

*Arlene Johnston*

*Jule's Story*

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## DEDICATION

To Jule Albert,  
my teacher, my inspiration, my love.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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your patience and great editing skills.

# 1

JULE OPENED HIS right eye catching a glimpse of morning sunshine as the curtain blew open before a hefty wind gust sucked it back toward the dusty screen. He turned onto his back and listened to the loose trill of a male eastern phoebe serenading its mate. Once again, the gray-brown, sparrow-sized birds had built their nest on top of the curved green metal hose holder, bolted to the side of the house, hidden safely under the deck. It was the perfect set up. Not only could the birds gain entry through the crisscross lattice work in front, but there was also an exit through the diamond shaped lattice at the far end of the wooden deck. Everyone was fine with this arrangement, except Dad, who was already complaining about the hose lying all over the grass for the third year in a row.

Jule glanced at the bright red numbers on the clock radio beside his bed and watched as 7:59 turned to 8:00 a.m. *She's late. Nope. Here she comes.* He lay still listening as the approaching footsteps beat a steady rhythm on the puritan pine, stained wood floor that leads to his bedroom. He knew the routine very well. After all, it had been going on since he entered grade one.

## Arlene Johnston

“Good morning my sweet bird feeder,” Mom called out, opening the bedroom door. “Time to get up for school,” she said cheerfully, walking over to the window and drawing back the navy curtains. “It’s a lovely spring day,” she said, looking out the window. “Claire is waiting for you,” she smiled before closing the bedroom door and walking back down the hallway.

Jule lay in bed mimicking his mother. She was his official timekeeper, weather announcer and curtain opener. He wanted to wake up with the clock radio alarm like his older sister, Kristen, who has been getting up on her own for years. He would have to have to talk to Mom about replacing her daily routine with the radio. He just wasn’t sure when. He knew it would probably upset her. *Maybe today*, he decided sliding out of bed, stretching as he walked toward the window. He stood and watched as a black-capped, white-breasted nuthatch moved headfirst down the tree, searching for insects. *Lucky bird, no school for you.* He picked up his beige khaki shorts and forest green t-shirt off the floor beside his desk, then headed toward the bathroom.

Jule walked into the bright, sunny kitchen with its two large picture windows and noticed a bowl of granola cereal sitting on the place mat in front of the oak chair he sits in. Kristen’s place mat was empty. *That’s another thing I have to talk to Mom about, making my own breakfast choices.* “Here’s your orange juice,” she smiled, handing him a tall glass. *I wanted apple juice.* “Thanks Mom,” he said, taking the glass. “Where’s Kristen?” he asked, sitting down at the table. He already knew the answer. For the past three weeks, she had been taking much longer to get ready for school. Ever since that new kid transferred to Haliburton from Fenlon Falls a few weeks ago, she made sure she looked hot.

## Jule's Story

"Getting ready for school. She's been up for over an hour," Mom replied.

Jule looked up from his cereal bowl, as the door to the kitchen swung wide open.

Mom commented on how pretty Kristen looked in her beige skinny jeans, blue paisley cotton shirt and stonewashed denim jacket.

Jule knew she would freak out, but couldn't resist this opportunity to bug her. "Probably has something to do with Adam Fullerton," he said, looking down at his cereal.

"Oh, shut up!"

"Kristen! Don't talk to your brother like that."

"He's such a jerk!"

"Kristen loves Adam."

"That's enough you two," Mom cut in. "Hurry now Jule or you'll miss the bus."

With two hands, he hoisted his cereal bowl and tipped its contents into his mouth, wiped his face with his hand, then grabbed the dark-brown backpack sitting on the floor beside him. He waited for his mom to scoop a handful of sunflower seeds from the blue plastic pail sitting by the door. Again, this was another routine of hers he could easily do himself.

"Aren't you working at Cindy's?" he asked, as she replaced the lid.

"No, not until Wednesday, I'll spend the day writing my novel. Love you to pieces."

"Love you too, Mom." Jule latched the screen door then began whistling and calling for Claire. She's around here somewhere he knew, shielding his eyes from the bright sunshine as he searched the surrounding trees.

He watched as she bounced her way through the air toward his outstretched handful of seeds, landing on his middle finger to select just the right one. Claire, a black-

Arlene Johnston

capped chickadee, he began feeding by hand months ago, visited his outstretched hand daily for sunflower seeds. As usual, it didn't take long before other chickadees joined her, landing on Jule's head, shoulders and arms awaiting their turn.

