


# Full Circle

June Edelstein

PROJECT 3D-VIEW



This work is one of a series of readers from NASA-sponsored Project 3D-VIEW (Virtual Interactive Environmental Worlds), an interdisciplinary, curriculum-based program for middle schools.

Glen Schuster, Project Director

[www.3dview.org](http://www.3dview.org)

U.S. Satellite Laboratory, Inc.  
32 Elm Place  
Rye, NY 10580

© 2006 U.S. Satellite Laboratory, Inc.

Illustrations by Rawn Gandy  
Layout and Cover by Ricardo Forero

Volume 3 – Full Circle  
ISBN 978-0-9791677-2-0

Project 3D-VIEW Readers 5 Volume Set  
ISBN 978-0-9791677-5-1



## TABLE OF CONTENTS

**The Assignment** ..... page 4

**The Exhibit** ..... page 6

**The Grasslands** ..... page 10

**A Balancing Act** ..... page 22

**Full Circle** ..... page 34

## Chapter One

# *The Assignment*

If the substitute teacher, Mr. Conte, had known the rules about keeping the class together, it would have probably been just an ordinary class trip. But, Mr. Conte did not know the rules.

The seventh grade class was studying the different biomes of North America. They were at the Museum of Natural History to do some research. Everyone was supposed to work in teams. Each team was in charge of studying a biome and writing a report about it.

“Okay,” said Mr. Conte, pulling out the class list. He called out the first four names, “you four go to *The Desert*.” *The desert* kids looked at each other and wandered off to *The Desert* and out of this story because nothing extraordinary happened to them. However, that was not the case with the next four kids. Something very unusual was about to happen to them.

Mr. Conte called out their names, “Susan Archer, Jake Cato, Fionn Dineen, Ann Marie Evans—you guys have *The Grasslands*.”

Jake heard his name called and groaned. “Great,” he thought. “I have to spend the morning with Fionn, king of the all-time losers.”

Fionn thought, “I was really looking forward to this trip. There are supposed to be interactive exhibits here that really make you feel like you’re in the environment. It was going to make the report way cooler to write. And, now, instead of having fun, I have to deal with Jake Cato. But, I swear, if Jake does one more annoying thing to me, this time I will find a way to get back at him.”

Ann Marie was much more interested in a couple of other kids who were whispering something to each other. She thought to



herself, “I wonder what Vashali and Julio are talking about. I wish I was on their team. I wonder if they’ll get *The Rain forest*. I was hoping for *The Rain forest*; there are amazing butterflies there.”

Susan heard the word ‘grassland’ and had a song lyric pop into her head: “Oh give me a home where the buffalo roam and the deer and the something play.” Then, Susan thought, “I wish I were doing this report by myself, since I’ll probably end up doing all the work anyway. That always happens, and I’m sick of it!”

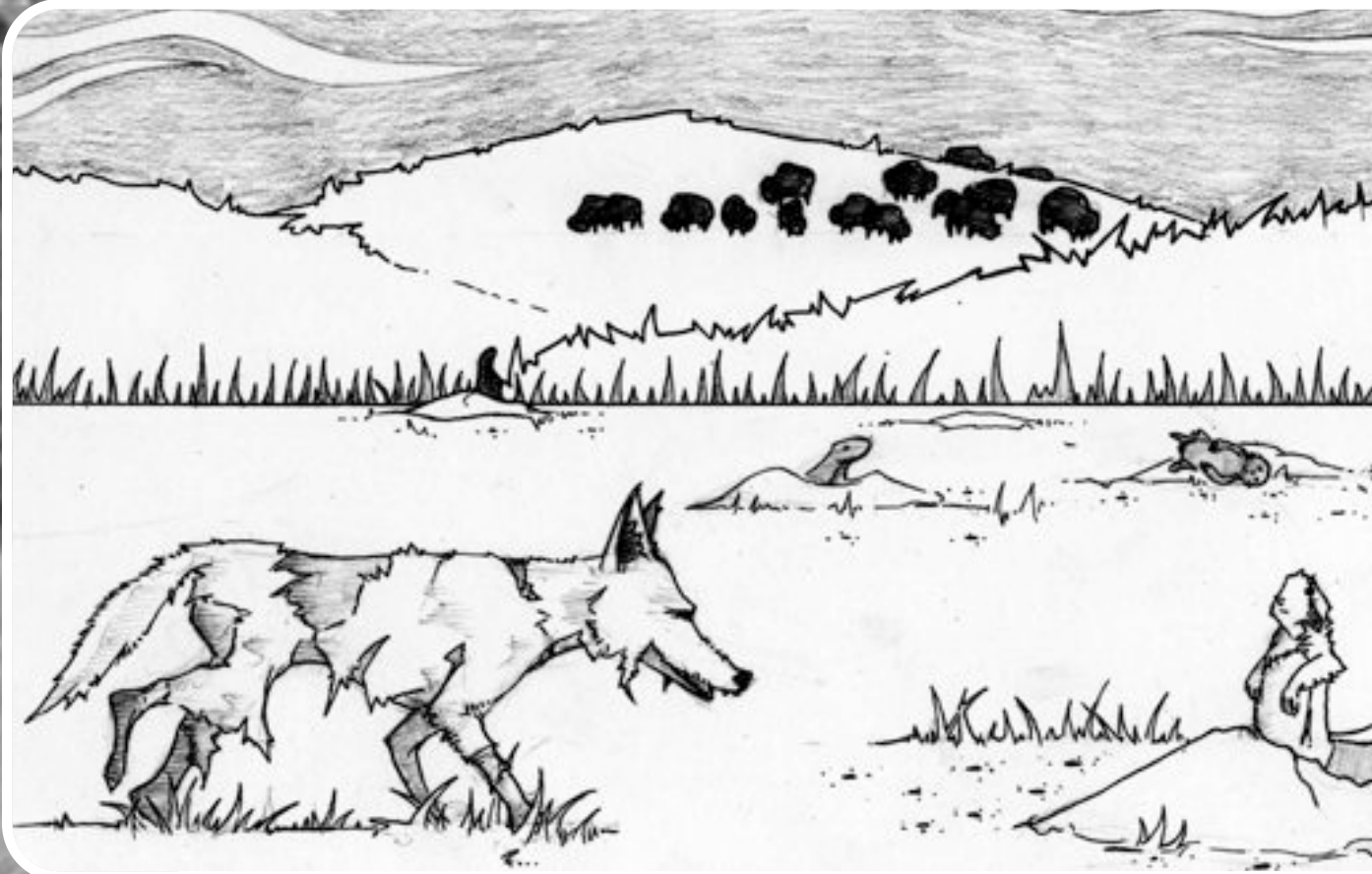



## Chapter Two

# *The Exhibit*

Jake, Ann Marie, Fionn, and Susan checked the museum map and made their way to *The Grasslands* exhibit. They were not at all impressed with what they found.

