

# PICTURES of ME



BY  
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Summary: This year the "fifth-farewell" project at St. Joe is to make a meaningful picture of yourself and present it to the rest of the class, and Annie, who has a horror of public speaking, is terrified, especially since most of the other children make fun of her; but Annie collects words, and when a boy she likes suggests that she use her collection, it gives her an idea--if she can find the courage to present it.

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*This book is about courage and friendship.*

*It's also about the love  
between mothers and daughters.*

*I dedicate it to my mom  
and to my two precious daughters.*



word #983

# conundrum

a puzzling question or problem



Mr. Summer tears off another number on the countdown chart. Only forty-eight days left until the end of fifth grade. And today's the day we finally find out about our project—The Fifth Farewell. It's a St. Joe's tradition as old as our school, which is as old as our town, which makes it a big deal. I can't explain what's so important about it. It just is. It always has been. I guess it's like saying goodbye to elementary school.

I squirm around in the most uncomfortable chair in the universe, trying to find a comfortable spot. Nothing works. Sitting up perfectly straight with my shoulders back and both feet flat on the floor—the kind of posture that makes my mom smile? Nope. Tucking one leg under me and

wrapping the other one around my chair leg? Still, no. Oh, well. I rest my chin on my hand. And wait.

There it is.

From down the hall comes the sound of sneakers slapping against the floor. The slapping gets louder as the sneaker-wearer gets closer. Then three beats of silence before a locker door slams. And right on cue, my best friend, Taylor Matthews—her black, curly hair flying in all directions—bounds into the classroom.

“Hey, Annie.” Taylor skids past my desk at the exact moment the bell rings, just like she does every day.

“You made it.” I grin.

Taylor smiles back at me with all of her teeth—and all of her braces—and flops into her chair.

“Okay, class. Let’s get started,” says Mr. Summer. I think it’s funny that our teacher’s name is Mr. Summer since summer is the only time kids don’t have to think about teachers. But it’s not summer vacation yet—not for forty-eight more days. I slide my notebook and sparkly pen out of my desk.

“It’s time to reveal some of the specifics of this year’s Fifth Farewell.” Mr. Summer writes the name of the project on the smart board in giant letters. I write the same thing at the top of a blank page in my notebook in much smaller letters.

“I want this project to inspire you and hopefully get your creative juices flowing,” he says. Snorting laughs and gagging sounds from around the room mean the boys think there’s something disgusting and funny about the thought of someone’s flowing juices. They have a point.

Mr. Summer slides his glasses back up his nose and waits for quiet. “We’re doing something a little different this year.” Different how? Different why? The Fifth Farewell is usually an essay or a poem. Last year’s fifth grade interviewed all the teachers in the school and made a class newspaper. Those are good ideas. Regular ideas. Also, since words and writing are two of my very favorite things, they are things I’m good at.

“For *your* Fifth Farewell, I want each of you to create a self-portrait and present it to the class.” My pen slips out of my hand and falls to the floor. I leave it there. Mr. Summer keeps talking. “Your self-portrait should tell us who you are and, if you choose, who you want to be. That’s all I’m going to give you in the way of instructions for now.” He looks around the room and beams at us. I don’t beam back because any idea that includes the words “present it to the class” isn’t something to smile about. Not. One. Bit.

The speaker next to the clock crackles and the voice of our principal, Father Richard, comes on.

Chairs slide back as we all rise, and stand next to our desks—almost like a dance. Prayers come first, followed by the Pledge of Allegiance, and then announcements. It's the same as every day. My lips move automatically, praying and pledging along with the rest of my class.

In the middle of Father Richard's description of today's disgusting-sounding hot lunch menu, Jalen Moore pokes me in the back with his finger. Sitting in front of Jalen means getting poked just like that—in the same spot—at least fifteen times a day. “What are you going to do?”

I shrug without turning around, or picking up my pen, or breathing much.

Out of all the words Mr. Summer said about our project, five of them bounce around inside my brain over and over again. I scribble a word that sums it all up on a scrap of paper and tuck it into my pocket. *Conundrum*. It doesn't matter if I know what a Mr. Summer-version of a self-portrait is supposed to look like. I mostly don't. But even if I did and even if I made something completely amazing, there's one thing I can't do. One thing I won't do.

Present it to the class.

When the bell finally rings for lunch, I bend over to pick up my backpack and two identical pairs of shoes come into view. I look up to see two

nearly identical girls with identical, snotty looks on their faces: Madison Marinelli and Addison Kim. Fabulous.

