

StoneSoup



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StoneSoup

Writing and art by kids, for kids

Editor's Note

When I saw Emma Tian's photograph *Majesty* (this month's cover image), I immediately knew that it had to be on a cover—not only because it's an excellent photograph but because its power lies partly in its size. It is a photograph that wants to overwhelm you, to make you aware of the weight of time and history, of the fleeting nature of civilization and the ongoingness of nature—of sky, tree, grass.

Emma took this photograph in the inner courtyards of the Heidelberg Castle ruins in Germany, a castle that was originally built around the year 1225 and then destroyed and rebuilt multiple times before becoming a tourist attraction.

So often, the photos we take as tourists are not artistic: they serve merely as records—"I went there, I saw this." Emma's photo, however, says so much more. It is beautiful, of course, but there is also something very eerie about it. Note the clouds in the sky, and especially the dark shadow in the upper right-hand corner: they suffuse the image with a sense of foreboding. The light is a bit strange, as well—too yellow—and something about the shadows the walls cast onto the grass feels "off"—like the light is coming from a place other than I expect.

Take a walk around your neighborhood with a camera ready: can you take a photograph of a structure or place that makes you see it in a new, and timeless, way?



On the cover:
Majesty
(Canon EOS 5D Mark III)
Emma Tian, 13
Belle Mead, NJ

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Crooked Shadows (Fujifilm X-T1)
Claire Lu, 13
Portola Valley, CA

The Fall

A leaf wonders why it must eventually fall



By Ananya Nigam, 13
Gurugram, India

Sometimes I look down at the forest floor below and I wonder what is out there. All my life, I have been sitting on the same branch, on the same tree, in the same forest. I have no idea of the world beyond. In my tree, I am part of a community, but in the outside world, all I am is a tiny leaf amongst millions of others. But soon, after staring at the darkness below, I feel a sense of dread slowly seep through me. It starts from the tip of my leaf and trickles down into my veins until I am forced to look away and hope that I never have to leave the warmth of my branch. But I know that that isn't possible. It isn't possible for any of us.

As a society, us leaves don't have many rules. We have to provide food to the rest of the tree, and we have to be welcoming to any bird, insect, or animal that chooses to rest on our branches. Other than that, we mostly have the freedom to do what we wish. However, the community has one rule that we all have to follow. It is called the Fall.

Every one of us, at some point in our lives, has to fall. They leave it up to us to decide when we are ready, but this rule is nonnegotiable. When

we were young leaves, we never took this rule seriously. It was something in the far-off future that we didn't have to think about. We would spend our days filled with innocent delight, wishing we could fly with the birds and run with the animals, and our nights staring at the stars shimmering like silver dust in the dark sky. We would remain on our branches, never thinking that a day would come when we would have to leave them.

But as we grew older and matured, we started to understand the importance of this rule and knew that someday we would have to leave. I have watched all the other leaves on my branch fall. Some dropped fast, gaining speed as they fell. For some, the wind took over and they were swept away. Some never even made it to the ground. But all of them were ready. I could see it in the color of their skin, the way the edges of their leaves curled up in apprehension. I could see it in the way their veins pulsed with energy. I've watched each one of them on their journey. I've observed the way they drop into the abyss of darkness, into a chasm of the unknown, almost fearlessly. I watched

The sun rises and sets each day, and the moon dances its way in and out each night, but somehow, I am never ready to fall.

until they faded into tiny specks like paint on a canvas and disappeared into a whole new world. Each time, I felt a sense of loss. Loss of a friend to another community and loss of the opportunity to join them.

The sun rises and sets each day, and the moon dances its way in and out each night, but somehow, I am never ready to fall. The frosty cold of winter morphs into the pleasant warmth of spring. But I am not ready. The scorching heat seeps in as spring turns into summer. But I am still not ready. Even autumn passes and I am surrounded by other falling leaves. But I remain tethered to my branch, unable to move. I see younger leaves falling happily through the air, laughing with glee as they reach the ground. I see the older leaves jumping gracefully off the branch, gently fluttering toward the ground. But I continue to wait. I can feel the judging eyes of the other leaves in my community piercing through me, trying to cut me apart with their stares, wondering why I haven't fallen yet.