There was a prairie dog mound with some moth-eaten prairie dogs hanging around. Coming towards the mound was a mangy-looking coyote which the kids later found out was a totally unrealistic set up. If a coyote was that close and in plain sight, those prairie dogs would have been long gone underground, unless of course, they had a death wish.





There was no getting around it. The grassland diorama was pretty threadbare. You could tell there used to be a lot of fake grass stuck there, but now there were only a few stems and pinprick holes where the grass had been. In the painted background there were these black dots, which the sign said was a buffalo herd grazing in the distance. Above the herd was a faded, flaking, blue sky. All in all, it was not exactly an inspiring place.

“Oh great,” said Jake. “My grades are already in trouble. Writing about some crusty exhibit isn’t going to help.”

“Maybe there is a plaque somewhere that gives more information,” said Susan hopefully.

Ann Marie pointed to a sign on the wall. *Under Renovation*. “When is that going to start?” asked Ann Marie.

“Probably not soon enough to help us with the report,” said Susan.

Jake saw another sign hanging on the red velvet rope strung across the front of the diorama: *Do Not Enter*. Jake pointed to it, and said, “Yeah, whatever, who would want to enter anyway? Talk about boring. Mr. Conte said they had interactive exhibits here. That was supposed to be the point of coming, so we could get a better feel of what it was like. What a rip-off this trip is.”

Then Jake saw Fionn just sort of standing there, not saying anything. A not-so-nice grin sprang onto Jake’s face. He grabbed Fionn’s notebook.

“Actually,” Jake said, “maybe I do know how to make this grassland thing interactive, at least for Fionn.” And he threw Fionn’s notebook into the exhibit.

“Real mature,” said Susan.





Fionn just sighed and ducked under the rope. Jake had been torturing him since third grade. Throwing the notebook into the diorama was pretty minor stuff in comparison to other things Jake had done.

“Hey, see if you can find anything interesting to write about while you’re in there,” said Susan. Fionn was about to say something back to her, but suddenly he was staring at the prairie dog instead.

“What?” asked Ann Marie.

Fionn pointed to the prairie dog. “Hey, I think there’s a robotic thing going on here. Maybe it *is* interactive.”

The others looked over, and sure enough, the prairie dog’s nose seemed to be twitching.

“Cool,” said Jake, and popped under the rope.

“You’re not supposed to go in there,” said Susan.

“Oh, c’mon, for the sake of research,” said Ann Marie as she went in under the rope.

Susan waited for a moment and then looked around. She didn’t see any guards coming. With a certain amount of queasiness that always hit her when she broke a rule, she ducked under the rope.

Then, there they were, inside the diorama. But it didn’t feel quite right.





“Uh,” said Jake, “does anyone notice anything unusual?”

They all did. The dusty museum smell was gone. Instead, it smelled like grass, and dirt, and wind, if wind had a smell. And, things looked different. The painted sky wasn’t faded anymore, and those spots in the background had started moving a lot closer.

“Wow,” said Ann Marie. “They really went all out; these special effects are amazing.”

The kids turned to look back at the Science Hall, but it was gone, and so was the rest of the museum. The kids stared, too stunned to speak. They looked back toward the diorama, but it wasn’t there. In its place were large gathers of wild, short grasses and dusty patches of hard dirt. It was a tapestry of red-tinged earth, and green-flecked, golden grass. The grass stretched all the way to the distant brown-humped hills, near where a river flowed.

This grass and dirt landscape was alive. The black dots in the diorama had turned into great beasts. A mighty herd of bison was moving slowly across the land, pulling up big chunks of “buffalo” grass as they ate their way across the prairie.

At a nearer distance a group of prairie dogs was busy nibbling at the grass while one prairie dog stood guard next to a hole in a mound of dirt. The guard prairie dog was sitting up on its haunches, looking around, sniffing for danger. It did not like what it smelled or saw and gave a few short yips to warn the other prairie dogs that it was time for a swift retreat back inside the burrow. Perhaps there was a hungry golden eagle circling in the clear blue sky. In the view were also pronghorn antelope moving nimbly through the grass up ahead, either unaware or uncaring that their landscape had just been joined by four newcomers.

## Chapter Three

# *The Grasslands*

The four newcomers? You can probably guess who they were: Jake, Susan, Fionn and Ann Marie.

“Okay, this is just too weird,” said Jake. And then, suddenly, it got even weirder. Everyone sort of just disappeared, or rather, seemed to disappear. Actually, what happened was that they, including Jake, all became something else. Becoming something else could have made them afraid, or freak out, but it didn’t. Somehow it felt right, like it was exactly what was supposed to happen.