“Hey, Puddles,” says one of the girls. It doesn’t actually matter which one. “What are you going to do for your presentation? Or will you chicken out again, like always?” Madison makes what I guess is supposed to be a clucking sound and they both walk away, laughing and clutching each other’s arms.

These are the popular girls in the fifth grade. Why they are popular is a mystery. They aren’t nice to anyone and have no other friends. Still, they have power. They like making the rest of us miserable. And they’re good at it.

Madison and Addison started calling me Puddles halfway through second grade. Well, Madison started it and, like always, Addison just followed along.

There’s a reason they call me Puddles—a horrible, humiliating, wake-up-in-the-middle-of-the-night-thinking-that-it-happened-all-over-again reason. And that’s why I have a *conundrum*. If our Fifth Farewell means getting up in front of the class and presenting something, I’m going to fail because I won’t do it.

I can’t.

word #984

# inkling

a partial idea or understanding



The rest of the day goes by without any other unpleasant surprises or insults. Sometimes that's the best you can get from a day in fifth grade. We were reminded that we have a science test tomorrow. Ugh. I'm terrible at science. This does not make my dad happy. He's an actual scientist with microscopes and a white lab coat and beakers. He hopes I'll be one, too. Fat chance. And not just because the enormous safety goggles hurt my nose. Luckily, Taylor is a genius at science and she always helps me study.

This morning while I was scarfing down my bowl of cereal, Mom told me Taylor is coming home from school with me today, but not for a fun reason. Taylor's parents are taking her little brother Zach to see another new doctor.

Zach is four years old and super cute. He has the same curly, black hair and brown eyes as Taylor, but not her smile. He almost never smiles. Zach has a hard time talking to people and playing with other kids. Mr. and Mrs. Matthews took him to a lot of doctors before they found out what was wrong. Taylor says she doesn't want to talk about it. So we don't. And she doesn't want anyone else to know. So no one else does.



When school is over for the day, Taylor and I come in the front door, kick off our shoes and drop our backpacks.

“Come on.” I start walking toward the kitchen.

“Wait.” Taylor holds herself perfectly still, closes her eyes and breaths in through her nose—loudly.

“Cheese.” Another sniff. “Tomato sauce.” A third sniff, the biggest one yet. “Pineapple.” Taylor’s eyes open and she starts race-walking toward the kitchen, dragging me along behind her.

“Hi, girls,” says my mom. “The pizza just came out of the oven. Be careful, it’s still hot.” Mom passes us each a plate with a giant slice on it. Almost before she finishes talking, Taylor and I each take a gigantic bite. Yum! Totally worth burning the roof of my mouth.

“Did you have a good day?”

Before I answer, I take another bite of pizza, even bigger this time. I take my time chewing thoroughly and wash it down with two big gulps of water.

“Well, Mr. Summer told us what we have to do for our Fifth Farewell,” I say.

“Yeah, Mrs. Humphrey. Annie’s been freaking out about it all day.” I dig my elbow into Taylor’s side which she totally knows means “shut up, right now.” It doesn’t work. Probably because my mom plops another piece of pizza onto Taylor’s plate—one with extra pineapple. She knows—and I know—Taylor is powerless against pizza, especially pineapple pizza. It makes her talk more.

“So we’re supposed to do some kind of self-portrait, right? It was kind of confusing, but I figure I’ll just do a collage with some pictures of me and a bunch of stuff I like. You know, pizza, cupcakes, cookies, oh and other stuff besides food.” Taylor giggles. “I must be hungry.”

“Annie, you can do a scrapbook,” says my mom. “We have plenty of pictures. And I can help you. It’ll be fun!” She claps her hands . . . twice.

Oh, no. My mom is crazy for scrapbooks. My little sister Daisy and I star in enough scrapbooks to fill an entire bookshelf in our family room. Nothing’s too boring to earn a page of honor in one of my mom’s scrapbooks.

I am not a scrapbooker.

"Thanks for the idea, Mom. Not sure about a scrapbook. I'll think of something." I try not to roll my eyes. I don't want to hurt her feelings, but I need to put a stop to this scrapbook idea before she gets out the fancy paper and special scissors.

"And we have to present our projects," I say it kind of casual and drink the rest of my water.

"Oh?" My mom brushes some crumbs off the counter, not looking at me. "Present them to whom?"

"Our class, I guess," I say. "But Mr. Summer didn't really say. Do you think we'll have to do it in front of all the parents, too? Or the whole school?" My voice goes higher and higher. It's possible I'm forgetting to breathe. I grip Taylor's arm a bit too hard. She squeaks.

