

THE HOUSE OF THE FUTURE

Rodney groaned and poked his paper idly with his pencil before forcing himself to finish the practice sheet. He hated multiplication tables, but he was in deep trouble with his mom, so he could not afford to waste any more time. Besides, he had a math quiz the next day; not that he cared very much about his grades. The wooden ship sitting on the shelf half-completed was the art that he devoted all his skills and imagination to. He could not understand why school, the part of his life that sometimes made him feel nearly sick to the stomach, was considered so important by his mom!

Rodney had done poorly in math and language arts in third grade, and his mom was determined to motivate him concerning his study habits so he would not repeat such a degrading performance this year in fourth grade. He sometimes felt bugged at his mom when she would temporarily confiscate his precious ship, although he knew better than to say so. Being sulky seemed a safe way of expressing his frustration.

But worst of all, his inability to excel at school made Rodney mad at himself. He didn't want to upset his parents and teachers, but he just couldn't be bothered. Every wonderful moment of piecing together his wooden ship was followed by pangs of guilt over neglecting his homework and the frowns of his teachers.



Rodney peeped at the clock and, very uncharacteristically, was glad that it was nearly bedtime. Finally he could put those studies out of sight for the night! Usually, his mom would have to pull him away from making features such as the miniature anchors and the ship's wheel and send him off to bed with reminders of the next day's classes. Not today, for Rodney knew that he had gone quite beyond the limits of his mom's patience and worse troubles would descend on him if he didn't go to bed, and also take his shower like a good boy ought to without being reminded.

As thoughts of the day's events drifted from his weary mind, Rodney found himself standing in front of a great house. Oddly, the whole thing was shrouded in a mist, making it difficult to determine exactly what sort of house it was, though he was able to tell it was incomplete and a work in progress. When he started to walk around the house to get a better view, he noticed several places with a gap where a brick had fallen out. Those gaps bothered Rodney as it seemed they would weaken the structure of the house. Why in the world didn't someone mend them?

After walking a full circle around the incomplete but very wide house, Rodney was about to turn away from it when he saw a large television-like screen next to the house. There was nothing on the screen when Rodney had first seen it, but as he approached, a scene swirled to life on its shiny black surface. A flush rushed up Rodney's cheeks as he watched himself gluing the mast onto his ship with a math book propped in front of it to hide his escape from homework. Then, the scene switched to the half-finished house. The flush on Rodney's cheeks changed to a look of horror as he saw a brick falling out from the right side of the house. He ran to the house to see if that brick had actually fallen out. Yes, there was the gap where the brick had been.



When Rodney turned back to the screen, a similar sequence occurred. This scene was of him reading a comic when he was meant to be writing a one-paragraph answer to a social studies question. Then, another brick fell out of the other side of the house. A cold terror seized Rodney's soul. Suppose this was really true! (For he already had a strange sensation that he was in an alternate world or at least dreaming. He was, of course, dreaming, but he did not yet know for sure.)

Rodney started counting up all the times he had hid away from doing his homework. How many bricks had already fallen out of that house? Could he find the fallen bricks? How could he fix it before it was too late and the house collapsed? Rodney ran around the mysterious house in circles, thrusting his hands through the gaps and trying not to cry.

A firm hand came to rest on Rodney's shoulder. Rodney was so absorbed in his thoughts that he was badly startled and screamed before whirling around to see a short, white-haired man dressed in a white robe with a gold sash. His first impression was that the man was an angel, and he was soon convinced of this when the man smiled at him and said, "I am Guide. Tell me your questions."

After Rodney had peppered the angel with many frantic queries, which the angel listened to patiently and without interrupting, he started with Rodney's first question. "The house is shrouded in fog because it is the house of your future character. It is not settled yet, so you cannot see it clearly. What it will look like by the time you grow up is for you to decide with every decision that you make now.

