

The Popsicle-Stick Bridge

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Will Cassandra's
bridge-building
project be a total
disaster?

THINK AND READ

Character As you read this story, think about how the main character changes.

Miss Juniper has asked everyone to pair up for a special project—building a bridge out of Popsicle sticks.

Last year, I would have run right over to Mackenzie Martin. But she moved away. Mackenzie and I were a good fit. She liked to talk, and I like to listen. Now I'm stuck.

I'd like to ask Marcy Gomez to be my partner. But April Lee rushes over to Marcy and practically tackles her. April gives everyone the evil eye, like, "Don't even try to get Marcy, 'cause she's mine, all mine."

I stay in my seat. Everyone else **whirls** around. There's a brand-new girl in our class, Veronica Roy. Maybe I'll end up with her. But Janice Dell gets to her first. Janice wears clothes with lots of sparkles.

Within minutes, everyone is paired up. Except for Robert McCowski and me.

Miss Juniper says, "Robert, Cassandra needs a partner. Pull a chair up to her desk."

Robert has something crusty on his mouth. Yuck. It's purple. Probably grape jelly from his breakfast.

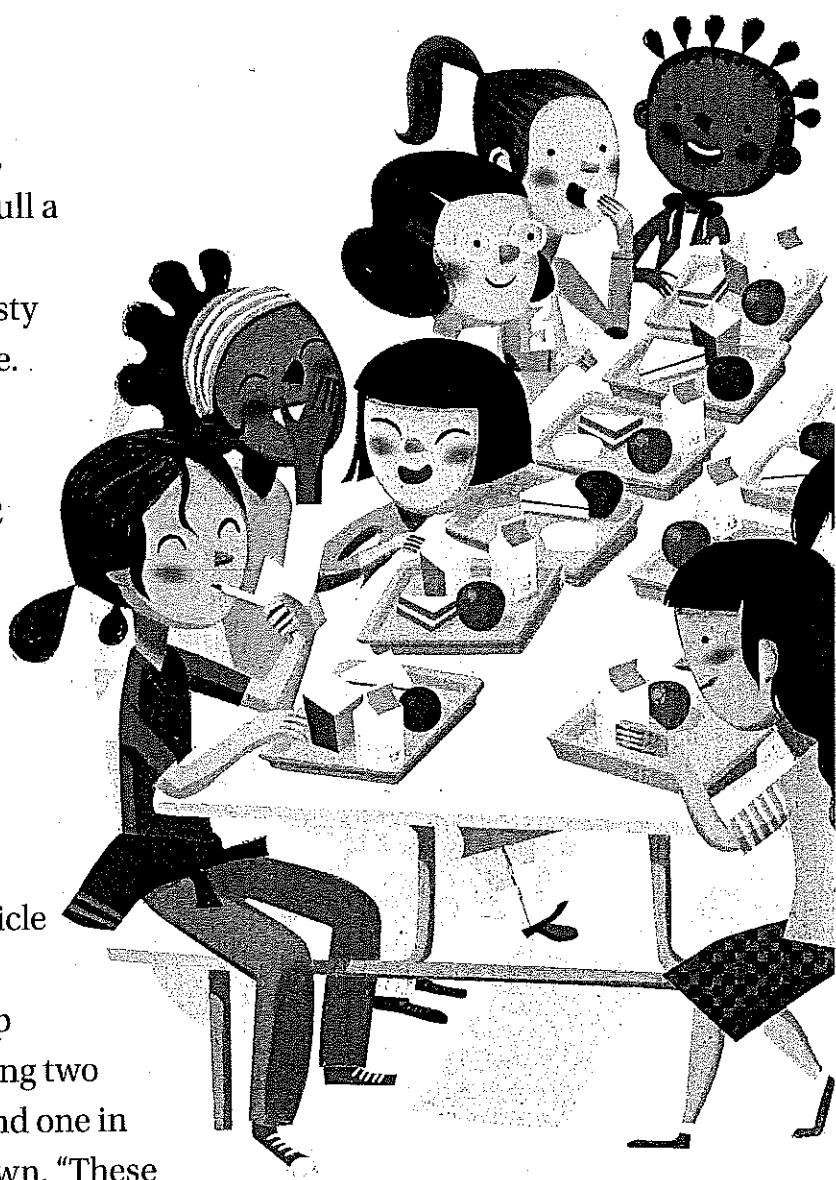
Miss Juniper passes out 22 Popsicle sticks and a bottle of glue to each team. "Try to make the strongest bridge," she says. "Tomorrow we will have a contest to see which bridge can hold the most weight without breaking."