My mom looks at me with her we'll-talk-about-this-more-later face and smiles without showing any teeth. I don't want to talk about it now, and I won't want to talk about it later. Talking about feelings is one of my mom's favorite things, but a lot of times I just can't talk about stuff. I write it down instead. I look like my mom on the outside; we're both tall and sorta skinny with blue eyes and straight brown hair. But inside I'm quieter, like my dad.

Taylor pulls me off my stool. "Science test tomorrow, remember?"

My head nods and my feet follow her, but my stomach still feels like it's down near my feet doing flips and flops, and my head is starting to sweat. And this is only the beginning of what would happen if I actually tried to stand up in front of our class and do or say anything.

Taylor and I escape up the stairs to my room. I flop across my bed one way; Taylor flops the other. I close my eyes and concentrate on breathing. It's easier to concentrate with my eyes closed. Because when they're open, all I see is pink. My room looks like someone came in and threw up pink everywhere. The carpet is pink, the walls are pink and the comforter on my bed is pink. Even the curtains around both windows are pink.

My mom thinks I should love it. I don't. I don't like pink. I never have. I never liked princesses or ballerinas either. I like anything with polka dots, reading books, and collecting words. The only thing in my room that makes it feel like it's actually mine is the bookshelf crammed full of my books. My mom said we can redecorate when I turn twelve. My birthday is in November. I'm counting the days. Today makes 228.

"Do you really want to study for science now?" I ask. "Because if you want, you could go back and talk to my mom some more." I give her my squinty eyes look. This time—finally—she gets it.

"I'm sorry. But you know I lose my mind when I eat her pizza." So not an excuse. "But hey, now you've got a great idea for your project. You can do a scrapbook." Taylor doesn't even finish talking before she bursts out laughing. "You know what they say, 'A picture is worth a thousand words.'" And she's off laughing again.

"Oh, shut up." I swat her with my pillow. I can't help but laugh, too. "But wait, what did you say?"

"You should do a scrapbook?"

"No, the part after that," I say.

"A picture is worth a thousand words?" Taylor's scrunched up face means she's not following me.

"Yeah."

"Not sure I get that, but okay."

Taylor and I worked on science until her mom picked her up, which was right before my mom asked me to set the table for dinner. And now, after dinner, it's the same as every night. My mom helps Daisy with her bath while my dad packs our lunches for tomorrow. I'm supposed to be finishing up my homework. I'm not. Instead, I keep thinking about what Taylor said about a picture being worth a thousand words.

I plop down on the floor in front of my bookshelf. In the middle of the bottom shelf are the hardcover *Charlotte's Web* I got for my seventh birthday, the book of saints that was my mom's

when she was a kid, and my collection of Curious George stories. Daisy says I should give Curious George to her—which is so *not* happening. And behind Charlotte, the saints, and George hides a notebook. It looks like an ordinary school notebook. It's not.

Some people, like Taylor, collect stuffed animals. Grandma and Grandpa Humphrey collect magnets from all fifty states—their fridge is covered. But me, I collect words. I love to learn new words and find words that mean exactly the right thing or that feel fun in my mouth. Words like stupendous, persnickety and frankfurter. I like words that sound like what they mean—like scintillating, thwack and shimmer. And I've written them all down, in this notebook.

I flip through the pages and smile at how big and sometimes crooked the letters are on the first bunch of pages. That was second grade. I watch my handwriting get smaller and neater, and roll my eyes when I come to last year's pages where every lowercase *i* or *j* was dotted with a heart. Page after page filled with words. I keep going until I find a blank page, take the scrap paper out of my pocket, and copy down today's word: *conundrum*—a puzzling question or problem. Yep. The perfect word for today, and maybe even for that day in second grade Madison never lets me forget.

I started my collection when I was in second grade. I used to carry it around in a special tote bag and show it to people. And one day I stood up to share it with my entire second grade class. Only I never actually got to tell everyone about it. Because it turns out I get really nervous when a bunch of people are staring at me, waiting for me to say something. And that time when I got really nervous, I froze. *All of me* was so frozen I didn't notice what was happening until the kids in the front of the class started pointing and laughing. And then Madison Marinelli shouted, "Look. It's a puddle." And there was a puddle . . . right where I was standing.

That was the first time Madison Marinelli called me Puddles; but not the last time. It *was* the last time I stood up in front of the class and did anything. And I never shared my word collection with anyone again. Nobody—not even my mom or Taylor—knows I'm still doing it.

Could my words somehow be my self-portrait? Maybe.

But it doesn't matter because I'm not going to get up in front of the class.

I won't.

I can't.