Kristen began her daily protest. Why did he have to do this every morning at the bus stop? "You are so weird and soon everyone will think that," she said, moving away from him and his flock of birds, as she tied back her long blond hair. Her friends were already calling him a geek.

"You should try it sometime, Sis. It's really neat connecting with nature." Jule rubbed his hands together, after Claire took the last seed.

"Well, I wish you would connect with nature somewhere else. You are soooo embarrassing me." She quickly boarded the mustard coloured school bus and sat up front with her friends, purposely not looking at her brother as he headed toward the back. Unlike most of the kids who wanted to sit and talk to their friends, Jule preferred sitting next to the window for the twenty minute ride to J. Douglas Hodgson School in the town of Haliburton. From this vantage point, he spent the time observing the seasonal changes of the forests, lakes and rivers. Every day, there was something new to see. Today, a pair of loons were swimming around Jim Beef Lake trying to decide where they will build a nest to raise their young. Though each season has its own unique beauty, spring was his favourite time of year, when the forests would come back to life, as winter's snowy blanket retreated and melted into much needed moisture for the trees. This year, the new foliage seemed more vibrant than ever, with its bright shades of yellow-green and lime-green. He wished he was sitting on a rock by the river casting a fishing line. The

## Jule's Story

bus was just passing his favourite rock face when someone tapped him on the shoulder, distracting him.

"Is this seat taken?"

Jule turned toward the inquisitive green-eyed girl with tightly-braided dark brown hair hanging over her right shoulder like a large brown snake. It reminded him of the huge water snakes that would hang themselves out to dry on sunny days, wrapped around tree branches that jutted out over the river. *Ah! Stop the bus! It's been invaded by the snake girl! Get a big net! Contain the beast! Slip it over her head and scoop her in, snake and all.* "No," he replied, turning back to the window wondering what happened to the snakes that they often mistook for tree branches.

"My name is Natalie," she continued, sitting down next to him. "What's your name?"

*The snake girl has a name. I wonder what she calls her snake. Betty? Lizanne? Kristen? That's it. Kristen.* "Jule," he said, staring out the window wishing the girl and her snake would slither back to where they came from.

"Jule," she said, with a slight accent. "It's French, isn't it?"

"Yup." *At least she didn't make fun of it.*

"I see you feeding those sweet little birds at the bus stop every morning. What are they?"

"Black-capped chickadees," he said, continuing to stare out the window. *We are almost at the school. Why doesn't she get the hint that I don't want her or her stupid snake anywhere near me?*

"I think that is so neat. I wish I could do that."

*Hmm. A smart snake girl. Not many of them around.* "You can," he said, turning to face her. "All you need are some sunflower seeds and a little patience, then you will

Arlene Johnston

have them eating right out of your hand.” *Better get rid of the snake though. Chickadees aren’t keen on hanging reptiles.*

The bus slowed to a stop in front of the school. “I can hardly wait to try feeding them. Thanks for telling me how to get chickadees to eat out of my hand,” Natalie smiled, getting up from the seat.

Jule remained seated and watched as Natalie and her snake, which now hung straight down the middle of her back, walk over to a group of girls. He was surprised at her interest in chickadee feeding. Kristen wouldn’t be caught dead doing that! The bus driver turned around and stared at Jule who began moving quickly down the aisle. He bid the driver good day, jumped from the top step onto the sidewalk then ran quickly to the side entrance of the school.

The halls were filled with chattering kids making their way to their classrooms, as the 8:45 bell sounded to start classes. The teachers lined the hallway coaxing the kids along. It was too nice a day to be in school, so it took some extra convincing.

Jule’s teacher, Ms. Annadale, waited at the classroom door and watched as the kids scrambled for their desks and began to settle down. “Let’s try to get to our seats a little quieter and quicker next time,” she said, as her eyes scanned the room for empty seats. “For today’s writing assignment, I would like you to write about a special place you would like to visit. It could be in another country or a certain place you enjoy going to, such as Toronto or a friend’s cottage. You may use the encyclopedias. And don’t forget your dictionaries. I would like them handed in before recess, please. Let’s get to work now.”

Jule remained at his desk and watched as his classmates scrambled for the encyclopedias that lined three metal shelves near the front of the classroom, then reached into his

## Jule's Story

desk for the dictionary and began flipping through the tattered pages. *I have my special place up here in my head*, he smiled, twirling his straight brown hair with a pencil, organizing his thoughts.