Robert shoves seven Popsicle sticks my way. "Glue them together like this." He lines up seven of his own sticks, making two triangles with the point up and one in the middle with the point down. "These will form the sides of our bridge," he says.

Later, we connect my set of triangles to his, using four sticks along the bottom. That leaves four sticks for the top. We glue them on, leaving gaps between each stick. I check out Marcy and April's bridge. Theirs is tall, topped by six sticks. I look at Veronica and Janice's bridge.

They have one stick at each corner and 18 sticks across.

I decide that Robert is the worst Popsicle-stick partner in the world.



At lunch, my usual seat is taken. I always sit at the end of the girls' table beside sparkly Janice. But the new girl is there today. I was last in the lunch line, so no seats are left.

A space is open at the boys' table, though. Crusty-faced Robert sees me standing there and looks sadly over at the full girls' table. He scoots over to make room for me.

I **slink** over and sit down. I can't



believe I'm sitting at the boys' table. All at once the boys go quiet. They can't believe I'm sitting with them either.

I hear April shout, "Knock, knock!"

"Who's there?" Marcy asks.

"Banana."

"Banana who?"

"Knock, knock!"

"Who's there?" Marcy asks.

"Banana."

The banana stuff goes on for a while until April finally says, "Orange."

"Orange who?" Marcy asks.

"Orange you glad I didn't say banana?"

April laughs **hysterically**, like she is the funniest person in the world.

"Knock, knock," I whisper.

"Who's there?" Robert asks.

"Orange," I say.

"Orange who?"

"Orange you glad you're not sitting next to April Lee?"

Robert smiles a purple-crust grin.

Last year,
Mackenzie
and I would
sit together on a ledge
and talk during recess.
Now I am all alone,
so I walk around the
playground, keeping
my head down. It
rained earlier, and
worms are wiggling all
over the gray asphalt.
It's sunny now. If the
worms are left on the
playground, they will
dry up and die.

I gently pick one
up and bring it to the
grass at the edge of the
playground. I let it go.

I do this again and
again.

Suddenly, Robert is walking beside
me. He doesn't have the purple stuff on
his mouth anymore.

"What are you doing?" he asks.

"Rescuing worms," I say.

**Robert starts to rescue
worms too. We don't talk,
but it's nice to not be alone.**

When I get home from
school, I catch a glimpse of myself
in the hall mirror.

I see that there is a crusty brown



patch beside my mouth. It's chocolate
pudding. From lunch.

The next morning, I'm ready to
watch Robert's and my Popsicle-
stick bridge get destroyed.

Miss Juniper starts with April and
Marcy's bridge because April screamed,
"Pick us first! Pick us first!"

Miss Juniper sets a small tray on the
top of their bridge. She puts one weight
on it. The weight is silver and small but
heavy. Nothing happens. Then she puts

a second weight on their bridge.

Miss Juniper puts a third weight on.
Crack, snap, crash! April's face **collapses**
along with her bridge.

Miss Juniper tests other bridges.
Some do better than April and Marcy's.
Some don't. The best holds 11 silver
weights. Robert and I are last.

Miss Juniper places the tray on top of
our bridge. She puts one weight on.

Our bridge is still standing.

Miss Juniper puts on another weight.
Still standing!

I'm starting to get hopeful.

After 11 weights, I cover my eyes. If
it can hold one more, Robert and I will
break the record.

Everyone gathers around. I'm not
brave enough to peek between my
fingers. But then I hear clapping. My
hands fly away from my eyes.

We broke the class record!

Robert holds up his hand. I slap it.

"Congratulations!" Miss Juniper says.
She says that our bridge has a good base.

"It was Robert's idea," I say.

"But Cassandra was a really good
gluer," Robert says.

**I realize that not only do I
have the best Popsicle-stick
partner in the world, but the
nicest one too.**

Right before lunch, one of the girls
in my class throws up and has to
go home. I feel bad for her, but it
means there is room for me at the girls' table.

As I walk toward the girls' table, my
eyes meet Robert's. He smiles.

I stand frozen, then I take a deep breath.
I go over to where he is sitting. "Knock,
knock."

"Who's there?" he asks.

"Ima."

"Ima who?"

"Ima gonna sit here if you don't mind."

Robert scrunches his face up, like he is
thinking really hard.

My cheeks flush in **embarrassment**. I
made a mistake. What if he tells me to go
away?

"Knock, knock," he finally says.

"Who's there?" I ask.

"Donut."

"Donut who?"

"Donut mind if you do." ■