I have come close to being ready many a time. I have teetered toward the edge of the precipice. But something has always stopped me. Maybe it was fear. A fear that consumes me. It engulfs my body like a gigantic wave at sea and takes away the last pinch of courage I had. How can I jump without knowing what's below? Some nights, while I stare at the moon shining like a light bulb in the midst of darkness, I wonder why

the community even has this rule. Why are we being forced to fall?

Soon the days seemed to merge into each other, forming a monotonous routine. I stopped waking up every day wondering whether today would be the day that I was finally ready. That littlest dash of hope that added the tiniest tinge of color into an otherwise grey sky began to fade as each day passed. I was ready to succumb to my unfortunate fate. I was ready to give up.

And then, suddenly, I heard it. I heard the noise that changed my life. It was a garish, barbaric noise that made me tense in my branch. Suddenly I felt uneasy. The sound became clearer as I heard steps approaching. I dared not look in the direction, as if looking away would help me pretend it wasn't there. Loud, harsh words in a strange language that was so different from the gentle whispering of the trees reverberated all around. It was as if the forest had become still. The birds had stopped their melodious tunes in warning. The squirrels scuttled away to hide. For a few moments, there was silence, like the calm before a storm.

And then I heard the dreaded noise. The noise of an axe. I anxiously waited for the pulse until I realized it wasn't my tree. A guilty sense of relief surged through me. The whole forest seemed to be waiting. However, nothing could prepare me for what happened next. A clean swish of the axe. The tree collapsed. A flurry of sounds and emotions ambushed me. I heard birds squawking indignantly.

I heard insects chattering worriedly. But the worst sound of all was the leaves. Millions of leaves falling. Their usual gentle whispering turned into desperate shivers of anguish. The guttural sounds swirled around me. Hundreds of emotions engulfed me—pain, guilt, and fear. But the most powerful emotion I felt was anger.

Sparks of fury raged inside me. Fury against those barbaric creatures that drove hundreds of birds and animals from their homes, who destroyed millions of innocent leaves whose time hadn't yet come. In that moment, I finally understood the reason for the rule of my community. They wanted to protect us. They wanted to give us a choice, to give us a chance to be ready when we fall—unlike these poor leaves. My anger slowly dissolved, and I felt a strange sense of peace and tranquility. What I had seen earlier as an empty void of uncertainty suddenly changed into an inviting world of opportunities. I took a deep breath and released myself, and in that moment all I could think of was that finally I could fly with the birds.

A single leaf gracefully fluttered to the ground.

Autumn Leaves at a Funeral



By Enni Harlan, 13
Los Angeles, CA

We gave a bird a funeral, my father and I—
it was one of those days
where time stands still, where
all evening sounds seem a lullaby, gently
singing the world to sleep.

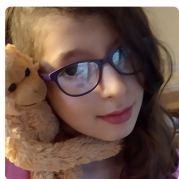
Dusk was falling over us like
a thick, warm blanket
as we saw the bird at the foot of a tree—
fallen, dead, and gone.

I wanted to bury it
but my father said to leave it be;
it was half-buried anyway
in its spot of rest, chosen by fate,
its ornate wing covering a lifeless beak as it
lay in a crevice
between two thick roots.

So we scattered some leaves
of crimson and burnt copper,
wishing it well just in case it was on its way
to another life.

A gust of wind, an autumn breeze,
swept over the somber scene,
sending leaves dancing as
the bird's beautiful soul departed,
soaring free once more.

My heart



By Aya David-Ramati, 10
Dublin, Ireland

All this feeling trapped in this tiny room,

my head preparing for its greatest doom.

The words come at me,

the feelings strike,

the memories roll me,

like wheels on a bike.

All these things mix

with the thoughts of the day.

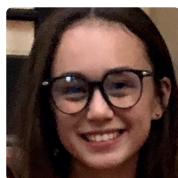
They jumble up my dreams,

ruin what I say.

Now I know why the room-brain is so very small:

because my heart is big.

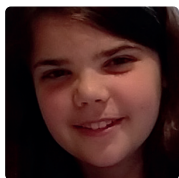
That is all.



Hat Girl (Acrylic)
Keira Callahan, 12
San Francisco, CA

Awaiting a Letter

Celeste sets out to find a bank robber—but ends up solving a mystery about her mother instead



By Lila C. Kassouf, 12
Towson, MD

Eighteen-thousand dollars were stolen from the Bridgeham Regional Bank on Nov. 2. Eyewitnesses say the robber was a man wearing all black, carrying a gun.

