

## Grade 8 Narrative

### Sky's the Limit

Jordan lay flat on his back, clutching his skateboard to his chest, the board's wheels facing upward and spinning wildly. He thought to himself: Nothing hurts. I landed safely on the grass, and I'm OK. His heart raced with the adrenaline of exhilaration, instinctively revving, unable to detect the difference between survival mode and celebration. For one seemingly endless moment, Jordan's existence consisted of a deep, tranquil silence underscored by the rhythm of his heightened heartbeats. He gazed up at the sky overhead, absorbed by the great stillness of the clouds and the thought that how strange that such a sky would be called *altocumulus mackerel*.

Then his sister's voice reached up and snatched him from the clouds and the sky and the memories of the past, yanking him unceremoniously back to the present.

"You really think you're something, don't you?" were the words, but Julianna's tone conveyed an almost parental pride.

A multitude of faces stared down at him; he heard not only Julianna's voice, but a chorus of voices, all speaking at once, unintelligibly, words blending together and cresting like the roar of the waves crashing on the shore:

"He's in shock."

"Concussion."

"Oh, right, when did you become a doctor?"

"At least he didn't break anything."

"How would you know?"

"He's a doctor, remember? He diagnosed the concussion."

"Look, he's trying to get up."

As Jordan tentatively hoisted himself to a sitting position, the voices gradually stilled, the faces anxiously watching, the anxiety apparent and yet so strange to Jordan until he understood the silence stemmed from worry: they assumed he was hurt. "I'm fine," he said, but his words did nothing to reassure them; having seen the landing, they had made up their minds.

"Maybe you shouldn't get up," said a girl in a black T-shirt.

“How many fingers am I holding up?” asked the guy who thought he was a doctor. Undeterred by Jordan’s indifference, he continued. “Hey, that was some fall.”

“It wasn’t a fall,” corrected Julianna, who had observed him more closely than anyone. “He was in control the whole time.”

“Maybe he broke something,” offered someone else, one of those who was clearly and understandably enjoying the drama of the spectacle.

Jordan’s respiration and heart rate had returned to normal, or as close as could be expected under the circumstances. Standing up casually cost him both effort and concentration—the temptation was to stay there, in that place of *altocumulus mackerel* sky, soaring, exhilarated, and more alive than he had ever been. The endless hours of slowly rolling, painstakingly rehearsing on the ground what he longed to achieve in the air, stepping backward into a rotation, wheels clacking awkwardly on the pavement, had finally lifted him up to the sky. He managed to appear just the same as always, with no indication that anything unusual had happened, as he picked up his board. Jordan glanced back at the ramp, trying to recapture the moment, but the moment vanished, evanescent as the clouds now drifting away.

“He’s fine,” said Julianna dismissively.

“That was incredible,” he heard someone else say. “At least two complete rotations!”

“More like a McTwist,” said the girl in the black T-shirt.

“That was some landing,” said the guy, who, like many who watch too many television doctors, somehow had gained the illusion that he had medical credentials. “Lucky you ended up on the grass.”

Staring at the ramp, Jordan assembled fleeting snatches of memory as brief scenes appeared and then disappeared like pictures in an accelerated slideshow: checking his helmet straps, adjusting his kneepads, testing wheel bearings before rolling up to the vertical ramp, then assessing its curve and steepness, preparing as he had millions of times before for yet another attempt at a Caballeria—a backward 360-degree turn, a maneuver he’d been practicing for ages, ever since Julianna taught him how to do it.

At that moment, those countless repetitions of movements merged and coalesced; immediately before releasing himself to gravity, Jordan visualized the exuberant arc of a dolphin, the heartbreakingly graceful swoop of the hawk, and then he, too, was soaring, effortlessly spinning in what seemed to be slow motion. Then the downward spiral as he caught the board under his feet mid-air and landed, sure-footed and solid, only to collapse in sheer amazement and disbelief in the grass.

“That wasn’t luck; that was intentional,” countered Jordan absentmindedly.

“Good one,” said the girl in the black T-shirt, and Jordan nodded in acknowledgment, seemingly nonchalant, but grinning inwardly.

“What’s next?” asked Julianna, as they navigated their way through the crowd.

Jordan shrugged. “Sky’s the limit.”

