A person and a dog posing for the camera

Description automatically generated**CELIA IS BACK** – by Amy Hempel

“Luck isn’t luck,” the father told his kids. “Luck is where preparation meets opportunity.”

The boy backed up his father’s statement. “That’s what the big winners say,” he agreed.

The boy and his sister were entering contests. The kitchen table was littered with forms and the entry blanks off cereal boxes. The boy held a picture of a blue Rolls-Royce, the grand prize in a sweepstakes he was too young to enter.

“Do you think it has to be blue?” he asked. “Do you think I can get it in a different color?”

“You can’t drive,” the girl said. “So it’s a mute point.”

She tore a sheet of paper from a legal pad and drew up an affidavit. It promised her the Rolls

when her father won it in the sweepstakes next fall. She penciled in a line on the paper for his signature, and a line below that, and titled the second one Witnessed By.

The father had time before his weekly appointment, so he poured himself coffee and filled in some of the blanks. In spite of what he said, the father knew he had luck. In the time that he had been home, he had won two prizes. He had won a week for two in Hawaii, airfare included, and a ride in a hot-air balloon.

Sweepstakes were easy, the father explained. There was nothing to guess, no jingle to compose, no skill required at all. You wrote your name and address, then you soaked the paper in water so that it dried stiff and crackly, and was therefore easy for the judge to get a grip on in the bin. You could enter a sweepstakes as often as you liked – you could flood it if the prize or the winning was worth the bother.

The father held his hand up like an Indian saying 'How'. “Remember the Three P’s,” he told his kids. “Patience, Perseverance, and Postage. The people who win these things know the Three P’s.”

Contests were different than sweepstakes, he said. You needed talent to win a contest, or at least you needed the knack.

“S-O-S,” the father informed. “What you want to remember is: Be Simple, be Original, be Sincere. That’s the winning system.”

When the sweepstakes entries were completed and stamped, the kids detained their father for the Jell-O pudding contest.

They said, “Daddy will help us – Daddy always wins!”

“All right,” the father said. “But don’t make me late for my appointment.”

You had to tell the judges why you liked Jell-O pudding. You had to complete the sentence, “I like Jell-O pudding because -------.”

First, the father looked at what his kids had written down. “It’s sincere,” he said. “But what about original?” He said that the first thing that popped into their heads would have popped into the heads of other people, too.

The father said, “Think. What is the thing about Jell-O pudding? What is really the thing?"

He paused for so long that the kids looked at each other.

“What?” the girl said.

The father closed his eyes and leaned back in his chair. He said, “I like Jell-O pudding because I like a good hearty meal after a brisk walk on a winter’s day – something to really warm me up.”

The boy giggled and the girl giggled.

The father looked confused. “This is the Jell-O pudding contest, isn’t that what you said?” he said. “Well, okay then,” he said. “I like Jell-O pudding because it has a tough satin finish that resist chipping and peeling. No, no,” he said, “I mean, I like Jell-O pudding because it has a fruitier taste. Because it’s garden fresh,” he said. “Because it goes on dry to protect me from wetness longer. Oh, Jell-O pudding,” the father said. “I like it because it’s more absorbent that those other brands. Won’t chafe or ride up.”

He opened his eyes and saw his son leave the room. The sound that had made the father open his eyes was the pen that the boy had thrown to the floor.

“You may already be a winner,” the father said. He closed his eyes again. “You know,” he continued, “most pudding makes me edgy. But not Jell-O pudding. That’s because it has no caffeine. Tastes right – and is built to stay that way." “Yes, I like Jell-O pudding because it’s the one thing to take when you really want to bufficate a headache. Or when you need to mirtilize a bad breath, unless you want your bad breath to mirtilize you.”

This time the sound that brought him around was the sound of his car keys swinging on their chain. His daughter held the keys. She said, “Daddy, come on. You’ll be late.”

“That’s what I told you, didn’t I?” the father said. Ï said, ‘Don’t make me late for my appointment.’”

He followed his daughter out to the car. “Did I tell you the thing about Jell-O?” he said.

His motor skills were not impaired. He drove slowly, carefully, the girl on the seat beside him. He turned off the freeway onto a wide commercial drive of franchised food and failing business. The place he was going to was blocks away.

A red light stopped him opposite the House of Marlene. There was a handwritten sign in a grimy window. The sign said, Celia, formerly of Mr. Edward, has rejoined our staff.

The father’s hand relaxed on the wheel. Celia, he thought. Celia has come back to make everything okay. The wondrous Celia brings her powers to bear.

The traffic light turned green. Is she really back? he wondered. Is Celia back to stay?

Through the horns going off behind him, through the fists of his daughter beside him, the father stayed stopped.

Everything will be fine, he thought, now that Celia’s here.

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**Characterization Questions**

* Who is the protagonist in this short story?
* His/her age?
* Family Background?
* Social Class and Status?
* Occupation?
* Is the protagonist DYNAMIC or STATIC?
* Is the protagonist ROUND or FLAT?
* Does he or she have special powers or handicaps that effect their behavior and beliefs?
* PLOT: What event incites/begins the central issue or conflict?
* How is the tension produced and is it appropriate?
* Does the short story seem to be high-tension or low-tension?

**The Psychology of the Character**

* + What are the main traits or desires?
  + How does the character generally act? Rationally? Instinctively? Sensually? Emotionally? Intuitively?
  + Does the main character take charge of a situation?
  + Is he aware of his problems? If so, how do he deal with them?
  + Does the short story involve a moment of insight, revelation or self-realization for one of the characters?
  + Based on your opinion (backed up with evidence), what does the narrator want us to think and feel about what happens to the protagonist? The daughter? The son?