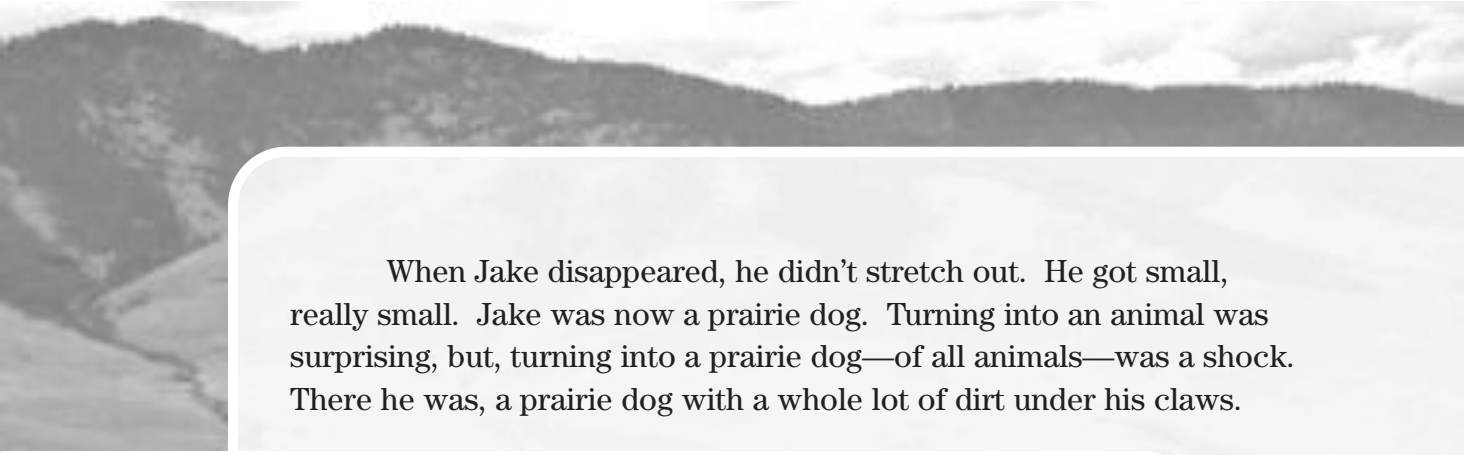
Suddenly, Ann Marie didn't see her classmates. Rather, she saw a coyote, a prairie dog, and one, lost-looking buffalo who were all staring at each other the way she was staring at them. Then, Ann Marie was everywhere at once. It was like the best morning stretch ever. She understood that she was something else, too. She was still Ann Marie on the inside, but, on the outside, she was grass. She could feel her roots twining in the packed dirt. She could feel her stems reaching up. But, most of all, she felt wonderfully golden which is almost impossible to describe unless you have ever been prairie grass.

Moreover, Grass Ann Marie felt, well, productive. She was sucking in the Sun's light and turning it into a different kind of energy. Her roots were taking in the water from under the ground and drawing the liquid up to the surface and to the tips of her blades. It felt completely glorious.

Ann Marie could feel everything that happened in the grass. She could feel the buffalo lumbering, the pronghorn antelope leaping, the prairie dogs scurrying, the grasshoppers hopping, wild turkeys pecking, worms twisting past her roots, and much more. Animals walked all over her, and it didn't hurt at all. She just bent down and then sprang right back up. Naturally, Ann Marie felt really a part of everything that was happening all around her. It was an incredibly powerful feeling.







When Jake disappeared, he didn't stretch out. He got small, really small. Jake was now a prairie dog. Turning into an animal was surprising, but, turning into a prairie dog—of all animals—was a shock. There he was, a prairie dog with a whole lot of dirt under his claws.



Jake looked up. There was a coyote, a buffalo, and, oddly enough, grass, looking right back at him. "Oh! Is this us?" Jake said, more than a bit surprised to hear actual words coming out of his mouth. "What the..."

Jake just didn't know what to say next. Things were as they were, and Jake was not happy about that at all. If some amazing thing was going to happen and they were all going to turn into animals, why turn into a prairie dog? If transformations were taking place, why



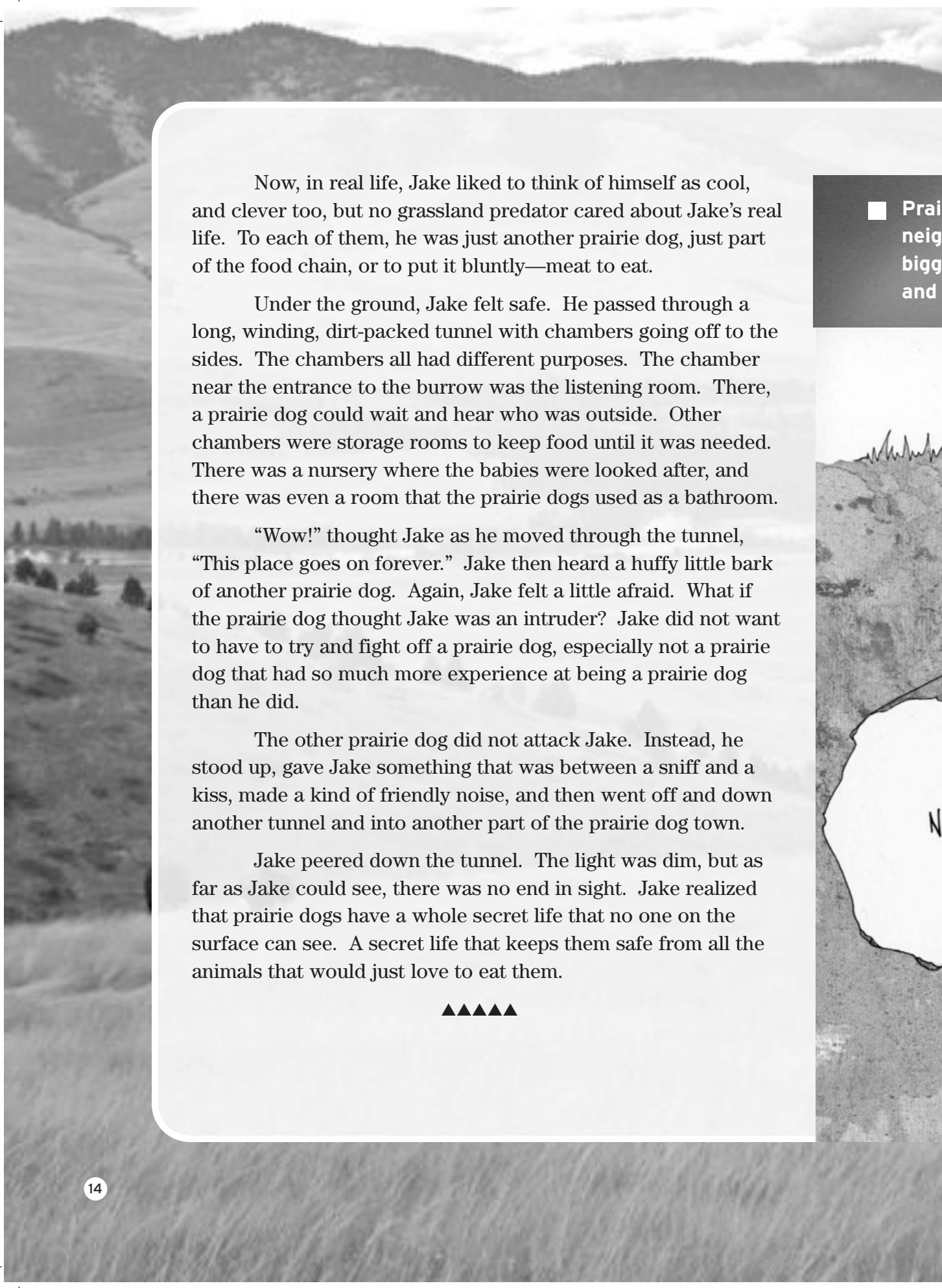
couldn't Jake have been a coyote, or a buffalo? Why did he have to be this little rodent thing? Rodents were just simply not Jake's style.