"He had a slight figure and he ran very quickly," said one woman who had witnessed the event.

This is the third armed robbery this week. Witness reports from each of the robberies confirm it was the same person.

—Page 1 of The Bridgeham Times

"Maman," I said, looking up from the newspaper. "Did you hear about the robbery?"

"What is it, the third one you've told me about this week?" my mother asked, washing dishes at the sink.

"Yeah. And all of the eyewitness reports agree that it's the same person!"

"Celeste, eat your oatmeal," she said. "It's getting cold."

I ignored her. "But isn't that weird? I mean, this isn't the kind of place you'd expect to hear about three armed robberies in one week by the same person."

"What do you mean?" she asked, turning around. "No place on Earth is safe from people doing horrible things. People kill, steal, cheat, lie. You name it." She turned back around. "Now eat your oatmeal. You'll be late for school."

At dinner, I brought up the robberies again. "It's just—that's so many!" I said intently, once again ignoring the food in front of me.

Maman gave me a weary glance. The dark circles under her eyes were as prominent as always. "Why are you so fascinated by the horrible things people do?"

"Because it's a mystery. Isn't it exciting? That person could rob the restaurant! We'd be in the news!"

"That is not exciting. And it's not worth pursuing. Just because you've read about every mystery book the library has does not mean that you're going to be able to solve this case, if that's what you're aiming for."

"That's not what I was saying," I said indignantly, although I had had that same fantasy for all of math class. I'd just have to pursue it when Maman wasn't looking.

There was a long silence before

Maman said, "You should write Aunt Marjorie."

Aunt Marjorie was Maman's younger sister with a passion for poetry, and in my opinion, quite possibly a mental disorder. She had dropped out of school to become a poet, and now she lived by herself in the middle of nowhere. Maman always used her as the reason why I should work hard in school. ("You don't want to end up like Aunt Marjorie.") But as far as I could remember, Maman sent her a letter every day because Aunt Marjorie didn't own a telephone. And on Sundays she sent her money and a box of food because she knew Aunt Marjorie couldn't support herself. She didn't want to publish her poems ("It ruins the intimacy"). But to be honest, I doubted she would be able to publish them even if she tried.

"But she never responds when you write her," I said.

"She never responds to me." Maman stared at her plate. "But she might respond to you."

"What would I write about?" I asked.

"I don't know. Whatever you want. Write about school or something. She needs human contact. She's probably started talking to the squirrels." She sighed.

After dinner, I wrote Aunt Marjorie a long letter telling her all about the robberies and how I'd compiled all the information I knew about the robber. He was male, blond, tall, skinny, and fast. I had even devoted a notebook to it, and I carried it with me everywhere in case I saw a clue or had a sudden realization. I told her about how I wanted to solve them. I knew that my

secret was safe with her. She hadn't seen another human in person for years.

I mailed it the next morning.

Writing to Aunt Marjorie made me think about Maman's childhood in France. Maman's father had left, and her mother was sick for a long time before she died when Maman was eighteen. Maman had taken care of Aunt Marjorie, her little sister, for most of her childhood: cooking, cleaning, and fussing over everything while Aunt Marjorie played outside or wrote poetry. I suspected this was why Maman was so worried about her all the time. She had programmed herself to. I wondered why she would have let Aunt Marjorie drop out of school. That didn't seem like something Maman would do. Maybe she had been too busy to care.

Constantly worrying made Maman far too practical and cheap. She insisted on hand-washing all of the laundry because there was no washing machine in our apartment and the laundromat was "too expensive." I couldn't understand why she would be so intent on making her life harder all the time. And for what? Saving a few dollars?

The way I saw it, Maman had never been happy. Naturally, I decided that her constant worrying had done this to her. I had resolved to never live like her. I was going to become a famous detective or, at the very least, star in a detective show. I'd be rich, and I'd hire people to do everything for me. Then I'd have Maman come live in my mansion so that she could understand

I got out of bed and looked out my window at the city lights twinkling. The lights never stopped, like they were constantly worrying or working, too busy to take a break.

how life was meant to be lived: to the fullest.

