

CHILDREN'S LITERATURE NEW ENGLAND
Vermont August 1997

THE VILLAGE OF CHILDHOOD

Let me start by repeating myself, a bit. When I made the acceptance speech for the 1994 Newbery Medal, I spoke briefly about the years when I was eleven, twelve, and thirteen: when I lived in Tokyo. Here is that section of the speech:

We live there, in the center of that huge Japanese city, in a small American enclave with a very American name: Washington Heights. We live in an American style house, with American neighbors; and our little community has its own movie theater, which shows American movies; and a small church, a tiny library, and an elementary school; and in many ways it is an odd replica of a United States village.

(In later, adult years I was to ask my mother why we had lived there instead of taking advantage of the opportunity to live within the Japanese community and to learn and experience a different way of life. But she seemed surprised by my question. She said that we lived where we did because it was comfortable. It was familiar, it was safe.)

At eleven years old I am not a particularly adventurous child, nor am I a rebellious one. But I have always been curious.

I have a bicycle. Again and again - countless times - without my parents' knowledge - I ride my bicycle out the back gate of the fence that surrounds our comfortable familiar, safe American community. I ride down a hill because I am curious; and I enter, riding down that hill, an unfamiliar, slightly uncomfortable, perhaps even unsafe - though I never feel it to be - area of Tokyo that throbs with life.

It is a district called Shibuya. It is crowded with shops and people and theaters and street vendors and the day-to-day bustle of Japanese life.

I remember, still, after all these years, the smells: fish and fertilizer and charcoal;; the sounds: music and shouting and the clatter of wooden geta and wooden sticks and wooden wheels; and the colors: I remember the babies and toddlers dressed in bright pink and orange and red, most of all; but I remember, too, the dark blue uniforms of the schoolchildren: the strangers who are my own age.

I wander through Shibuya day after day during those years when I am 11, 12 and 13. I love the feel of it, the vigor and the garish brightness and the noise: all of such a contrast to my own life.

But I never talk to anyone. I am not frightened of the people, who are so different from me, but I am shy. I watch

the children shouting and playing around a school, and they are children my age, and they watch me in return; but we never speak to one another.

One afternoon I am standing on a street corner when a woman near me reaches out, touches my hair, and says something. I back away, startled, because my knowledge of the language is poor and I misunderstand her words. I think she has said, "Kirai-des'", meaning that he dislikes me; and I am embarrassed, and confused, wondering what I have done wrong; how I have disgraced myself.

Then, after a moment, I realize my mistake. She has said, actually, "Kirei-des'". She has called me pretty. And I look for her, in the crowd, at least to smile, perhaps to say thank you if I can overcome my shyness enough to speak. But she is gone....

What was going on there? I wrote about that memory for the Newbery acceptance speech but I didn't really think about it much, beyond the sensory details, and the wonderful coincidence of the fact that Allen Say - who that night was with me at the head table, about to accept the Caldecott Medal for Grandfather's Journey - had been one of the school-uniformed Japanese children that I was too shy to speak to, when I was eleven.

But now I have thought about it a lot. Recently, while writing all of this down, I've been thinking about my memory of shouting, and of the clatter of wood that I referred to. I remembered seeing the wooden wheels on the fertilizer carts; but for the rest of it - I didn't know any more what all that noise WAS, actually. I couldn't reach Allen, who was in New Jersey supervising the print run of his new book - but another acquaintance who lived in Japan explained that the wooden sticks, banged together - and the shouting - the large groups of young men wearing headbands, and carrying banners, which I remember - were Communist demonstrations. There were many of those in those years of government turmoil. Perhaps there are still. (Perhaps I was not, in truth, as safe as I felt, in Shibuya)

I don't know how you, this week, have chosen to define "village." For me, it means the self-contained place where the rules are known, the guidelines familiar, and where we feel safe.