Then, Jake got a feeling. It was not a good feeling. A quiver of fear went through him as he looked at Fionn, who was now a coyote. Jake heard a little warning yip from somewhere inside the mound, and it occurred to him that he was the only prairie dog around. All the others were down below.

To Jake, coyotes looked a lot like dogs. As far as he knew, dogs chased and maybe even ate rodents. It struck Jake that having a coyote, even a coyote that used to be a classmate, looking at you with its ears straight up might not be a good thing. On top of that, if the coyote happened to be a former classmate who had reasons to dislike you, well, maybe the smartest thing to do was get away...fast! "Later guys," said Jake. And, then he ran.

As Jake scurried down the hole and into the burrow, he thought about the fact that Fionn wasn't the only one around who might want to eat him. There had been other coyotes off in the distance, and there was that golden eagle in the sky and a badger not too far away that Jake could smell from somewhere. Their smell filled Jake with the desire to escape. "Does everyone want to eat me?" Jake thought, "Boy, what a life!!"





Now, in real life, Jake liked to think of himself as cool, and clever too, but no grassland predator cared about Jake's real life. To each of them, he was just another prairie dog, just part of the food chain, or to put it bluntly—meat to eat.

Under the ground, Jake felt safe. He passed through a long, winding, dirt-packed tunnel with chambers going off to the sides. The chambers all had different purposes. The chamber near the entrance to the burrow was the listening room. There, a prairie dog could wait and hear who was outside. Other chambers were storage rooms to keep food until it was needed. There was a nursery where the babies were looked after, and there was even a room that the prairie dogs used as a bathroom.

“Wow!” thought Jake as he moved through the tunnel, “This place goes on forever.” Jake then heard a huffy little bark of another prairie dog. Again, Jake felt a little afraid. What if the prairie dog thought Jake was an intruder? Jake did not want to have to try and fight off a prairie dog, especially not a prairie dog that had so much more experience at being a prairie dog than he did.

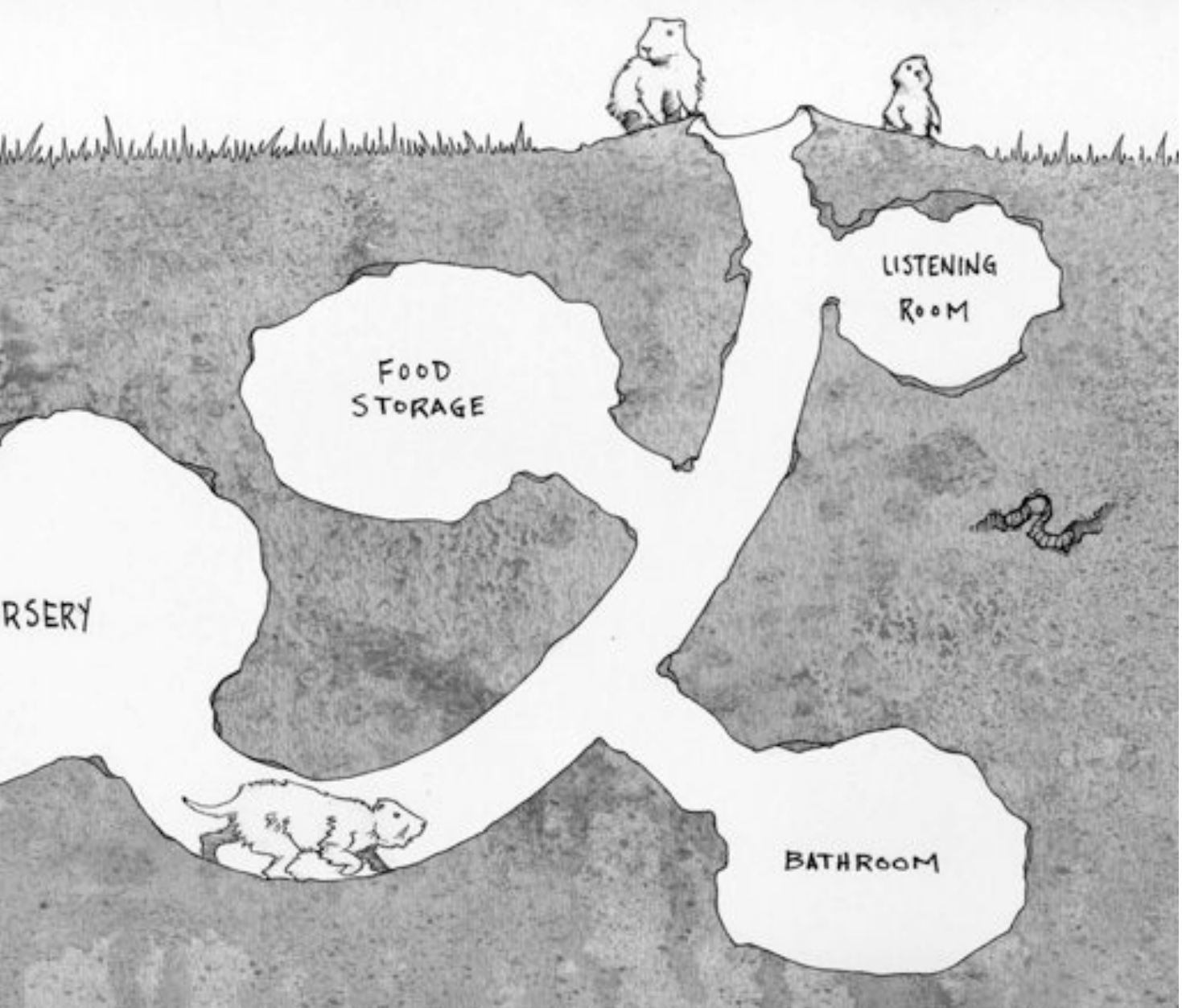
The other prairie dog did not attack Jake. Instead, he stood up, gave Jake something that was between a sniff and a kiss, made a kind of friendly noise, and then went off and down another tunnel and into another part of the prairie dog town.