## **Grade 8 Informational**

### **The Homestead Act: Gateway to a New Life**

On the morning of January 1, 1863, Daniel Freeman traveled to a land office in Brownville, Nebraska. He had journeyed to the office to be the first person to sign up for land under the terms of the newly passed Homestead Act. He wanted to settle a piece of land on Cub Creek, near Beatrice, Nebraska. Freeman's dream of owning land was not new in the United States. The Homestead Act of 1862 helped many people realize their dreams.

#### **U.S. Laws Regarding Landownership**

Deciding how to distribute land in the United States was a controversial issue. According to the Land Ordinance of 1785, unsettled land could be bought from the United States government for one dollar per acre. The minimum purchase was 640 acres. That was a lot of money in those days, and few farmers could afford the price.

By 1800, the minimum purchase was 320 acres, and payment could be made in four installments. Even so, most people could not afford to buy land. As settlement extended west into the dry lands of the Great Plains, people thought the land was not worth the price. Congress made several attempts to change the law and make land more affordable. Disagreements among legislators prevented a new law from being passed. The cost of land limited settlement of the West.

The Homestead Act of 1862 provided settlers with new opportunities. It allowed settlers to claim 160 acres of land. No money was paid for the land. Many new settlers were attracted by the offer. The land became the property of a homesteader who built a dwelling and raised crops on the land for five years.

#### **Perils of Farming on the Plains**

Farming in Nebraska and other plains regions was difficult even for experienced farmers. The Homestead Act did not require settlers to know anything about farming. As a result, many people who took advantage of the law were unprepared for the task of farming in the challenging environment of the plains. Despite their efforts, many of these homesteaders failed.

More than the 160 acres provided to the settlers was needed in order to sustain a farm family on the plains. Crop yields were small, and natural vegetation to feed livestock was sparse.

Water is an essential resource that is often taken for granted. Everyday needs, such as cooking, watering crops, and tending livestock, require a lot of water. Many areas of Nebraska were grasslands and had little surface water. The earliest settlers claimed the parcels of land near creeks and rivers quickly. Those who came later had to settle on lands where water was scarce. Their chances for success diminished because their choices of land near water were limited.

Natural hazards added to the difficulties for the homesteaders. Property and life were often put at risk by prairie fires, hailstorms, tornadoes, and swarms of locusts. Farmers could do little to defend against these hazards. At times, the lonely feeling of isolation on the prairie caused people to give up and leave.

### **Overcoming Obstacles to Success**

Homesteaders who withstood the hard times of establishing their farms began to prosper. Successful farmers expanded onto the lands of the farmers who gave up, and farms began to grow to the size needed to survive on the plains. Sod houses gave way to frame houses. Innovations, such as barbed wire for fencing and windmills to pump water for irrigation, developed over time. These improvements led to the production of healthy and plentiful crops and livestock.

Perhaps the most dramatic development in the early years of settlement was the completion of the transcontinental railroad. Once the Union Pacific Railroad rolled through Nebraska, farmers could sell their products to the big markets in the East. In addition, they could receive manufactured goods ordered through catalogs from Montgomery Ward and Sears Roebuck. People on the plains began to feel less isolated.

### **Results of the Homestead Act**

By 1900, small family farms dotted the Nebraska landscape. Farmers were prospering, but the tough environment was about to provide the plains with another obstacle to overcome. In the early 1930s, an extended drought hit the plains. The wind picked up tons of dirt and blew it into clouds that blocked out the sun. Thousands of farmers lost their land and moved away.

The remaining farmers learned to adapt. They planted hedgerows of trees to block the wind. They developed new methods of dryland farming so the land would not be as susceptible to wind erosion. Agriculture on the plains flourished again. Today, the agricultural economy of Nebraska supports the state.

Fearless homesteaders, like Daniel Freeman, established farms on the frontier long ago. Today, the Homestead National Monument of America, near Beatrice, Nebraska, honors the law and the pioneer spirit that brought farming to the plains.

### **Events That Influenced Settlement of the Plains**

1785 \_\_\_ Land Ordinance of 1785 establishes rules for purchasing land

1854 \_\_\_ Kansas-Nebraska Act creates two new territories

1862 \_\_\_ President Lincoln signs the Homestead Act into law 1863 \_\_\_ Daniel Freeman files for the first free homestead

1869 \_\_\_ Transcontinental railroad is completed

1932 — Drought causes dust storms that destroy farms on the plains 1936 — Site of the Daniel Freeman homestead becomes a national monument