Kids. Anyone who knows me well would say that I don’t exactly mix well with little children. Kortney would relate how hilarious it was for her when I attempted to hold her infant cousin, which felt like holding an enormous sack of Jell-O, and Emily would tell the story of my attempt to help at our aunt’s daycare; that story involves a hungry baby and some Play-Doh – I’ll leave the rest to imagination. Children and I, we’re a bit like baking soda and vinegar: an uncontrollable explosion followed by a mess to clean up. So how then, one may ask, did I end up with a babysitting job? For the same reason many people do a lot of things: money, guilt, and an inability to say no.

It’s not as if I’ve hidden my clumsiness with kids. In fact, I believe I’ve made it quite apparent. Despite this fact, my elementary school principal, who also happens to be good friends with my mother, requested that I babysit her kids. While my head was saying, *sweet baby Jesus, please no,* my mouth smiled happily and said, “Sure, why not?”

The two kids I babysit are named Simon and Roger, who are 9 and 8 years old, respectively. Roger is only a year younger than his brother, but he is substantially smaller, both physically and mentally, due to medical complications when he was younger. (Simon also has a few allergies, but they’re not nearly as severe as his brother’s.) So, when I sat in their mother’s messy, kid-friendly van for the first time, I received an extensive verbal list of the allergies and medical conditions I would need to know in the coming days. My attempt to retain this onslaught of information was equivalent to trying to shove an entire loaf of bread into a toaster – except Roger can’t eat regular toast, because he’s allergic to gluten. Needless to say, I was a bit overwhelmed by the unexpected complexity of said list. I think I played it off quite well, though, because after a few minutes of nodding and some phrases such as, “Oh, of course,” I earned a rhetorical question somewhere along the lines of “Oh, you’re so smart, I don’t even need to explain all this, do I?” I again smiled as a response, hiding the distress that was building inside my body as rapidly as a waterfall would fill a small bottle.

“Ariannatang!” Roger calls as he slowly descends the few steps off the bus. My name is one word as far as this tiny bundle of energy is concerned. Another kid thrusts her tongue against the window and laughs, and Simon follows Roger off the bus after saying something inaudible to the driver. I’m both proud of myself and relieved, as I’ve managed to survive the final weeks of summer while babysitting a few days a week. Now that school has started once again, my schedule has become a consistent one or two hours every Wednesday and Thursday after school as opposed to the eight or nine hours I had been babysitting the kids previously.

While taking care of the kids is much easier now that the task doesn’t last an entire day, the school year’s schedule poses its own set of problems. When they get home, the two boys have to do their homework. For a fourth grader, this apparently means reading for half an hour. Easy enough, right? Wrong. Simon spends more time trying to avoid his work than the reading would take if he just sat down and did it.

“Can I read this?” Simon says holding up a magazine that’s 90% pictures.

“No.”

“Okay, then I’ll just read this,” he says, and sits down with what appears to be a book.

Now, I may not be an exemplar of basic motherly knowledge, but I’m not stupid. I walk over to look at what he’s going to “read”, and sure enough, it’s practically a picture book. After
finally sitting Simon down with an actual book and a groan I’m sure anyone who deals with kids is familiar with, I sit down with Roger to make sure he does his homework properly. Roger is a bit more naïve than his sibling, so it’s generally easier to convince him to do what needs to be done. On the other hand, he’s also quite stubborn. When doing his first grade homework, he prefers to guess the answer rather than really try to figure it out. Sometimes he gets incredibly excited and is sure that he knows it, but don’t be deceived. A close eye needs to be kept on what he’s actually writing, because the kid will say seven and write three.

“Right, it says ‘Jo was good friends with Ben. She made Ben feel less shy,’ so who made Ben feel less shy?” I repeat to Roger for the third time.

“His brother!” he exclaims, certain he’s got it right this time.

“Nope, let’s try reading this one more time – No, not there – Right, there. Try reading with your finger, just put it – there you go,” I instruct.

“Jo was good friends with Ben. She made Ben feel less shy – Jo!” Roger finally answers correctly, and he immediately scribbles in the general vicinity of the multiple choice circle next to Jo’s name and under the faded pencil marks remaining from previously erased mistakes.

Homework is a daily ritual, and it’s generally always the same. Simon always has to be harassed into picking up a book, and Roger’s homework worksheets are the same format with a few different sentences. At the beginning, I was sure the boys would become more compliant. I was wrong. When I first started this job, I had no idea that half a year later they could be so stubborn. However, I’ll take the challenge of elementary schoolers’ homework any day over the hazards I faced over the summer while trying to figure out just what exactly I had gotten myself into.

The most prominent challenge I faced during the summer was the task of feeding the young consumers. To many people, food is a wonderful thing and it not only keeps them alive but also tastes good. Unfortunately, I’m a terrible cook. Luckily for me, the kids aren’t very picky. I narrowly escaped cooking several times by offering sandwiches, which are about half of my repertoire, but all good things must come to an end. One morning, the boys decided they wanted eggs. My general thought process at this point was more or less panicky, but I managed to work things out: Water. Pot. Stove on... high? This may seem a bit ridiculous because everyone should know how to make something as simple as eggs, right? My apologies, but I missed the cooking train. Completely. I didn’t catch it at the last minute and managed to hop on the very back of the caboose. That train took a quick look at me and zoomed in the opposite direction. After a few minutes of panicked apprehension while the kids wandered the house, completely oblivious to my clear lack of knowledge, I realized I had no idea how long to cook eggs for. My brilliant solution: something in the back of my mind told me that hard-boiled eggs couldn’t really be overcooked. Did I have any idea whether or not this was true? Not at all. Did I follow the information as if it were law? Absolutely.

Some time later, I managed to remove an egg from the pot of scalding water without too much trouble by using a humongous spoon I found in a drawer. It had fairly large holes in the shape of a flower in the middle which would drain the water, so it seemed like a good choice. I received a strange sideways glance from Roger as he walked through the room and eyed the spoon, but he said nothing. I continued my endeavor to place normal looking food on the table by beginning to peel that egg. I smashed the giant spoon into the top of the egg, denting the top slightly. I treated the rest of the process as if I was a member of a bomb squad and the egg was a very dangerous bomb. This was the moment of truth. Peeling the egg, I tried to decide what I would do if the egg was disgustingly overcooked. Before I could come up with anything,
though, I was showered with good fortune and relief as I found that the egg was a perfect ovoid of normalcy. The kids devoured the food as they had any other, and I was satisfied.

My mom came to pick me up, and I went home that day with a small sense of accomplishment from my small victory. I had managed to conquer the eggs.

“So, are you hungry for dinner?” my mom asked as we walked inside the house.

“Absolutely,” I replied, “But only if you cook.”