Jake peered down the tunnel. The light was dim, but as far as Jake could see, there was no end in sight. Jake realized that prairie dogs have a whole secret life that no one on the surface can see. A secret life that keeps them safe from all the animals that would just love to eat them.



■ Prairie  
neigh  
bigger  
and 2

Prairie dogs live in neighborhoods, called coterie, that connect to each other. These neighborhoods connect underground and are collectively called a Prairie Dog Town. The largest Prairie Dog Town on record was found in West Texas. It was about 100 miles wide and 250 miles long, and the town was home to an estimated 400 million prairie dogs.







Fionn, who was now a coyote, was suddenly very hungry. It was a kind of relentless hunger that he had never felt before. He sniffed the air. He trotted some on four legs which seemed much more efficient than his two human legs had been. He looked around. Then, he saw a huge buffalo looking right back at him. There was something familiar about the buffalo. “Susan?” asked Fionn.

“Yep,” answered the buffalo.

Then Fionn saw Jake, or rather the prairie dog version of Jake, standing on top of a mound of dirt. Fionn’s mouth really started watering. Fionn got a happy thought. This time around, he was not Jake’s prey; it was the other way around. Fionn was the predator. Okay. Maybe he wouldn’t eat Jake; that would be just too weird. But, seriously, the idea of eating a twitching rodent suddenly seemed to be quite appetizing to Fionn’s new coyote self.

Keeping his ears perked was easy and produced amazing results. Fionn could hear everything. He had never noticed before




just how full of sound the world was. Fionn could hear the buffalo pulling at the grass. He could hear other coyotes loping through the distant grass. He could even hear the grasshoppers rustling Grass Ann Marie's blades.

Then Fionn saw a rabbit hop by him. Without thinking about it he took off, quickly. Fionn was blown away by how quick he was and how wonderful it felt running on four legs instead of two. If he could run this fast in real life, he would be the star of the track team instead of where he usually was, somewhere near the last to finish. Fionn thought, "Forget about everything else. This is the best thing that has ever happened to me, and I can run like this forever." Except then he smelled the rabbit again. He forgot about everything except how hungry he was. But, then, another coyote snuck up out of nowhere and quickly sank its teeth into the neck of the rabbit so that the creature was paralyzed into stillness, ready to be carried away and consumed. Fionn was oddly jealous. He had never seen anything that looked as appetizing to him as that limp rabbit looked hanging from another coyote's jaws.

Now in real life, Fionn might go for a hamburger, but the closest thing to that here was buffalo, and Fionn knew there was no way he was going to try and tackle one of those big guys. So, Fionn just nibbled on some grass, but he kept his ears perked for grasshoppers, more rabbits or any other tasty morsel that might come his way.





Susan smiled to herself. The idea that anyone would think of her as one of those “big guys” was pretty amazing. Ironic, really. Susan was the smallest kid in the entire seventh grade. Now she was big and shaggy. You could even call her massive. And she had horns! She loved her horns. Let anyone try and mess with her now.

Susan fixed her eyes on the coyote, and just as the coyote had recognized her as Susan, she knew straight off that the coyote was Fionn. It was the same way she knew that the prairie dog disappearing into the ground was Jake, and the grass was Ann Marie. Being that the grass was Ann Marie, Susan was a bit afraid to step on her. She didn’t want to cause any pain.

“Ann Marie, are you okay?” Susan asked.

“More than okay,” answered Grass Ann Marie. “I feel delicious!”

Then, Coyote Fionn perked up his ears in a way that Buffalo Susan did not like at all. Buffalo Susan then reacted by running to join her herd. It was where she belonged. It felt great to be part of something so big. She could feel hundreds of buffalo all around her. She could feel their buffalo heat, see their calm big brown eyes, and join in with all those mouths lowered to the ground. It felt comfortable and safe and just so right. And, the grass, it just kept going for miles, just one big delicious golden-green treat.

Buffalo Susan stood in the middle of a group of buffalo. She pulled at and then chewed on a big hunk of grass. She swallowed it down. Then, to Susan’s surprise, the chomped-up grass came right back up from her stomach so she could chew it some more. (When the chomped-up grass comes back up, it is called “cud”). “Oh yeah,” thought Buffalo Susan as she chewed on the cud. “I’m a ruminant; I have four stomachs at work here, just like a cow.” Being a ruminant

meant she didn't exactly eat her food at first. She sort of swallowed it, and then regurgitated, or vomited it back into her mouth to chew more, later. The person part of Susan knew that it was all a bit gross, but the buffalo part of her thought it made perfect sense. Really, it was all a matter of perspective.





Speaking of perspective, Buffalo Susan loved knowing that for once she was one of the strongest, biggest and most powerful things around. She realized that she could say just about anything and no one could do anything to her. So, she wandered away from her herd and closer to where Coyote Fionn was back staring at the prairie dog mound in a none-too-friendly way.





Buffalo Susan said, “Hey guys, isn’t this amazing! Gosh, I am big, and strong! Really, I think I might just be the biggest and strongest thing around.”

Grass Ann Marie ruffled some at that. “Uh, Susan...” she started to say, but was quickly interrupted by Buffalo Susan, who was not finished.

“Seriously, there must be a reason why we are here and why I was made the strongest and biggest of all. I mean I did study a little about *The Grasslands* before the trip. So, I know that Fionn might want to eat prairie dogs, and we all want to eat grass, but none of you can eat buffalo. At least, none of you can kill me. I suppose if I were dead, which will not be happening, Fionn might want a bite. But, now, while I’m alive, I could just give you one swift kick and you’d be gone.” Then Buffalo Susan said, “Speaking of swift kicks, I wonder where Jake has gone. Maybe now that he is a prairie dog, he would like to see who is really in charge of this place.”

Coyote Fionn and Grass Ann Marie did not know how to respond to this. They were used to Susan being studious and maybe a bit bossy in a shy sort of way. It seemed like being a huge buffalo was going to her head.



## Chapter Four

# *A Balancing Act*

Meanwhile, Prairie Dog Jake was down in Prairie Dog Town in one of the listening rooms near the entrance. There was no way he could bare to hear Buffalo Susan brag on and not say anything. So, he popped out of the burrow's hole.

