way, he'd save you before you knew what had happened.

“Pepper is in the cave!” Li planted his hands firmly on his hips and stuck out his lower lip. “We have to go back in and get him.”

I could think of one reason to go back in and get him and twenty-five reasons not to.

“OK,” I said. My adult was back, and I had less conviction and more fear now than times when molten lava and dragons threatened to destroy us. Make-believe dragons back in their cozy bedroom sounded like a great alternative to what we were about to do.

Li started climbing up the tunnel.

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Chapter 5

Just Give In

“Wait!” I whispered hoarsely behind Li.

“What?” Li turned to me.

But I didn't have anything to say. I was as bad as his classmates who raised d their hands when they can't answer the question and don't have a comment but just want to be called on. Li hobbled and wobbled forward once again in the slippery tunnel.

“Lu,” I turned toward my younger boy. “Do you want to go after Li or after me?”

I was just stalling. He contorted his face into his melting monster imitation, which he uses when he doesn't have an answer to a question he thinks is stupid. He nods and bobs his head, sticks out his tongue, and his eyes go googly like a bewitched doll.

“Why don't you go now after Li and then I'll be last?” I asked my dorky goblin.

He gave me a thumbs up and made his way in the tunnel by holding onto the sides as best as he could. I looked back into the small park, and I didn't see anyone or anything that made me think we shouldn't do this. My fatherly notion that it was probably a bad idea was the only thing blocking our progress.

I followed my boys to the tunnel entrance.

“Li, what do you see?” I asked. The silence in the park and the sound of our panting and slipping shoes were not distracting enough.

“That light is getting brighter,” he said.

I couldn't see him ahead of Lu, but from the sound of his voice, he couldn't have been too far.

“OK, let me know when you see something,” I replied.

I can't stand it when movie actors say things so obvious they just don't need to be said. And now I was a guilty party. Of course Li would tell me when he saw something. And of course he would be careful and try not to slip, so I didn't need to tell him. Or did I?

I analyzed the situation further. No actor needs to say “Hurry up!” in a scene when someone is running from the killer. “Hold on tight!” is kind of silly, too, when they're dangling from a rope outside of a building. It's just empty filler dialog. But here I was reminding him to let me know if he sees something, as if he'd keep it to himself and only later, maybe at dinner, mention in passing that he saw a giant alligator. We moved along.

“Ooh, I see a candle!” Li whispered. He was the leader, so of course he was excited to report whatever he saw. “I'll investigate. There's an opening. Wait a second, what's that?”

“What's what?” I whispered back, as if whatever was in there didn't already know that two boys, a father, and a dog were in their tunnel.

“It's on a rock. There's a bed of straw and ... “

“And what?”

“There's another opening.”

“Hold on. We're almost there,” I said.

I scrambled as fast as I could behind Lu's feet. Within seconds, we were all back in the opening where the candle still flickered. The open area was as large as a minivan; the ceiling was tall enough for Lu to stand up. Li stayed by the candle.

“Don't burn yourself!” I said. Li loved playing with candles. That trait was certainly passed on through generations since I liked them too.

“Look behind the rock, behind the candle,” Li said. “There's another tunnel.” Lu and I moved toward Li and looked where he pointed. I suppose if I were more of a detective, I could have estimated how long the candle had been burning and calculated how long ago someone had lit it. But who lights candles in the middle of tunnels under city parks? I wasn't sure I wanted to know.

“Let's go in,” Lu said.

I was going to hold my tongue before I, yet again, mentioned the potential pitfalls of going still deeper into the unknown. Was I just a party pooper or a regular parent? Maybe both. Maybe neither. I was about to say, “Wait!” or “Hold on!” or some other nonsense, but when I said nothing, Lu and Li stared at me, waiting for an answer.

“OK. Let's go.”

Commented [LM15]: Great that you give a comparison. I was thinking something much smaller.