One night while I tried to sleep, Maman's question played over and over in my head. Why was I so fascinated by the robberies? I got out of bed and looked out my window at the city lights twinkling. The lights never stopped, like they were constantly worrying or working, too busy to take a break. As I crawled back into bed, I realized that if I solved the mysteries, I'd give people a reason to stop worrying. The robber would be behind bars, and I would be the hero.

An idea came to me Saturday morning as we opened up the restaurant. I would be the one taking orders, so I could observe the people in the restaurant. The robber could be among them! It was a small chance, but I was desperate for something to do. And besides, I could save the restaurant from being robbed. Every time a customer came in, I wrote down a description of them in my notebook so I could keep track of them. One matched the blond hair but was very short. Another was tall and skinny but had black hair. Each graphite streak led me closer to solving the mystery. Adrenaline pumped through my veins.

In between jotting down descriptions and taking orders, I thought about what I would do if I found the robber. I realized I hadn't really thought it through that

well. I decided that I would closely watch them and write down any information. I could tell Maman I was going on break and follow them, if the opportunity arose. As I cleared dishes, I knew that Maman would not allow me to take a break. *Oh well*, I thought. *I'll just write down anything I observe.* Two customers came in, and I went to grab my notebook to write down their descriptions. A customer seated directly behind me saw the notebook.

"What's that?" she asked.

"Um, just something I'm working on," I said, rushing to hide the notebook. I wasn't fast enough.

"Are you taking notes on us?" the customer sitting across from them asked.

"Um, no, of course not . . ." I said, trying to find the right way to fix this situation.

"That's so creepy," the first customer said. "Come on, let's go." They walked out.

I turned around and saw that Maman had her eyes fixed on me from the counter. She had seen the whole thing.

"What are you doing?" Maman demanded. Before I could respond, she grabbed my wrist and pulled me behind the counter. She grabbed the notebook and read what I had written. I watched her face as she realized what I was doing. She stared at me like I was not from this world. "Go back to work. We'll talk about this more tonight." She held onto my notebook.

After we closed the restaurant, I

sat on the sofa while Maman paced around me. "Why are you so obsessed with these crimes? Why does this matter so much to you?"

"Because it's a mystery!" I said loudly.

"You keep saying that! What do you mean?"

I wasn't sure how to explain it. It was just something to do. Instead, I went after Maman: "You're obsessed with the restaurant!"

"Do you know how hard I've worked for that restaurant? I've put everything I had into the restaurant!"

"You're still obsessed with it!" I took a deep breath, and there was an uncomfortable silence. "That's your thing. This is my thing."

"You don't need a 'thing'!" There was another long silence. "Look," she said. "I need you to help with the restaurant. You can't help with the restaurant if you're busy taking notes about every person who walks in." She slammed my notebook on the table and walked away.

I sat in my bedroom staring at the wall. *Look at where Maman's ended up, I told myself. She spends every day of her life taking orders from people in the restaurant. She worries about everything.* One thing dawned on me: if I did what Maman told me, I'd end up just like her. Once I solved this mystery, she'd realize that she was wrong. I pictured the headline in *The Bridgeham Times*: "Local 11-Year-Old Girl Solves Mystery that Baffled Police." I took out my notes on the robber and tried to remember all of the people in the restaurant. I sighed. None of them had looked like the robber.

To get more inspiration, I re-read some of my favorite mystery books. I realized that the detectives always mapped out the locations of crimes to find a pattern. I decided that in order to have any real chance at solving this mystery, I needed to plot out the robberies on a map too. That way I could find a pattern.

Maman's bedroom had the big closet, so that was where we kept things that I needed for school supplies. I went in there to look for poster board and thumbtacks. A small cardboard box caught my eye. I opened it and realized that it was all the letters that Aunt Marjorie had ever sent Maman.

There were only three. I picked one up and read it:

Like I keep telling you, I'm fine. We're not children anymore.

I read another:

Stop sending me letters. I won't read them. I never needed anything from you. I would have been fine if you had stayed in school too.

The paper was old and wrinkled, but I spotted what looked like teardrops on it. Whose tears were they? Judging by what Aunt Marjorie had written, I knew the answer.

Why did Maman send Aunt Marjorie so many letters if she didn't even want them? Did that mean she wouldn't reply to me either?

The door opened and Maman came in.

"What are you doing with that box?" she asked.

"I was looking for thumbtacks and poster board. For, um, a school project. I found this in here."