When the bell sounded for recess, the students handed in their stories before leaving the classroom. Jule handed his to the teacher. "You seem to enjoy writing," Ms. Annadale smiled.

"I do, a lot. Writing stories lets me go wherever my imagination transports me."

"I always look forward to reading your stories. You have such a vivid imagination."

He smiled and made a mental note to look up 'vivid' in the dictionary.

Jule walked out the side door of the school into the bright sunshine, raising his hand to shield the sun from his eyes, as he heard his name being called. It was Andrew Thompson yelling and waving frantically from centerfield. He stood motionless trying to decide whether he felt like playing baseball, especially without his glove. He wasn't sure where he had left it, then he remembered seeing it beside the clock radio this morning. He had left it there as a reminder to bring it to school. Andrew kept beckoning him to join the game. Finally, Jule ran quickly toward him.

"It's about time," he said, punching his glove. "We need another fielder."

Jule scanned the baseball diamond. The bases were loaded and there was one out, according to Andrew. Once again, Bozo Barrett had hand picked his team, making sure he got the best players every time or he wouldn't play. Now the short, stocky, blond haired, freckle-faced Barrett stood riveted to the chainlink fence that divided the benches from

Arlene Johnston

the playing field, coaxing Jamie Laking, the team's best batter, to not hold back and clobber the ball.

"Come on Laking! You can do it!" Barrett encouraged, as the pitch sailed over the plate and Laking swung missing it by a mile. *Idiot*. "Keep your eye on the ball!" he yelled tersely from the sidelines, as he felt the chainlink fence dig into his fleshy hands. *If we lose this game, I'll never hear the end of it*. Finally, Laking connected hard with the third pitch sending it flying high into the air. "Run!" Barrett screamed, letting go of the fence.

Andrew watched as the ball started descending back to earth with Jule running backward to retrieve it. The ball landed in his cupped hands with a hard smack. He then fired it into home where the catcher tagged the last runner.

"Nice catch!" Andrew said, patting him on the back as they made their way toward the bench. "And with no glove! You're up to bat first."

Jule walked over to the stack of bats lined up against the six-foot fencing and swung a couple of them until he found a metal bat that felt right.

"Well, well. If it isn't Julie," Barrett said, as Jule took his place at home plate. *I'll make toast of this little jerk*. "Keep your eye on the ball," he said sarcastically, before pitching a hard right.

"Strike one," their catcher yelled, as the ball flew over the plate.

"What's wrong Julie? Too fast for ya?" Barrett chuckled, getting ready for the next pitch.

Jule tightened his grip on the bat. Barrett may be a jerk, but he was one of the best pitchers in the school. He watched closely as Barrett tried to distract him with his constant banter before the next pitch. Ironically, he had thrown himself off with all his yapping and pitched another hard

## Jule's Story

right that Jule anticipated. He swung with all his might and connected bat to ball with a loud twang, firing the ball like a burning meteorite into right field.

"That's a homer!" Andrew yelled, jumping up from the bench, as the ball whizzed quickly past the side of Barrett's head.

"Go Jule go!" his team chanted, as he rounded the bases heading toward home. "Nice hit!" his team congratulated him, as the bell sounded ending recess. Barrett was not impressed, as he began shoving through the team huddle with his teammates following close behind. He came to a halt a few centimeters in front of Jule. "You almost hit me in the head," Barrett said, running his hand over the left side of it, standing as tall as he could to meet Jule's gaze. Even standing on his toes, he was still a few centimeters shorter.

*Too bad I missed* Jule thought, as Barrett breathed his garlic breath all over him. "Gee Barrett, I'm really sorry," he said, holding back a gag. He was beginning to feel ill.

"Do you mean that?" Barrett asked, noting his sarcastic tone.

"Of course I do."

"I don't believe you."

"Then maybe you should settle with keeping your eyes on the ball. I believe that was your advice to Laking just a few minutes ago," Jule smiled, before walking away.

"You little grade four jerk. I can beat your butt anytime. Julie, Julie, Julie," Barrett chanted, as his team joined in.

Andrew caught up to Jule saying Barrett was the jerk, and thanked him for playing on his team.

Jule nodded then ran for the side door, as the chanting continued. He was unaware of the group of girls standing on the pavement watching him run inside the school. "There goes Jule," Natalie said, as they walked toward the entrance.