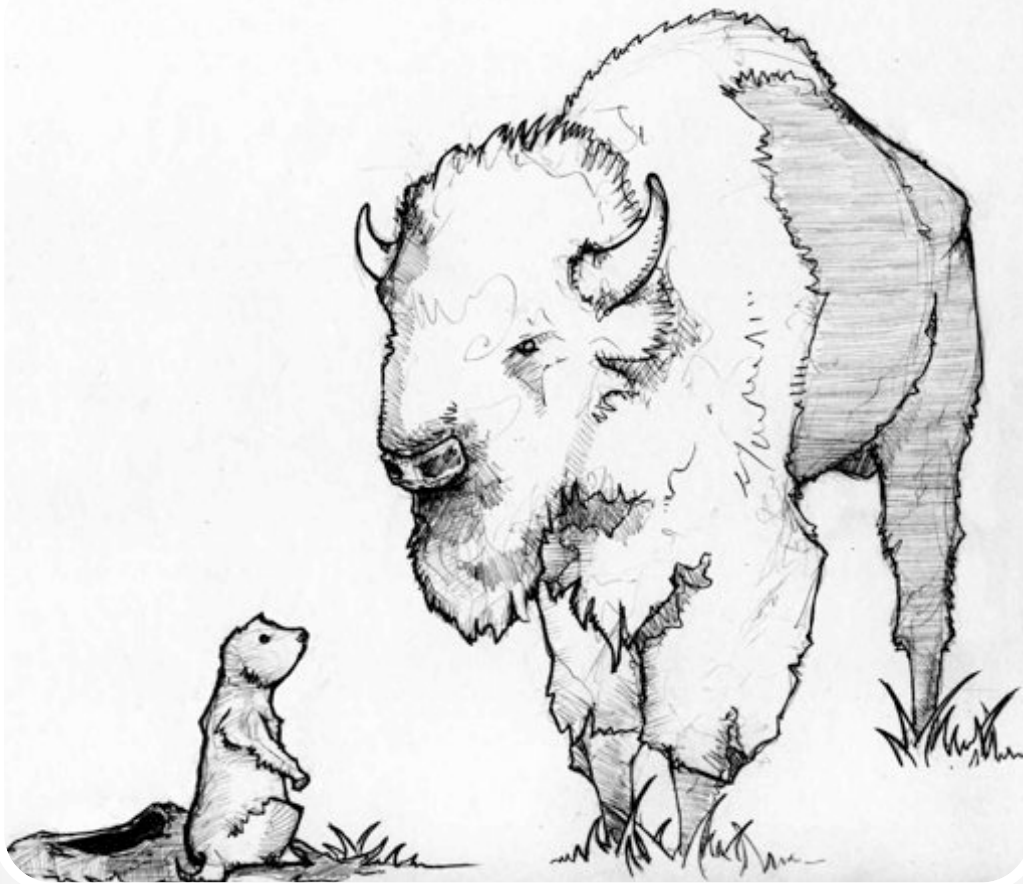
Coyote Fionn could smell a prairie dog coming and his ears got all twitchy with excitement. His mouth began to water. He could almost taste the fresh blood and meat. As you can imagine, he was pretty disappointed when he saw that the prairie dog was Jake. Despite being a coyote, Fionn, like the rest of them, still had enough of his human sense to not to want eat another classmate no matter what form the classmate might take.

Prairie Dog Jake said, "Oh wow, who would have thought that meek little Susan could be so full of herself."

"Careful, Prairie Dog," answered Buffalo Susan. "All I have to do is start a little stampede with my friends over there and you're one flat dog."

Prairie Dog Jake considered this. "Whatever," he said. "I have friends too, and we actually work together, not like some mindless herd. We have a whole town under here. Our town has neighborhoods, and these neighborhoods are made up of tunnels and burrows. There are rooms for sleeping, rooms where we store food, and even rooms where we go to the bathroom. In fact, prairie dogs have a whole life going on underground. It takes a lot of teamwork and organization to do all this. You've got to 'play well with others,' not like a coyote who is sneaky and usually on his own."

Coyote Fionn pulled back his coyote lips and snarled some. It felt good. “Sneaky is just another word for clever and being a survivor. I’m both of these. I can eat just about anything, and I can live almost everywhere. I can see far, smell prey from a long distance away, and run like the dickens when there is trouble. As far as I know, these are good traits. Prairie Dog just doesn’t like it because he is jealous that he is actually just another rodent—an oversized rat, in my opinion.”





Prairie Dog Jake sat up on his hind legs. He was all of fifteen inches tall that way. “Oversized rat! I don’t think so. Anyway, what good are you to anyone, o’ sneaky one? All that digging I do? It helps turn the nutrients in the soil so the grass Buffalo eats can grow better. And, my digging helps aerate the soil and allows water to

reach deep under the ground. I’m one useful little dude. What I do helps grasses and other plants grow. And speaking of grass…”

Grass Ann Marie was enjoying being the grass. She knew that everyone needed her and she knew almost everything that was happening.

“Give it a break you guys,” said Grass Ann Marie. “In all fairness and reality, none of you are the boss of this place. Really, if you think about it, that would be me. I am the boss, head honcho, numero uno. No one here can live without me. Buffalo and prairie dogs need to eat grass to stay alive, and it doesn’t end there. Coyotes eat prairie dogs, and other animals that eat grass. So, without me you would all wither away and die. I would say that pretty much makes me the most important thing around.”





Buffalo Susan snorted. She lowered her horns to better show them off. She pawed the ground some. “Oh please, everything I do helps to grow better. My eating grass helps it to better grow. Grass uses my dung for fertilizer. And when I die? Well, it’s like one big banquet for all of you. All the nutrients in my body go right into soil, and grass just laps it up.”

For once Prairie Dog Jake agreed with Buffalo Susan, or at least with the part where Grass Ann Marie was not Queen of *The Grasslands*. “Miss busy-body would have to think she was the most important thing,” he said.

And with that, they all just stopped talking to each other for awhile. Then, Buffalo Susan started feeling a little itchy. She walked over to the prairie dog mounds and lay down, wallowing in the dust.



“Hey,” said Prairie Dog Jake. “What are you doing?”

“I’m a buffalo, remember?” said Buffalo Susan. “I like to wallow, so, I am wallowing.”

“Fine, whatever,” said Prairie Dog Jake, “but just remember who made those mounds for you to wallow in.”