Thinking about it, looking back, I realize that in 1948, in Tokyo, I was venturing out and away from from my village, and its safety, its familiarity, its security - the way all children must at sometime do. Because of my circumstances - the geography, which so clearly delineated two worlds, divided them even by language and hair color - my venturing forth was more dramatic, more specific, than most.

But I was performing the inevitable, often difficult task of the young: going out, assessing the new territory; returning, reassessing the old; and using that new knowledge to begin to create my own place in the world. Eventually leaving the village behind. But moving on, eventually, too, to a new village of my own.

Let me describe to you, now, a book character - one of my own book characters, since those are the ones I know best - who is doing the same thing.

No, his name is not Jonas.

His name is Sam.

Sam's mother is speaking. "I'm sorry, but I can't let you wear fangs in this house."

Sam frowned."How about if I keep them in my pocket?" he suggested.

Mrs. Krupnik thought about it. Finally she sighed. "Promise me you won't take them out of your pocket as long as you're in this house?"

"Even just to look at?"

"Even just to look at. I don't want those fangs to see the light of day. I don't think my heart can stand the sight of those fangs."

"But can I reach into my pocket and touch them?" Sam asked.

"Okay, but don't tell me when you're touching them. I don't want to know."

Sam's hand was in his pocket. "I'm touching them right now," he said.

"Sam! I told you not to tell me!"

"Oh. Okay, now I'm not touching them. Look - here are both my hands. Can I have my hot dog?"

Mrs. Krupnik put their lunch on the table and poured a glass of milk for Sam and a cup of coffee for herself.

Usually she talked to him a lot during lunch. Usually she asked him everything about that morning at nursery school, and what songs he had sung, and what stories he had heard.

But today Mrs. Krupnik didn't say much. "I'm sorry, Sam," she told him as she cleared the empty plates away. She sliced an apple and gave him a couple of slices. "I just seem to have a thing about fangs. I guess I suffer from Fang-phobia."

"What's that?"

"Fear of fangs," his mother explained. "Want more apple?"

Sam nodded, and she gave him two more slices.

"Do you think maybe you'll get over fangphobia?" Sam asked hopefully. "Maybe by tonight, when Daddy comes home, so I could - "

"Nope. Never."

Sam sighed. He finished his apple slices and took his plate to the sink. "I'm going up to my room," he announced.

"Okay," he mother said, "but remember what you promised, Sam? No fangs. Not in this house."

"I'm going to be very sad up there."

"I'm sorry to hear that. No fangs in this house," she repeated, looking at him.

His mother's face looked very certain, and her voice sounded very certain, so Sam trudged up the stairs to his room with a disappointed feeling. His hand went into his pocket and felt the fangs. His day was ruined.

Somewhere, Sam thought, there would be a nicer place to live. A place where people didn't have fangphobia. Maybe somehow he could find that place.

That was when Sam decided to run away.

The truth is, people - even nursery-school-age people like Sam - don't really need fangs, or a mother with fangphobia, to propel them out into the wider world. The writer needs that detail, in order to create a plot. But the child needs only the wider world and the fact that it exists beyond the village.

You could find the village of my childhood, the Washington Heights in the middle of Tokyo (it still exists; I will be there in November, to visit) on a good map of that city: near Meiji Shrine, beside the neighborhood called Shibuya.

And you could find Sam's. Though it is not identified by name in the books, Sam lives in Newton, Massachusetts, which is marked on any map, slightly west of Boston. But the village of Sam's experience is his own home and yard, no more than that.

But the essence of *village* is not, of course, a place on a map. It is simply the place where the rules are known, the landmarks are clear, the inhabitants are caring; it is the place where you feel secure.

Setting forth from such a place requires courage, maybe even anger. It also begins a process of acquisition.

Sam, wearing his fangs, carrying his traveling bag, and with a strong, self-righteous sense of purpose, sets out. His first acquisition is a destination, acquired when he meets the mailman.

Mr. Watson, spotting him, waved. "Hi, Sam!" the mailman called, walking up to where Sam stood on the sidewalk. "Going on a trip?"