Inexplicable anger shook through me. Why would she make me wait so long for a response and then just send me a riddle?

She walked over and swiped it out of my hand.

I studied her face intently. "Why do you write Aunt Marjorie so much if she doesn't want you to?" She didn't respond. "Why didn't you tell me that you dropped out of school too?"

"Get out." And I did. I could tell she would start yelling soon.

I laid on my bed, tracing the pattern on the bedspread, trying to untangle the complicated web of Aunt Marjorie and Maman's relationship. If Aunt Marjorie was just composing poems all day, it would have been up to Maman to support the family. From the little snippets she had told me, I gathered that her father had taken most of the family's money when he left. I hadn't put together until then that Maman must have had to work to support them while her mother was sick. But why was Aunt Marjorie so hostile toward Maman? Maman was giving her food and money. She was looking out for her.

I turned back to the robberies. A crime spree made far more sense than my mother's family. I would have to do without the thumbtacks and poster board.

The next morning, Aunt Marjorie's letter finally came. I was sitting at the table with another bowl of oatmeal in front of me. I ripped it open, eager for her response.

There is another problem closer to home that needs solving.

"What is this, a riddle?" I asked out loud.

"What did she write?" Maman

asked.

I read it to her. She was as confused as I was. Suddenly, I felt anger. Inexplicable anger shook through me. Why would she make me wait so long for a response and then just send me a riddle? I crumpled it up.

"What are you doing?" Maman asked as I walked toward the trash can. "You should be glad she sent you a reply. Even if it doesn't make sense."

"I know you're still trying to solve those robberies," Maman said as we sat down to dinner.

"What?" I asked, taken aback. "No, I'm not."

"Celeste, I saw the notes in your room."

I sighed. "Maman, why can't you just let me have this?"

"Because it's not healthy to obsess over something."

"But you obsess over multiple things!" I shouted. "You obsess over everything! The restaurant, Aunt Marjorie, the laundry!"

"Don't you think I know that?" Maman asked quietly. "Celeste, I don't want you to turn into me."

"What?" I asked, shocked.

"I have worked so hard so that you can have a better childhood than I had. I spent my childhood worrying, and now I spend my adulthood worrying. I can't not worry. It's just who I am." She sighed. "But if you start obsessing over things like these robberies, or whatever, next thing you know, you'll obsess and worry over everything."

Don't do that to yourself."

I stared into her eyes, and I saw a tear form.

"But . . . it wouldn't be a bad thing to be like you. You have your own restaurant. You've accomplished so much."

She looked at the floor and shook her head.

I got up from the table and got my notes. Then I ripped them up and threw them into the trash can. More tears slid down Maman's cheeks, but she gave me the first real smile I'd seen on her face in a while. I hadn't realized how much I had missed her smile. I hadn't realized that the smiles that she'd been giving me were the same smiles she had to plaster on when a customer complained about something. Before I knew it, tears were falling out of my eyes too.

"Why did you let Aunt Marjorie drop out of school?" I asked. "Couldn't you have stopped her or made her work so you could've stayed in school?"

She stroked my hair. "It made her so happy," she whispered. "But these robberies won't make you happy, Celeste."

I wondered how she knew that.

Then I realized something.

"Aunt Marjorie was wrong," I said.

"What?" she asked.

"She was wrong. She was saying that you need to be solved, but she's the one that doesn't make any sense. We need to go visit her. There's a new mystery on my hands."



Bubble (Fujifilm X-T1)
Claire Lu, 13
Portola Valley, CA

Treason: What's That?

A five-year-old boy desperate for food unknowingly makes a terrible mistake



By Kinga Czajkowska, 12
Palo Alto, CA

Sammy walked along the road. He was kicking a rock. It helped him forget about being hungry, but if this worked, he'd have food. Once, he had tried to eat the grass. Jack told him that the grass had been green before the great and just rebellion. Sammy didn't believe him. The grass had always been blue.

He squinted. The outline of the Justice Outpost could barely be seen against the mountains. He walked on.

An hour later, he came upon the outpost. Sleek metal and glass—it looked a bit strange, a remnant of kinder times, times that, according to Jack, were filled with wondrous machines that flew in the sky or let you talk to someone across the world, which, back then, everyone believed was round.