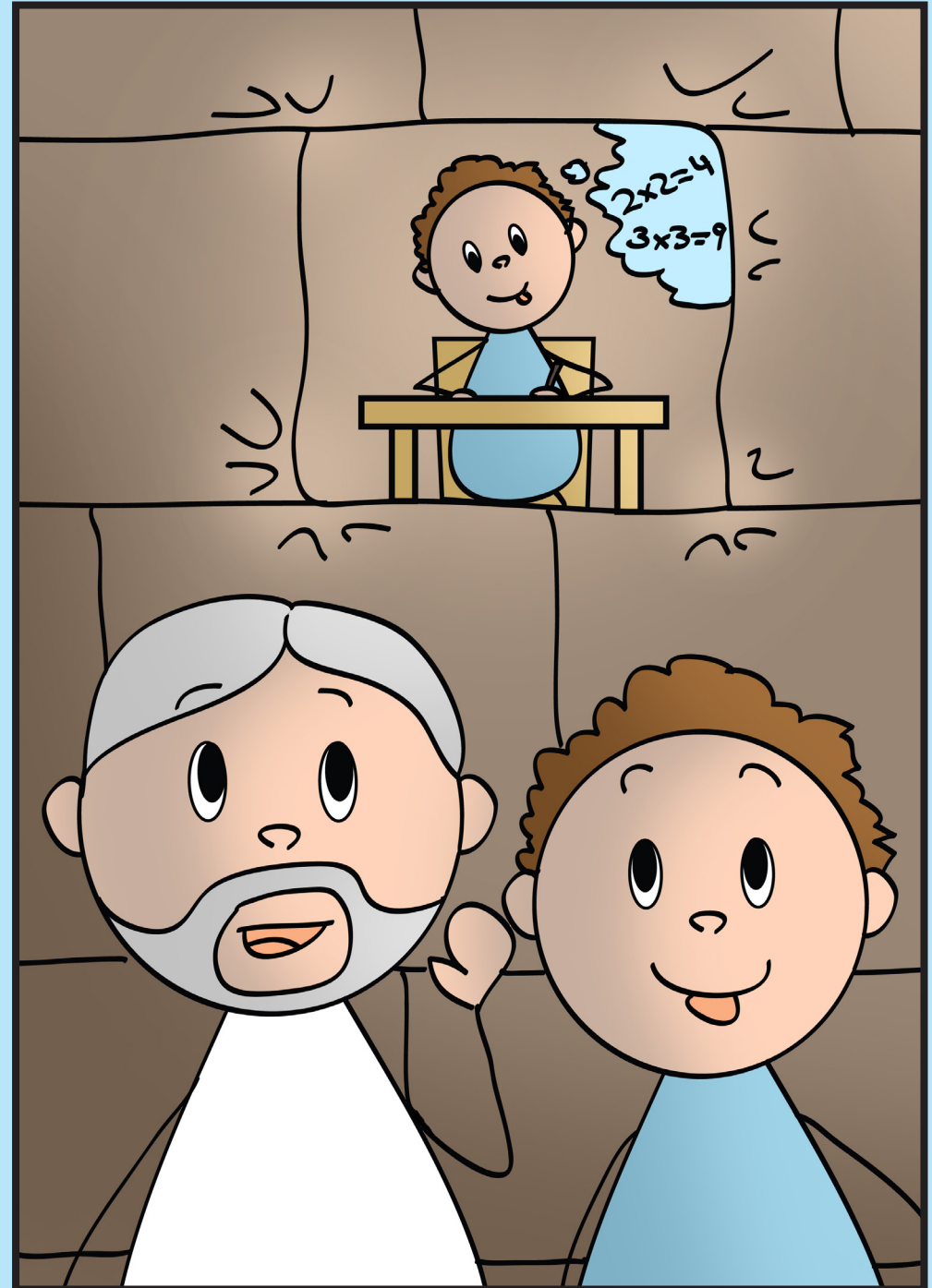


"Now, rest assured that the gaps can be mended. Every time you resist the temptation to be distracted from your work, the gap will be filled in and another brick will be added to the construction of the house. The reason your mother puts so much emphasis on your education is not so much because she wants to see you receive good grades, but because she wants you to develop a strong character that is capable of the self-discipline needed to do things even if they seem boring, tedious, and annoying.

"If you cannot make yourself focus on what needs to be done, you will never be able to accomplish much of value in life. When you have strong character, you will have the motivation to do both the tasks you enjoy doing and the ones you don't care to do. You will understand that mundane tasks are exercises in developing persistence and diligence."