Sam nodded. "To Alaska," he said.

"Wait a minute. Let me think for a minute." Mr. Watson closed his eyes tight and stood silently on the sidewalk. His lips moved a little, and Sam could hear him murmuring, "Nine, nine, six - "

Then he opened his eyes and grinned. "99668," Mr. Watson said. "That's the Zip code for Sleetmute, Alaska."

"Sleetmute?"

"Yep. Sleetmute. My goodness, I notice you have fangs, Sam. And a Band-aid on your forehead."

Sam nodded. "And mittens," he said.

I myself have never been to Sleetmute, Alaska. I found it on a map when I was writing the book, and I liked the sound of it: the stinging silence that the word implies. I expect one day I may hear from the children who live there, if the book about Sam makes its way that far north and west. I expect they will tell me about the about their families, their school, their friends - their community, their village - the familiarity, the security of it.

(I expect, too, that one day each of the children of Sleetmute will set forth on their own journey, their own process of acquisition and quest.)

Sam continues on. His next stop is at the home of his elderly neighbor, Mrs. Stein.

...You're one of my very best friends. (Mrs. Stein says, to Sam) I'll miss you when you're in - what was the name of that place?"

"Sleetmute."

"Yes, Sleetmute. It's a very long distance, Sam."

"It's because of fangs," Sam said unhappily. "I'm going to go lie around in a pile."

"I know." Gertrude Stein sounded very sympathetic. "Your mother mentioned that." She rose from her chair. It always took her a little longer than most people, getting out of a chair, because her legs were pretty old and pretty tired and pretty sore.

"Finished?" she asked Sam, reaching for his empty milk glass.

Sam nodded, and she took his glass to the sink.

"More cookies?"

Sam wiped the crumbs from his mouth with his napkin. "Could I maybe have some for my suitcase?" he asked. Then he added, "Please."

Mrs. Stein unzipped his bag and carefully placed a handful of chocolate-chip cookies, wrapped in a paper napkin, inside it, next to Sam's bear and on top of the rolled-up towel.

"There you are, Sam. Traveling food."

Now Sam has a destination, nourishment, and reassurance that he is cherished. His needs are the same as those of all of us who set forth in a search for our place in the world.

His next neighbor, Mrs. Sheehan, folds a soft plaid blanket and puts it into Sam's bag. She gives him a symbolic kind of protection against the world he is facing for the first time: the world of Sleetmute.

And Mr. Fosburgh across the street, puts a World Atlas into Sam's bag, providing him with directions:

Standing on Mr. Fosburgh's porch (with his sister, who has joined him temporarily), Sam looked around the neighborhood and could see that the sun was beginning to set. The trees along the sidewalk were making long shadows which seemed to reach across the street. Lights were beginning to appear in people's windows.....

"I don't like dark a whole lot," he said timidly. "I'm not scared of it," he added, "I just don't like it."

Mr. Fosburgh, about to close the door behind them, said, "Gee, Sam, you probably ought to start learning to like the dark. In Alaska, in the winter, it's dark all day long.

"See you later, Anastasia," he said. "And, Sam, I guess I won't see you later. So this is good-bye. I will truly miss you. I hope you'll send me postcards from Alaska. I especially would like to hear about the wildlife around Sleetmute."

"Is it really dark all day long?" Sam asked, suddenly.

"Only in winter," Mr. Fosburgh said. "Of course, winter's on its way right now."

"I don't have a flashlight!" Sam wailed.

"One minute," Mr. Fosburgh said. He whirred his wheelchair in reverse to the hall table, reached into a drawer, and whirred back. "Here you are. It's a small one. I think it'll fit into your pocket."

Sam took the miniature flashlight from him. He forgot to say thank you. "My pocket is full of fangs," he said. "There's no room for even a little flashlight."

"I thought you intended to wear your fangs, Sam," Anastasia pointed out. "Wasn't that the whole point of running away? So that you could wear fangs?"

