

Better Than an A

What kind of hero would ignore an adorable seven-year-old?

BY SHANDA STEPHENS

Words jumbled in my mind as I desperately tried to concentrate on Dante's *Inferno*. I gazed at the living room clock. It was already 10:00 p.m. I had a quiz in the morning on eight chapters of the *Inferno* that I had not read yet, I needed to write an outline for my English class, and I also had a 6:00 a.m. meeting in the seminary building. I needed to go to bed soon. I read:

*Soon as the charity of native land
Wrought in my bosom, I the scatter'd leaves
Collected, and to him restored, who now
Was hoarse with utterance.¹*


I was finally grasping the concentration needed to endure this dragging night.

*. . . To the limit thence
We came, which from the third the second round
Divides, and where of justice is display'd
Contrivance horrible.*

"Hi, Shan," my seven-year-old sister, Shallen, uttered. I mumbled a little humph and hoped she would go away. Where was I? Hmmm . . . *horrible . . . horrible . . .* Aha!

*. . . Things then first seen
Clearlier to manifest, . . .*

I couldn't concentrate. I felt Shallen's baby doll face examining my every move. I felt like a prisoner under the



careful eye of my annoying little sister. Her sparkling, emerald eyes ignited with excitement when she saw me look at her.

"Today in school my teacher told us that all the second graders are going to have a hero day, and we get to dress up as our hero, and we get to give a report, and it is going to be fun, and we get to wear our hero outfit all day even at recess, and we . . ."

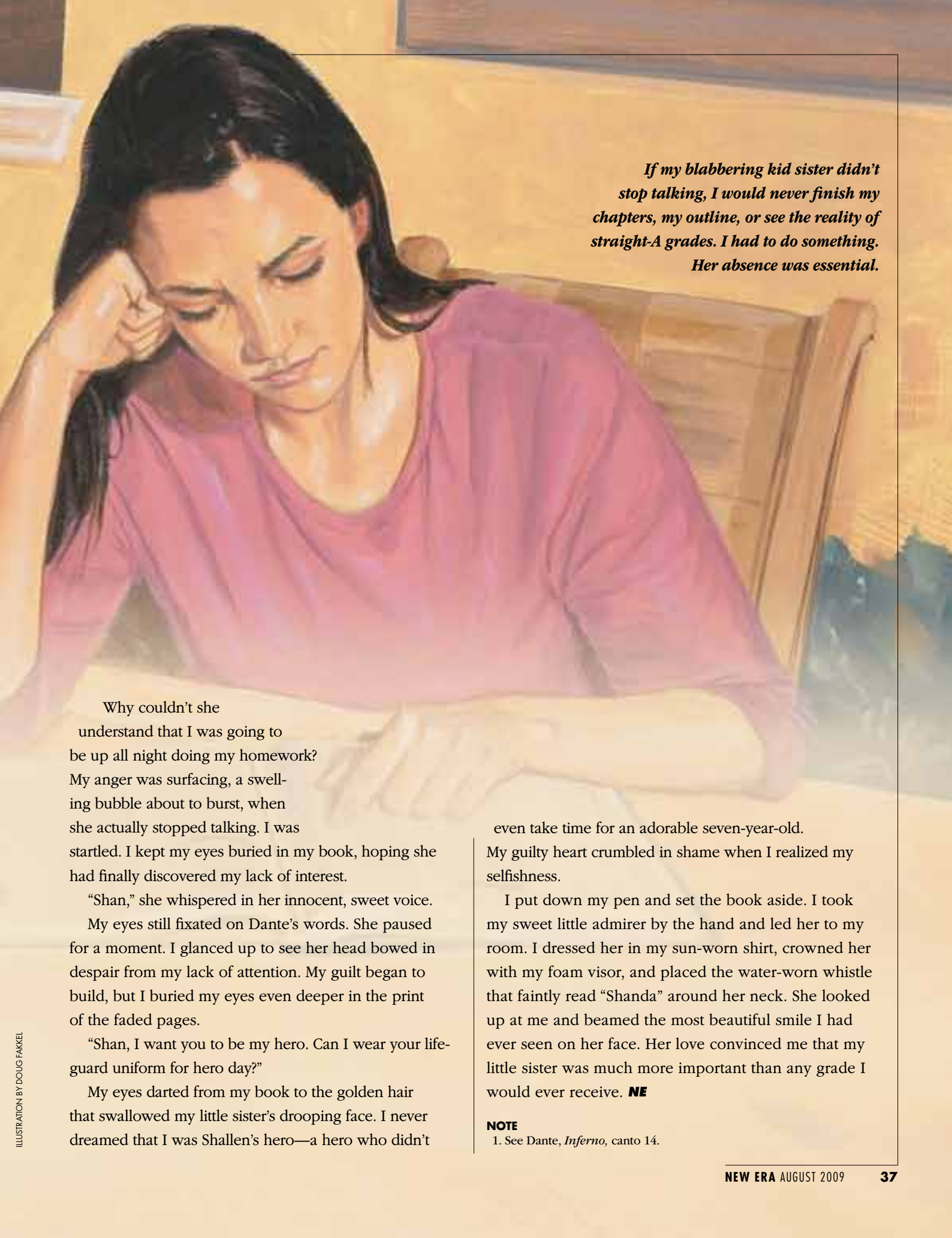
I knew if my blabbering kid sister didn't stop talking, I would never finish my chapters, my critical outline, or see the reality of straight-A grades.

I had to do something. Her absence was essential. Neglecting her would hopefully bore her, and she would redirect the "hero day" story to another family member.

My index finger guided me back to my place in the *Inferno*:

*. . . I tell how next
A plain we reach'd, that from . . .*

"And we get to draw pictures of our hero and . . ."



If my blabbering kid sister didn't stop talking, I would never finish my chapters, my outline, or see the reality of straight-A grades. I had to do something. Her absence was essential.

Why couldn't she understand that I was going to be up all night doing my homework? My anger was surfacing, a swelling bubble about to burst, when she actually stopped talking. I was startled. I kept my eyes buried in my book, hoping she had finally discovered my lack of interest.

"Shan," she whispered in her innocent, sweet voice.

My eyes still fixated on Dante's words. She paused for a moment. I glanced up to see her head bowed in despair from my lack of attention. My guilt began to build, but I buried my eyes even deeper in the print of the faded pages.

"Shan, I want you to be my hero. Can I wear your life-guard uniform for hero day?"

My eyes darted from my book to the golden hair that swallowed my little sister's drooping face. I never dreamed that I was Shallen's hero—a hero who didn't

even take time for an adorable seven-year-old.

My guilty heart crumbled in shame when I realized my selfishness.

I put down my pen and set the book aside. I took my sweet little admirer by the hand and led her to my room. I dressed her in my sun-worn shirt, crowned her with my foam visor, and placed the water-worn whistle that faintly read "Shanda" around her neck. She looked up at me and beamed the most beautiful smile I had ever seen on her face. Her love convinced me that my little sister was much more important than any grade I would ever receive. **NE**

NOTE

1. See Dante, *Inferno*, canto 14.