“Fine yourself,” said Buffalo Susan, “but then you just remember who eats off the top parts of the grass.”

“Huh?” said Jake.

“Look, you’re standing there looking out for coyotes and other predators, right? Who do you think keeps the grass short enough for you to see? That would be me and my kind.”

Then Prairie Dog Jake sort of grinned, or at least did a prairie dog version of a grin. “Hey, you got a point. I need you, you need me, and we both need the grass. But what about old wily coyote there? I can’t see what’s so great about him.”


Until that moment, Coyote Fionn had stopped paying attention to the quarreling and bragging. Coyote Fionn had wandered away a bit, but then he heard what Prairie Dog Jake was saying.

For a moment Coyote Fionn felt like regular Fionn instead of a coyote, which is to say he felt hurt by Jake. Then, he let out a chilling howl and Fionn felt his coyote self again. He was Coyote Fionn. He was strong, sure, and certainly not bothered by a prairie dog. He ran back to the prairie dog mound.

“Hey!” retorted Coyote Fionn, “You don’t have a clue about what you are saying. I keep things interesting! And my dung is just as good for fertilizing as anyone else’s. Plus, coyotes help keep the prairie dog population in check. If coyotes—and a few other fine predators like eagles and badgers—didn’t eat your prairie dog friends, you guys would have this place completely overrun.







“You’d eat every plant in sight, and then things would go totally out of whack. There wouldn’t be enough food to go around and everyone would start dying. So, you are really alive in part because of me and the other coyotes!” Coyote Fionn threw his head back and howled for all he was worth. “Oh, and, I can sing a heck of a tune.”

Buffalo Susan shook her mighty head and pawed at the ground. A moment passed, and then she said, “Wait, I get it. Listen to what we all have been saying. It kinda fits together, I mean, what we do fits together.”

“What are you talking about?” said Prairie Dog Jake.

“Okay,” said Susan, “not to be sappy, but you know what, we are all part of the balance of nature.” She took a moment to wave her tail and swat away a fly. Then, she said, “Hey, our report can be about the balance of nature in *The Grasslands*.”

Prairie Dog Jake looked at her in disbelief. “Wait a minute, we’re here. We get to be things that no human has ever been before, and you’re thinking about school?”

“What? You think we’re going to be here forever?” answered Buffalo Susan, and just when she said this, the wind started to blow, really blow. It was going maybe 40 miles an hour, hot and dry. It took everyone by surprise.

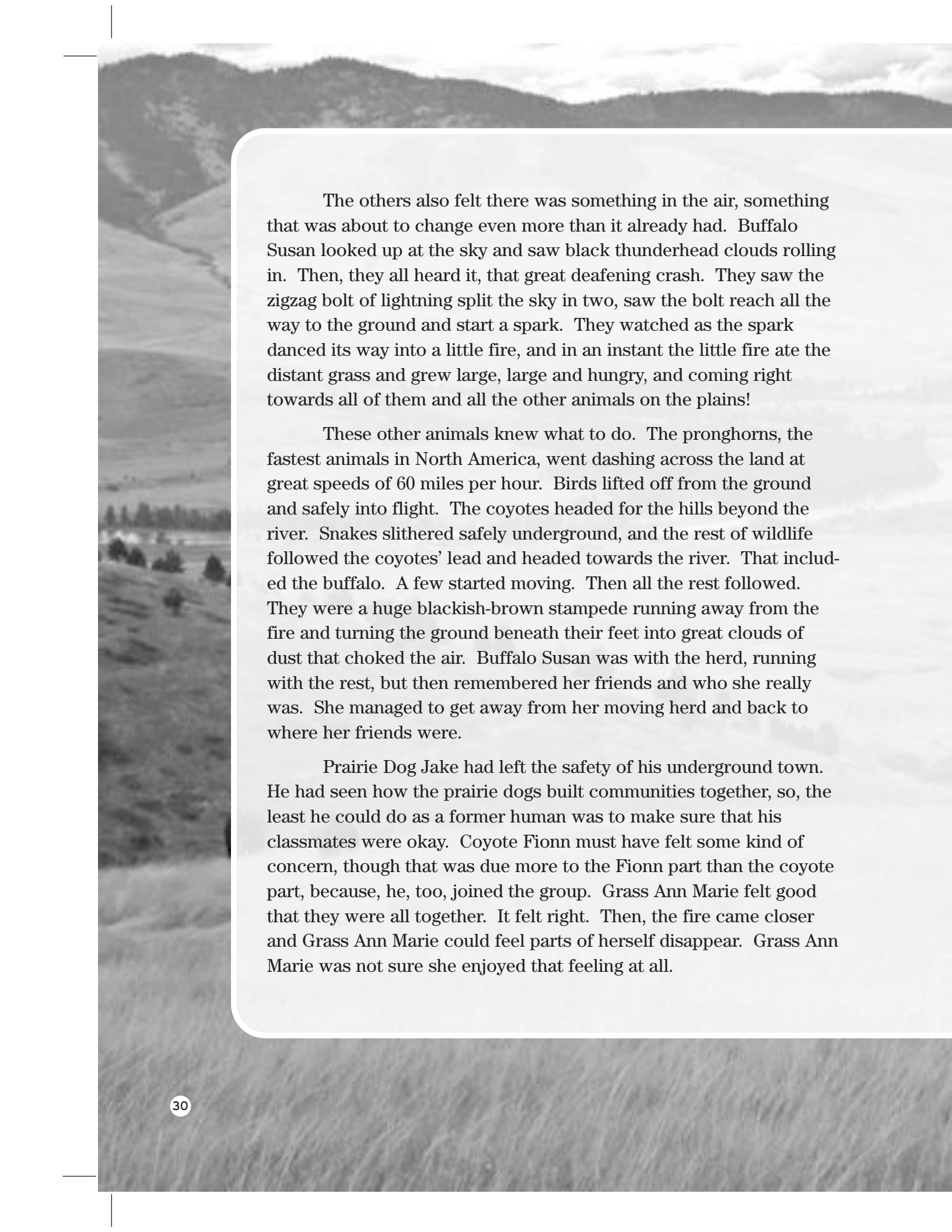
Grass Ann Marie could feel the moisture being sucked out of her. She could sense the golden-green feeling being slowly pulled away and replaced by something else, something brown and dry. It’s not that it felt bad, just different, and sudden. Grass Ann Marie figured it was a part of the grass’ plains life, so she just went with it.