So once again Sam took the fangs from his pocket and inserted them into his mouth. He made a face. They felt terrible, tasted terrible, smelled terrible. He tried to arrange his lips more comfortably but it was impossible.

He tested the little flashlight. When he pressed its switch and pointed it at Mr. Fosburgh's doormat, a feeble beam of light appeared.

"It's not a very powerful light, Sam, and the batteries are a little weak," Mr. Fosburgh said from the doorway. "You wouldn't be able to see a large herd of animals with it. But I believe you could illuminate one creature at a time."

"Creature?" Sam wiggled the little light at the doormat. Somehow the word 'creature' was just as terrifying as the word 'wildlife.' He thought that he could see a creature on the doormat: just a small creature, maybe an ant.

"Like an ant?" he asked Mr. Fosburgh, wiggling the light again.

"I was thinking more along the order of a bear," Mr. Fosburgh said. "I believe you could illuminate one bear at a time with that flashlight. At least you could if it were a small bear. Not a grizzly."

"Don't say grizzly," Sam whispered.

Sam has acquired a lot of equipment. He is armed with the benevolent gifts of his village: the nourishment, the knowledge, the protection - as he sets out. But his bag is too heavy, now. He is weighted now - as we all are when we venture from our secure places - with self-doubt, regret, misgivings, and an admirable sort of stubborn pride.

Before I take you with Sam to the conclusion of his journey - I want to turn to Jonas, in The Giver. When Ethel Heins asked me to come here this summer, she said that The Giver lent itself explicitly to the theme. (Of course she was right. Was Ethel ever NOT right?)

Jonas, the protagonist of The Giver, lives already in a in a community which is defined by the same definition I used earlier: the place where the rules are known, the landmarks are clear, the inhabitants are caring; it is the place where you feel secure.

I created the world of Jonas so that it would be clearer, more codified, more caring, and more secure than any true community I have ever known. I wanted it to be seductive. Yes, I wanted the reader to say; *this is a place that got it right. This is the place one would never want to leave.*

Marriages work. Crime doesn't exist. Courtesy prevails. Human discourse is practical and civilized. The rules of Jonas's community are delineated in thick volumes which the children willingly study and learn and obey. They are clearer than the rules of Sam Krupnik's house, and frankly, they make more sense. (Personally, I feel that Katherine Krupnik was somewhat arbitrary in her no-fangs-in-the-house ruling).

The inhabitants of the family units in Jonas's world are so caring in their studied intimacy and sharing that they could have sprung fully formed from a therapist's textbook. (By contrast, The Krupnik family, caring though they are, nevertheless explode now and then as all of us mortals have, into quarrels and conflict.)

Yet each of these boys, Sam and Jonas, are propelled from the community by a sense of betrayal and deprivation.

And I think I can say, now, looking back, that I rode my bicycle through the gates of my safe, secure Tokyo community for the same reason: the awareness of being deprived.

For Sam? Deprived of independence.

For me? Deprived of knowledge.

For Jonas? Deprived of honesty.

Each of us felt that we could find these things Elsewhere.

Did we? Armed as we were with maps and food and sweaters and plans and grit?

Sam returned home. Back to the original "village" of his house and family; back to the embrace of all those who loved

him and who had, without his knowledge, helped him on his journey because they understood its necessity. But he took back with him what he had found elsewhere: knowledge of his own power; new awareness of his role in the human community; pride in his own determination.

I returned home. Put away my bike and took up my own very American life. But I returned changed. I had felt the hand of a foreigner on my head and understood her language, though it was difficult. I had tasted things, exchanged smiles, and felt unafraid. It redefined my place in my own village: made it stronger, different, and new.

The question of whether Jonas "returned" is a question that I still receive in the mail every single day.

I am aware, looking back through the books that I've written - I think there are 23 - that there is always a journey from a village: sometimes a journey and a village of geography, always a journey and a village of the heart.