Just as Rodney was trying to think through what the angel had told him, he felt himself lying on his favorite dolphin bedspread; he saw his blue pillow had fallen to the floor. He picked it up and vaguely remembered that he needed to attend to something. He tried and tried to rack his brain, but he only remembered it was remotely to do with his wooden ship. Frustrated over the forgotten dream, he went back to sleep.

The morning light came streaming through the bedroom window, but Rodney sort of resented it because it did not shed any light on the haunting thought that his memory had lost what he had been dreaming of. He rolled out of bed and was about to frown over his schoolbag when he realized that seeing his schoolbag made him feel strangely happy, like he was going to recall that forgotten memory soon.



As he descended the stairs to the smell and the sight of his mother frying eggs in butter, he gasped, and cried, "Oh! Oh! I know what it is now! My dream! The bricks! Oh! I want to mend those gaps today!"

"Rodney! What are you doing, yelling at people first thing in the morning?" his poor mother cried.

"Sorry, Mom. When I saw you, I remembered something important," said Rodney, as he grabbed the plate with the finished egg that he wolfed down.

Piles of little numbers swirled through Rodney's mind as he plugged along through the multiplication quiz. On the bus ride to school, as he had done so many other times before, he had done his best to do a speedy last-minute review for the quiz, but now he wished that he had started being a better student earlier. Cramming was no fun, and he couldn't absorb what he was trying to learn when he tried to study in a hurry.

However, by the time Rodney had completed the day's classes, including the quiz—which he had passed, but not with flying colors—the thought darted into his head that the little figure of the captain he had made had a lopsided head. Putting his schoolbag down, he plucked the figure from the ship's deck and set to work removing that possibly ridicule-attracting mistake. Next, he checked on the first mate and second mate. They, too, had lopsided heads, and a puff of wind from the open bedroom window had disturbed the sails of the ship.

By the time all this maintenance was finished, Rodney glanced at the clock and realized ten whole minutes had gone by. What was more, his head was deeply embroiled in the mystery of why one of the little pieces of railing seemed to be missing. But, sadly, the science project that was due the next day was nowhere to be seen in Rodney's mental to-do list.



Footsteps were coming down the hall, and Rodney grabbed his science book and plunked down onto his desk without looking up to know who was coming. His mother passed on into her own bedroom and seemed deep in thought. A vision of a short, white-haired man dressed in a white robe with a gold sash flashed into Rodney's mind. Despair descended upon him like a cloak. Another brick was going to be gone! But ... no! He still had the rest of the afternoon and evening.

He got out a large box, lovingly slipped his ship into it, taped it shut, and settled down to complete the science project. Then he even corrected and studied the parts that he had gotten wrong on the math quiz. Yep, it felt good to be getting some work done!

As Rodney was pulling out his social studies book, his cellphone rang. "Hello, Donald!" Rodney said, trying to contrive a nice way of saying that he was not available for discussing the ship right now. Donald, his friend and neighbor, loved that ship just as much as Rodney did, if not more.

"I have this awesome idea for how to make one of the cabins," exclaimed Donald. "Come over to my house and I'll show you."

"I'm awfully sorry, Donald, I would love to come but I haven't finished my homework yet," Rodney squeezed out the words as bravely as he could without sounding disappointed.

"Pooh! Finish that stuff on the way to school. Come on, Rodney."

"No, I am busy now." His fingers itched for the box that contained the forbidden pleasure, but Rodney kept reminding himself about a house, bricks, and a man in white.



““Don't be such a goody-goody,” Donald insisted.

“I don't care. Let me be a goody-goody then,” huffed Rodney, who really just wanted to say, “Leave me alone, or I'll cave in!”

“Humph.” Donald grunted and hung up.

Rodney reviewed his social studies dutifully. Compared with working on the gallant sea vessel with Donald, the finest shipbuilder of his whole class, his textbook seemed unbearably dull. But the house of his future had to be more important than some little masterpiece of his, for he noticed that his mom had come by while he was on the phone and sent him a lovely smile of pride.

When bedtime came, Rodney took to his covers eagerly and wearily. As slumber shut his eyes, he knew that the guide was smiling at him, and he dreamt with joy about another gap being filled in the wall of his house of the future. It had to be a good, strong, safe house to spend his future in, and he was determined to build it up brick by brick, day by day.

