

## Hope as *Sweet* as APPLE PIE

The little town was called Hickory Grove, in Iowa. Sunlight dappled through the large, sprawling cottonwood trees, shining on the sidewalks as kids rushed to school on bikes. The sweet brownstone, Hickory Grove Elementary, lay just down the narrow cobblestone street named Ashes Road.

Hickory Grove was the only school in the tiny township, with only one classroom for each grade and a sturdy old foundation made of sandy red brick. Sure, the school was the only one for miles around, but it made up for the distance in heart. Every single student knew one another inside and out-especially the fifth grade. It was said that there was a magic about the fifth grade. Perhaps it was that they had known each other for so long; or maybe it was that their teacher knew them so well. But whatever it was, the fifth grade had a sparkle.

MONDAY, NOVEMBER 1

Miguel walked into his fifth grade classroom, his head hanging low. His backpack felt heavier on his shoulders than usual as he sat down. Class began, but no matter how hard he tried to focus on his fractions, Miguel's mind kept wandering off to his father. He thought about how his father was probably steering a giant battleship. He thought about how his father probably was planning a scheme to block off the attack. But most of all, he thought about whether his father was ever coming home. His father was in the Marines, and his son wondered about him every day... until today.

The day slugged on, until it was finally time for Miguel's favorite subject: Health, where they were learning about the digestive system. As an experiment, the teacher had brought in an apple pie for them to taste. She stood at the front of the room, the crispy apple pie sitting in front of her, cut into 5 equal slices, and asked if anyone would like to try it. Despite the lack of raised hands, Miguel's hand rose slowly and steadily into the air. His teacher beckoned him up, and she gave him a heaping slice of the pie. Miguel examined the mouth-watering apple filling, the golden crust weaving around the top, and the heavenly cinnamon scent as the steam rose up into the air. He stabbed his fork into the end of the pie and pulled the pie to his mouth, swallowing it down. A warm energy coursed through him, wrapping his body in a hot blanket. Suddenly all his thoughts of his dad disappeared as if a magician had yanked them from his mind. He smiled, enveloping the warmth. He couldn't think of anything but hope. His hope was as sweet as apple pie.

TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 2

A tear dripped down Libby's rosy cheek as she walked into her fifth grade classroom, memories of her puppy jamming into her head like dark gray storm clouds that just wouldn't leave. Libby tried, she really did, to pay attention, but thoughts of her dog bounding through her farmhouse hills as the sun shone bright on his golden fur just wouldn't leave. She thought about how she wouldn't have that lump of warmth on her feet at night. She thought about that slurping sound of her pup sipping from his water bowl. But most of all, she thought about how her puppy was gone forever.

The day slugged on, until it was finally time for Health class. Libby had wondered why Miguel had tried the apple pie their teacher was offering yesterday. Something about it just sounded, well, not right to her. The rest of the day, Miguel had looked perfectly fine, as if nothing had ever happened, while in the morning, his head was in his hands. However, when the teacher brought out the apple pie again today, Libby found her hand rising up into the air. She took a slice of pie, which was suspiciously still fresh and steaming, and walked back to her seat. She was about to let out another sob when she rose the fork to her tearstained face and into her mouth. Then, when Libby was about to think about her dog again, the thought was simply cut off. She felt a warm feeling race up her spine like a cozy embrace. All she felt was hope. Her hope was as sweet as apple pie.

WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 3

Jake sauntered into his fifth grade classroom, trying to keep his usual cool, but an uncertain expression took over his face. "Yo, Jake!" called Miguel. "Do you want to head over to the arcade tonight? They lowered the tickets to *only five bucks!*" Jake slunk down, trying to remain unnoticed. Unfortunately, Miguel found him. "No, really, Jake, let's go!" Jake pretended not to hear him. "I-I can't," he managed to stutter. Then he raced off to his seat. Jake tried to pay attention, he really did, but the thought circled around in his head like an endless audio loop: *You know your limits, Jake*, his parents would say. *One dollar a week, and that's it. No more.* He thought about years ago, when he could just slip a quarter into the ice cream vendor's hand and receive a tall, crispy wafer cone with creamy strawberry ice cream dripping down the side and rainbow sprinkles dotting the top. But now because the prices had inflated like a giant balloon, he couldn't join any of his friends. He thought about how he couldn't buy a fancy new bike like all of his classmates; he'd have to stick to his chipped old black one he shared with his little brother. But most of all, he thought about how his family's lack of money set him apart from everybody else.

The day slugged on, until it was finally time for Health class. For the third time this week, their teacher pulled out the apple pie and asked for someone to try it. It was just as delicious-smelling and steamy as the first day their teacher brought it out. Jake's mouth watered, and despite the voice in the back of his mind telling him to not eat it, his hand shot up. He walked to the front of the classroom to take a slice of pie, careful to avoid Miguel's gaze. When he returned to his seat at the back of the room, he nervously tried the pie. The second it hit his tongue, it felt like all his worries swirled in a cloud in his head and then slid right out and faded into the air around him. He was suddenly oblivious to all the eyes staring at him, all the worries that crowded his head. All he felt was hope. His hope was as sweet as apple pie.

THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 4

Cecelia stepped into her fifth grade classroom with a deep sigh. She dropped her backpack in her cubby, not bothering to pull out her lunchbox and binder for later in the day. She fell back into her chair with a *thump*. Pictures of her summer vacation flashed through her mind in a photo album of memories. Memories of before her parents announced they were getting divorced. She tried, she really did, to pay attention, but she couldn't. She thought about when she was younger, and she would peek through the bars of the staircase in her pajamas with her teddy bear hanging from one hand, hearing her parents bicker in low voices. She thought about her mom gazing into framed wedding photos and shaking her head, turning around with a sigh. But most of all, she thought about how things would never be the same with her parents.

The day slugged on, until it was finally time for Health class.. For the fourth time this week their teacher brought out the apple pie. Cece had been fascinated about why Jake, Miguel, and Libby had tried that pie. She didn't understand. Why was it there... and how did it look so perfect? So she was shocked when she felt herself raising her hand. Well, she sure did love apple pie. And fresh, golden, crispy, steaming and delicious apple pie? It was too good of an offer to pass up. She took a slice and stared at it, her stomach growling despite her sudden urge to push away the pie. She sat there, the heavenly cinnamon scent tickling its way up her nose in tendrils of steam, not touching the pie until Jake, who had already tried the pie, urged her to eat it. She looked up and was suddenly aware of all those eyes staring at her, boring into her as if trying to pry open her thoughts. She hurriedly scooped a bite into her mouth and *boom*, the snapshots of her worries just *poof*-disappeared. Warmth raced through her body, tingling as if she had just swallowed a warm fizzy drink. She closed her eyes, a slow smile spreading across her face. She felt nothing but hope. Her hope was as sweet as apple pie.

FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 5

Dawn stormed into her fifth-grade classroom and tossed her backpack into her cubby, not caring about her jacket spilling onto the floor. There was Cece, with her passion already cut out for her-reading. Miguel of course, with his video games. Jake with his cool-dude status and Libby with her dogs. *Argh!* Everybody already had their passion, and she felt stuck. She was absolutely sick of it! She felt steam was puffing out of her ears like a cartoon character. She plopped down in her chair with her book, not noticing it was upside down and not caring. She tried to focus, she really did, but her brain just wouldn't let her. She thought about her older sister, Leah, who loved track and field. She thought about her mom signing her up for various activities, trying to find one that stuck. But most of all, she thought about not having anything to define her. She was just boring, plain old Dawn.

The day slugged on, when it was finally time for Health class. Dawn had been so worried all week that she hadn't even paid attention to the mystical presence of the pie. As the teacher brought out the pie again, now with only one slice remaining, she knew she needed something to distract her so she raised her hand and collected her pie. She peered at the pie and the smooth apple filling with apple chunks and golden crust. Then she took a bite and all her frustration was just... gone. She smiled, thinking of fun times tickling her little sister and bike riding through the sticky, sizzling summer heat with her cousins. The sparkling warmth of the pie felt like a soothing hug from her grandma. Maybe her special thing was... family. All she felt was hope. Her hope was as sweet as apple pie.

#### EPILOGUE

It was Thanksgiving Break now, and Miguel, Libby, Jake, Cece, and Dawn were all at Miguel's house. Each one of them hadn't forgotten the sensation of the magical apple pie at school, and although all of their worried thoughts had returned, they were all more hopeful now. As they lounged in Miguel's basement, Libby spotted a tiny, aged scrap of paper tucked into a corner behind a bookshelf. Libby told Miguel and he hopped up from the couch and yanked it out from its hiding place. A recipe was scribbled on it in neat, loopy calligraphy. He read it over and a pure look of amazement crossed his face. The rest of the kids crowded around to read it.

#### HOPE AS SWEET AS APPLE PIE

*8 large apples, peeled and thinly sliced*

*¼ of all-purpose flour*

*¼ tsp. kosher salt*

*1 tbsp. Heavy cream*

*½ cup granulated sugar*

*1 tsp. ground cinnamon*

*2 tbsp. unsalted butter, small pieces*

*1 full dose of LOVE and 1 full dose of HOPE*

“We should make an apple pie stand to share it,” suggested Dawn. And that's what they did.

Artist statement:

I am hopeful because...

Hope is everywhere. It can be found in ordinary things and it's anywhere you look for it. So we always have it. And best of all, it can be spread and shared, which, if you think about it, is quite magical itself. I wrote my short story about a magical apple pie because it is a simple thing that can lift people up. Hope is about the small things in life that can make you feel good.