I've discovered, too, looking back, that such villages have Elders, the providers of wisdom. In my first book, A SUMMER TO DIE, it was a man I called Will Banks, who taught the young girl how to accept loss. Two books later, in one called AUTUMN STREET, it was my grandparents' cook - a real woman - who taught the child - who was me - the same thing.

It saddens me that in our whirlwind lives in the USA, not only has the village been largely lost, but so too its inhabitants. Its elders are disappearing, transmuted into retirees off on round-the-world cruises, returning with gifts that say, "My Grandma visited Acapulco and all I got was this crummy t-shirt."

My own granddaughter, three and a half, is growing up in Europe. She lives with her mother, my daughter-in-law, in a village of 500 inhabitants, which include her maternal grandparents. It is her grandfather, often, who walks with her to the village cemetery; together they water the flowers that they have grown from seed and planted on her Papa's grave. Walking back, they wave to the bakery man in his little truck, and to the farmer moving his cows along the little dirt lane toward their pasture. That is a gift to a little girl from a man who has never been - nor ever intends to go - to Acapulco.

My granddaughter's day-to-day life is a kind of scenario that I perhaps have tried to re-create in books, though I do it, I fear sometimes, for children who can only view it as fantasy. Some of their letters confide in me of lives far from any community of security, guideposts, or love.

Here is a letter I've saved for now 8 years.

It came from someone named Kimberly, in Louisville, Kentucky. Kimberly, who was ten when she wrote me this letter in 1989, had just read the book Anastasia Krupnik. She had liked it. It had made her laugh.

And she had discovered, by looking at the copyright date, that I had written it in 1979, the year she was born. She asked hopefully, in her letter, if maybe I had written it on October 22nd, her birthday.

Then she went on to tell me a little about her life:

"I have one brother and one sister. My mom and dad is defrosted (surely she must mean divorced? But she did write 'defrosted'). My mom has a boyfriend there getting married in January. My dad was married 2 times before my mom and so far he has 8 kids not including my brother. His dad lives in another state. My dad has a girlfriend she has 3 children. She's my first cousin but she's removed. Her children are my second cousins. My mom's boyfriend has a daughter she's spoiled like a rotten egg."

Here, I would suggest, is a child who has been betrayed. There is no safety in her village. There are no guideposts. For every letter I get which says self-confidently, "I am a Gifted Child," there are five - maybe ten - others from children like Kimberly who feel displaced, uncertain, and afraid. They are being forced to set out on journeys woefully unarmed.

Most of what I do as a writer I do by subconscious and whim and intuition. It is only in the looking back that I see patterns to what I have done, the way we sometimes take pleasure in reading a road map after the trip has come to an end: seeing where we turned, remembering why, and recalling with sighs or smiles the outcome of shortcuts or detours.

Let me look back with you now through a book yet unpublished to see if I can fit it into the pattern of villages fled and communities still to be found. I have the galleys with me of a book due out in October. When I sat down to write it this past winter, I had the usual choices to make: the first is always the gender of the protagonist. The two books I've quoted from tonight: SEE YOU AROUND, SAM and THE GIVER have both featured boys. More often - not surprisngly - I choose to write about girls.

This time I chose MALE - but the Imp of the Perverse took hold, and I chose for the first time to write about a non-human. The protagonist of this rather Dickensian book is a dog.

But the species of a hero does not really change the circumstances; and a dog, even a mongrel as this one is, begins his personal journey to selfhood from a place - soon to be lost - of utmost security.

....I remember only that we played and fought as infants, practicing our growls, learning our various postures and ear-placement, each with its own coded meaning; and chewing each other's still undeveloped tails. I recall our nudging each other aside in our quest for the perfect nipple, the one with

the best footing, the most abundant and dependable flow of lunch. We yipped and quarreled and our mother watched us with weary fondness, reaching out with one large paw from time to time to drag us back when we wandered on our wobbly legs too far from the curve of her belly.

We slept in a pile, warm against each other and all of us encircled by our mother, comforted by the deep rhythm of her heartbeat and rocked by the gentle heave of her body as she breathed.