The others also concentrated on existing with the wind, but there was no way they could talk above the winds that howled even louder than any coyote. So, they let their animal selves take over. Buffalo Susan went back to her herd. Their great numbers helped her



to stand strong against the wind. Prairie Dog Jake ducked out of the wind and went underground where he stayed in the listening room. He wanted to hear everything that happened outside. As for Coyote Fionn, he took shelter behind some rocks and waited for another unsuspecting rabbit to hop by so he could finally have lunch.

The wind continued. Grass Ann Marie felt herself being fiercely blown to and fro. She could feel her stems and blades being desiccated, dried out. She began to feel a little anxious, though she wasn't sure why, other than of course that she was golden-green grass now turning brown, whereas this morning she had been a pretty typical teenage girl.



The others also felt there was something in the air, something that was about to change even more than it already had. Buffalo Susan looked up at the sky and saw black thunderhead clouds rolling in. Then, they all heard it, that great deafening crash. They saw the zigzag bolt of lightning split the sky in two, saw the bolt reach all the way to the ground and start a spark. They watched as the spark danced its way into a little fire, and in an instant the little fire ate the distant grass and grew large, large and hungry, and coming right towards all of them and all the other animals on the plains!

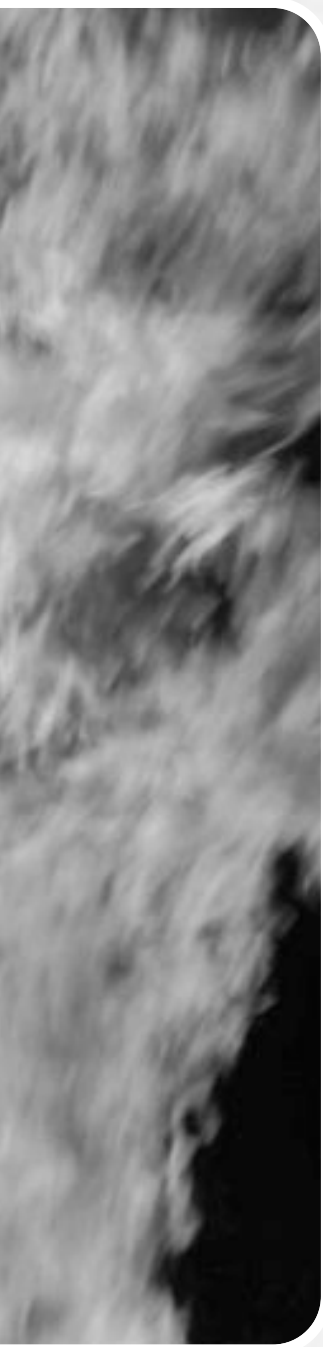
These other animals knew what to do. The pronghorns, the fastest animals in North America, went dashing across the land at great speeds of 60 miles per hour. Birds lifted off from the ground and safely into flight. The coyotes headed for the hills beyond the river. Snakes slithered safely underground, and the rest of wildlife followed the coyotes' lead and headed towards the river. That included the buffalo. A few started moving. Then all the rest followed. They were a huge blackish-brown stampede running away from the fire and turning the ground beneath their feet into great clouds of dust that choked the air. Buffalo Susan was with the herd, running with the rest, but then remembered her friends and who she really was. She managed to get away from her moving herd and back to where her friends were.

Prairie Dog Jake had left the safety of his underground town. He had seen how the prairie dogs built communities together, so, the least he could do as a former human was to make sure that his classmates were okay. Coyote Fionn must have felt some kind of concern, though that was due more to the Fionn part than the coyote part, because, he, too, joined the group. Grass Ann Marie felt good that they were all together. It felt right. Then, the fire came closer and Grass Ann Marie could feel parts of herself disappear. Grass Ann Marie was not sure she enjoyed that feeling at all.









Still, Grass Ann Marie didn't quite fear the fire like the animals did. She knew that the fires were part of the natural cycle, that they helped keep the land free of trees, got rid of dead grass, and made the soil better for growing. Fires were supposed to happen. Fires were also part of balancing nature.

Even though Grass Ann Marie didn't fear the fire, she didn't want to much be around when the blazing fire reached her and the others; and the others felt the same way.

Prairie Dog Jake, Coyote Fionn, Buffalo Susan, and even Grass Ann Marie all had the same instinct as the flames got closer. Run! So, that's what they did. With their first leap, whether physical in the case of Prairie Dog Jake, Coyote Fionn, and Buffalo Susan, or mental, as in the case of Grass Ann Marie, they felt themselves land not on the soft prairie, but on hard, scratchy ground. All of a sudden, they were back in the exhibit, back in the museum, and back to being the people they were that morning. They were human beings, again.





## Chapter Five

# *Full Circle*

“Hey, you kids!” shouted a deep voice. Ann Marie, Jake, Fionn and Susan jumped some. They saw an exasperated pair of guards walking towards them. Behind the guards were museum workers carrying hammers, saws and such. “Get out of there!” the guards shouted.

Ann Marie, Jake, Fionn and Susan, a little dazed and confused, stepped out of the exhibit. They watched as the workers took down the rope and went into the diorama. The kids waited to see if the builders would disappear, and become part of the grasslands, but they didn’t. They stayed there and slowly started to dismantle the exhibit. First, they picked up the prairie dog and put him in a box. Then, they went for the coyote.

The kids turned and walked away, this time feeling just like a team, knowing that none of them wanted to see the exhibit put away. One of the workers turned and called after them. “Hey, come back next week, the exhibit will be much better then!”



“I doubt it,” muttered Jake under his breath.

“I’m with you, Jake,” said Fionn. The girls nodded in agreement.

“Well,” said Ann Marie, “I’m guessing I will be writing the best grasslands report that’s been seen for quite some time.” The others gave Ann Marie a sideways glare. “Okay. Okay. *We* will be writing the best grasslands report ever.”

“Yeah,” said Susan, “maybe just like we were in balance out there, maybe we are still in balance right now, with each other.”

Jake twisted his face some. But then he smiled. He gave Fionn a friendly, light punch on the shoulder. Fionn grinned and punched him back. Ann Marie laughed.

Susan was right. It was sort of corny, but it was true. The kids had been through something together; they were a team, and that was a feeling that they would remember for a long, long time.