He opened the door. Inside, the room was painted blue and yellow, and plush chairs lined one wall. Sammy shuffled over the fluffy green carpet up to the reception desk where a young woman sat painting her nails. When she saw Sammy, she smiled. Her teeth were beautiful, straight and white.

"Excu' me, ma'am, but at the Edu-House they told me that you

give sweeties here," Sammy half-whispered, hoping for a yes, or a nod, or another smile.

The receptionist smiled kindly. "Well, honey, you just have to fill out this form," she said with a voice slipping into Sammy's ears, a voice that snared him with the phrase "Trust me."

"Sure! Thank you. Thanks."

The receptionist pulled a sheet of paper from the shelf, along with a stubby pencil, its eraser worn away. She handed both to Sammy with an encouraging nod. Sammy read poorly. His teacher told him that for a five-year-old, he read pretty well, and when he grew up, had a chance at a job in the big city. But the form had so many words he just didn't understand. He wrote his name where it was asked for, then proceeded to the next section: a checklist asking him to fill out who he was turning in.

"What's 'turning in'?" he asked the receptionist, but she just waved him away.

"Oh, it doesn't matter."

He checked "parents" because that was the only thing he understood on the checklist part.

The last part was a list of crimes to circle. Murder. That was bad. Espionage. He knew it was wrong. He came to treason. What that meant, he didn't know, but it didn't sound bad. He circled it.

When he gave the form to the receptionist, she told him something strange: "Thank you for helping the good, just, and heavenly rebellion by rooting out dangerous traitors," before giving him his reward: a sugar-smacker. Sammy was a bit disappointed with its small size. But he had to thank the receptionist anyway. When he was doing that, Sammy noticed that some of the screws in the receptionist's neck were rusted.

He walked out of the outpost, smelling the sugar-smacker, passing it from hand to pocket and back again. He could almost taste the cold sweetness but resisted the urge to rip apart its wax-paper wrapping. *I'll show it to my friends first*, Sammy decided. *Then I'll tell my mom how great this day was*. He could just imagine the expressions on his parents' faces and how proud they would be of him. He loved his parents. They were the ones who took care of him and helped him with his schoolwork. His dad always cracked the best jokes.

Sammy wanted to hurry home now, but he couldn't. There was once a time—he could just dimly remember—when he could. He remembered a strangely dressed woman telling him that he had the Hungers. She said something about poisoning, radiation, and about a necessary evil. Worried, Sammy looked up at the clouds. Green. That wasn't so bad. If it rained, the rain

would only burn him slightly.



AHOK.



Opposite:

Untitled (Pencil)

From the “Shadows” Workshop (2018),
run by Hands On Art, at the Kakuma
Refugee Camp in Kenya

Above:

Shoes (Pencil)

From the “Everyday Objects” Workshop
(2017), run by Hands On Art, at the
Kakuma Refugee Camp in Kenya

Stone
Soup
Refugee
Project

About the Project

Millions of children who have escaped from war, persecution, and climate change are now living in refugee camps, or in host countries far from their homes. The work that appears here is a part of *Stone Soup*'s growing collection of creative expression by young people whose lives have been upended by such conflict throughout the world.

Speak



By Suhani Pandya, 12
Englewood Cliffs, NJ

Tied feet
Curled toes
Aching legs
“Why?” she asks
“Pretty feet”, they say.

Trapped
Must hide her face
Can't leave the house
“Why?” she asks.
“You must go unnoticed”, they say.

Can't vote
No voice
Not allowed to learn
“Why?” she asks.
“Not allowed to have power,” they say.

Wears pasty makeup
Itchy dresses
Fancy hairstyles
“Why?” she asks.
“Must be pretty,” they say.

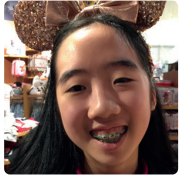
“Pretty, pretty, pretty,”
she thinks, all day long.
“What is the value of this beauty,
if it takes up your whole life?”
“Nothing,” she thinks. “It is pointless.”



Rabbit through the Grass (iPhone 8)
Grace Gorzelany, 10
Glen Ridge, NJ

Ripples in the Pond

Humans interrupt a peaceful day in the forest



By Karen Susanto, 13
Rancho Palos Verdes, CA

The forest had always been peaceful.