Now and then she stood, stretched, and shook us loose. One brother in particular had such a strong, determined mouth that he dangled, feet waving, in the air, still attached, until Mom reached around impatiently, pried him away, and let him drop.

Then she would leave us alone. It is one of my first memories: the little chorus of whimpers, the squirming frenzy of our group as we sought to be cozy without her and cried with fear that she may not return.

The family. The place where there are rules and affection in equal measure; the place where one is safe.

And the place where language is learned. Remember Sam, in the first book about him, as he acquires language and tests its power?

Remember Jonas. Learning precision of language was one of the most important tasks of children in Jonas's well-ordered community.

(Remember Kimberly, for whom survival was paramount and precision of language - or grammar or spelling - was an irrelevancy; Kimberly, who said "My mom and dad are defrosted...")

In the world of my so-far unnamed mongrel dog, the power of manipulating words comes to him as a puppy:

The differences between us were beginning to be clear. My two brothers had from birth been relentlessly energetic and quarrelsome. They nipped at each other endlessly, shoving and pushing, making life into an exhausting contest. Inevitably they extended playful wrestling matches into real battles until Wispy and I scampered whimpering to our mother to be licked and calmed.

My mother gave them pet names which reflected their contentious personalities. Tug and Tussle, she called them. Then one day, as the boys were quarreling in a corner near the trash cans. while I lay quietly with Wispy enjoying a patch of sunshine that had worked its way around the side of the building, I said casually to my sister, "Listen to Thug and Muscle."

Wispy, who had been half asleep, opened her eyes. She giggled. "Thug and Muscle?"

I had surprised myself. "It just came out that way," I told her.

"Cute," Wispy said, and closed her eyes again.

I said it to myself several times, liking the sound of it, the way Tug turned into Thug and Tussle into Muscle. It was cute. Stretching there in the sun, listening to the boys fight, I tried a few more experiments with human words.

"Yip," I whispered to myself, as one of my brothers punctuated the morning with a small half-bark.

"Nip," I added, identifying the reason for his little pained sound.

"Grr," I said to myself thoughtfully. Then, after pondering for a moment, I added, with satisfaction, "Fur."

"Wake up, Wispy!" I urged my sister. "Listen to what I can do!"

She opened her eyes, yawned patiently, and listened while I explained to her how I was putting words together into rhymes. "What rhymes with cheese?" she asked me, and her little tail thumped against the ground. Wispy loved cheese more than anything.

I thought long and hard. Finally I whispered a hideous word to her, a word that Mother preferred us not to use. "Fleas," I said in a very low voice.

But in the way of dogs - and of book characters - the hero finds himself alone, betrayed by his mother ("a magnificent bitch", he calls her with rueful admiration, as she abandons her family and heads off with a handsome Doberman), separated from his beloved sister, and embarking on the journey we all make in search of a community.

Like Sam, like Jonas, he makes stops here and there, testing the waters, as it were - seeking mentors - assessing enemies - stockpiling strengths - being nourished and taught.

He spends a year living under a bridge with a homeless man, who gives him his first name, Lucky.

I didn't, of course, compare my first dinner with Jack to fine cuisine. It was shared stew from a can, with river water to wash it down for me, and a beer for Jack, who burped afterward without apology. But there was a sweetness to the camaraderie, and I felt a sense of safety which made up for the lack of elegance. I curled beside him under the tin, and we slept soundly together, covered by an old Army overcoat, frayed at the seams, which he tucked around us both.

From Jack he learns compassion, survival, and sorrow.

His next companion is a photographer who happens by chance to catch the roaming, once-again homeless dog in a fashion photograph...and who takes him home..

The photograph of me and the boy in the collapsed-muffin hat appeared publicly the next week, in a Sunday supplement called "Fashions of the Times." Both of us, the photographer and I, admired it extensively. He left the publication on the coffee table, open to that page, just in case any neighbors dropped by.

