STEEL TOE BOOTS

By Monique Polak

Homonym. It's a big word for someone in Grade Three. But I love big words. I also love how when I say *homonym* my mouth feels filled with sounds.

In case you don't know the word *homonym* it means words that sound the same, but have different meanings. Like *see* (what you *see* with your eyes) and *sea* (the kind you swim in).

Yesterday, in class, I raised my hand when Ms. Mathilde asked if someone could think of another homonym.

"Yes, Isobel," she said.

"*Steel* and *steal*. There is a *steel* factory in our town, and robbers are people who *steal* stuff."

Peter, who sits next to me in class, and is my best friend, laughed.

"What's so funny?" I asked him.

"You!" he said. "You're always talking about steel!"

I felt proud when Ms. Mathilde told the class to write down my homonym. Ms. Mathilde also said there is another meaning to the word *steel* – the one that's spelled with two e's. "To steel oneself," she explained, "is to face a challenge with courage."

Most of our parents work at the steel factory. My friend Olivier's father is a mechanic who services the machines. My friend Sandra's mother has a job in the head office. But I think my mom has the coolest job of all: she manages the building where they make steel rods. Some of those rods were even used to build the new Champlain Bridge which connects the Island of Montreal to the South Shore, where I live.

For Christmas, I have asked Santa for a pair of steel toe boots. I hope he can find them in my size. My mom wears steel toe boots and fire-resistant clothing to work. Before she goes into her building, she puts on a safety helmet with earmuffs, safety glasses, a mask and gloves.

Kids are not allowed inside my mom's building. That's because of all the giant machines and the fact that the furnace they use gets very very hot. It reaches a temperature of nearly three-thousand degrees Fahrenheit!

Only people aged eighteen and up are allowed inside. Which means I'll have to wait nine more years!

In the mean time, I am super lucky because I get to watch the surveillance video camera! Today is Saturday, and though Mom is home, she has to keep an eye on what is happening inside her building. She lets me watch too. We have the same favourite part – it's when the steel and scrap metal that gets mixed together with the steel are turned into liquid steel. That's when we see the giant furnace flames glowing orange and red, the liquid steel pouring out like hot white lava, and the golden sparks flickering in every direction! Those sparks are like fireworks – only better, because the show lasts longer! And it doesn't just happen on Canada Day!

I could spend all day watching the camera footage. But Mom says I need to get outside. It's not too hot, and not too cold. Making it a perfect November day for bike riding. I go next door to see if Peter wants to come. "Of course I do," he says, grabbing his bike helmet.

Mom is at the front window. "I'm glad you two are getting some fresh air!" she calls after us.

Peter and I pedal side-by-side. "I wouldn't call this air fresh! Look at that smoke!" he says. He points up ahead to one of the tall brick chimneys in the distance. The chimneys are part of the steel factory. A pale grey plume is rising out of the chimney, up into the air.

"That isn't smoke!" I tell Peter. "It's water vapour!"

When we reach the bottom of a small hill, our brakes make squealing sounds. Peter runs his finger over the handlebars of his bike. "Dust," he says, shaking his head, "from the factory. Who needs steel?"

"We all need it!" I tell him. "Without steel, you wouldn't have a bike! And we wouldn't have the Champlain Bridge!" I pull up my green wire glasses which have dropped to the bottom of my nose. "Even my glasses have steel in them!"

“Okay, okay,” Peter says. “I get it. We need steel. But we also need clean air!” He shakes his finger at me. Which is how I know he’s upset.

I don’t want to fight with Peter. We’ve been friends since kindergarten. I think about Ms. Mathilde and homonyms. If I want to stand up for steel, I will have to steel myself!

“Here in our town,” I tell Peter, “all the furnaces used to make steel are electric. That means there’s almost no pollution!”

We bike past a recycling bin someone has left out on the curb. The bin reminds me of something else. “Did you know steel is one hundred per cent recyclable?” I ask Peter.

“One hundred per cent?” Peter says. “You sure about that?”

“I’m one hundred per cent sure!” That makes us both laugh.

There is a scrapyard up ahead at the edge of town. When we get close, I ask Peter, “Did you know it takes scrap metal to make steel rods?” We stop in front of the scrapyard. Through the fence (which is made of steel), we can see two rows of old cars and a mountain of broken washing machines, dryers and dishwashers. “The steel factory buys all that junk and turns it into steel. Which is a lot better than burying it in some landfill.”

Peter can’t argue with that!

Before we go home, we stop for soft ice cream. We watch as the ice cream comes out of the machine. The ice cream machine is also made of steel.

Christmas is still a month away. But down the street from the ice cream shop, someone is putting up Christmas decorations. “Hey,” I say to Peter. “Have you decided what you want for Christmas?”

“That’s easy,” he says. “An Xbox. I know what you’re thinking. An Xbox is made of steel. What about you? What do you want, Isobel?”

“Boots!” I tell him, “with steel toes!”