Late that morning I was lying on the floor, eating some leftover lasagna, while the photographer, wearing his fuzzy bathrobe, worked on the crossword puzzle and sipped coffee. The telephone rang.

"Yes," I heard him say, "he's my own dog.

"What breed?" He glanced over at me.

I tossed my head and yawned. What breed. As if it made the slightest difference. It is a shallow human indeed who actually believes that the flowing, silky hair and disdainful face of an Afghan makes it a more aristocratic dog than, say, a tri-colored shepherd fathered in the Outback by a roaming herding dog with a few minutes to dally. The distinction of a dog lies entirely in its innate character and intelligence, coupled with the early training of a diligent mother. I would match my wits and virtue against a best-of-show any time. And my tail, too.

Fortunately the photographer appeared to share my view. He winked at me, an odd human habit that I have learned to appreciate but have never truly understood. Then he shrugged, and said into the receiver, "Mixed. He's a unique mix." Unique. A pleasant word. In my mind, I coupled it with others like physique and sleek.

The photographer names him Pal. As Pal he achieves success as a model. But finally, betrayed by fame, dissatisfied with the shallow life that wealth provides, he runs away. Eventually he finds a true home, and his true name, with a little girl and her mother:

For the first weeks I was not certain whether, in fact, Emily's mother would allow me to remain. The plaintive "Can I keep him?" from a child most often brings about a no. So I felt that my tenure was uncertain. Then there began to be hints that I might stay. The bowl, for example, for a number of days they fed me from an old baking dish. But suddenly a new bowl appeared: a heavy ceramic bowl with, I am reluctant to describe, the word "FIDO" on its side. Heinous though the "FIDO" was, still it was clearly a dog bowl, purchased for me, an investment in my permanent residency.

Then, of course, the acquisition of a name. One cool evening, after dinner, as we sat by the fire, Emily said again, "Isn't he great?"

Her mother laughed and nodded, agreeing tacitly to my greatness. Then she said, "I guess he's a keeper."

"Hey, did you hear that, Keeper?" Emily asked in delight.

It became my new name. First I had been Lucky, then Pal. Now I was to be Keeper, it seemed. Well, there are worse dog names. I had met a dachshund named Kielbasa once.

I think children like - and need - happy endings: resolutions to the tangled and sometimes frightening journeys that they - and we - and characters in books - all make. They need to know that there are battles to be fought, and burdens

to be carried; but that there are villages to return to, and new villages yet to be claimed. If Sam can return, so can they. If Jonas can find Elsewhere, and change the world that betrayed him, so can they.

And there is one thing more. Here it is, at the ending of Keeper's story. Happy in the safety of his home with Emily, reunited with his longlost sister, Keeper finally battles - and defeats - the vicious bulldog who has terrorized him throughout the book. But he is terribly wounded. Still in a veterinary hospital, he raises his head painfully and greets his visiting loved ones with a subdued and stoic kind of courage.

But finally, in the privacy of my visit with my sister (for my human family had nudged her into my pen and then tactfully retreated, leaving us alone together), I broke down. At first, holding my head erect to look at the loving, sympathetic gaze of my homely but faithful sibling, I tried to maintain a devil-may-care attitude.

"Forward my feet!" I declaimed. "Upright my - "
But I lost control then, and howled with grief.
"Wispy," I wailed, "I have lost my glorious tail!"
She nuzzled my neck and licked my chin for comfort.
"You still have a glorious tale, " she reminded me gently.
"Why don't you tell it?"
And so I have.

That, I think, is the final essential ingredient of the true village, the place we seek from the time we first venture forth.

It is what Sam did, after his journey around the neighborhood, when all of his extended family gathered to have dinner together and he described his day.

It is what Jonas, warmed and comforted, would have been doing in the house with the lights and the music.

It is what I hope Kimberly, whose parents had been defrosted, is doing somewhere today.

The reconstructed village is the place where we heal, by telling our stories to one another.

Thank you for listening to mine tonight.