The forest was where you would stand still and feel the earth beneath your feet. It was where you would inhale the sweet forest air that was full of the invigorating scent of tree bark and green leaves and fresh earth. The forest had that unmistakable feel of authenticity: it made you feel *alive*.

It was where you would hear the gentle cooing of birds from their perches in the trees, where you would hear the crackle of leaves and the occasional sound of a single leaf softly falling from its branch. You would hear the mellifluous echo of the flowing river as the water coursed smoothly down, making small white waves.

You would see fluffy little rabbits hopping to and fro, and you would see busy squirrels scampering up the sturdy trunks of leafy oaks. You would see birds with wings outstretched circling high above the topmost branches of tall pines. You would see wood ducks splashing through the river and turtles basking on the rocks beside it. And if you went deeper in, you would see the small circular pond, sheltered by slender white birches,

reflecting its surroundings in the clear, unbroken mirror of its water. You might even glimpse the antlers of a stag. Or you might see a bushy red tail just before its owner scrambled off into the depths of the woods . . .

A thirsty fox makes his way toward the pond for a drink of water. The soft flutter of wings as a wood thrush hurriedly takes flight reaches his ears, and he looks up, flicking his tail. Seeing the rustling of bushes as two rabbits scamper out of his way, he pauses a moment, then turns and resumes his way.

(Swish, crackle, flutter)

Loping through the tangled undergrowth that carpets the floor of the forest, the fox reaches the pond, where he crouches and drinks thirstily. The water shifts and ripples, creating a distorted image of the fox. A moment later, he tenses and leaps up, ears twitching upright, alert black eyes soundlessly darting back and forth among the trees.

(Crack, scrape, snap)

Human footsteps: crushing leaves, snapping twigs. Human voices: shrill

laughter, giggling, whispering.

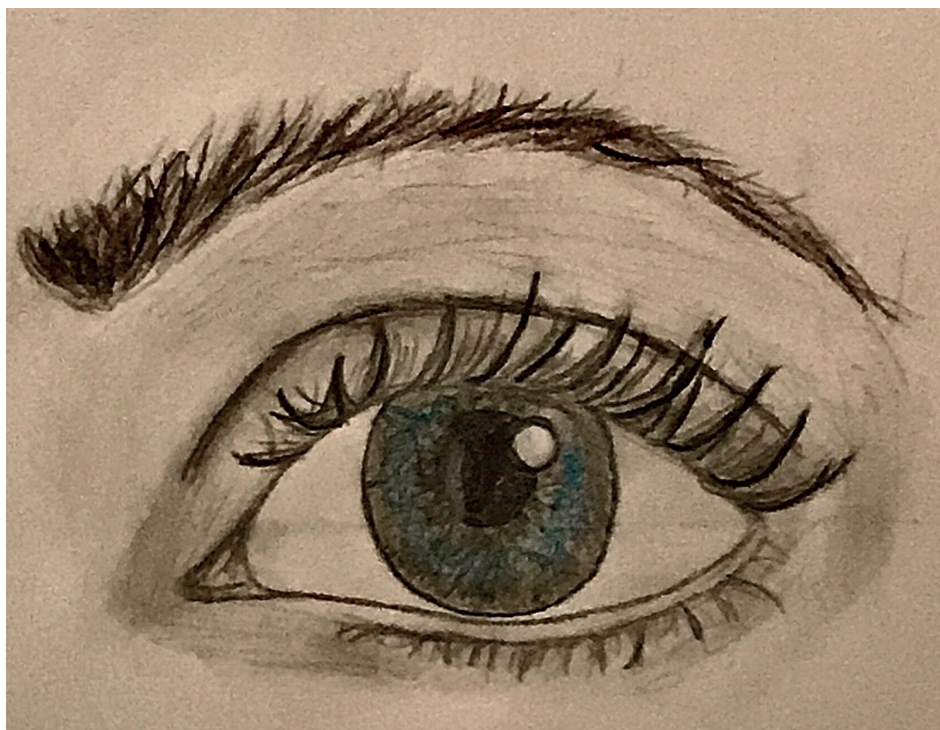
(Thud, whiz—)

The fox throws himself to one side just as a smooth stone cuts sharply through the air in a high arc. It passes directly above the spot the fox has just vacated and splashes, hissing and singing, into the center of the smooth, glass-like surface of the pond. The surface shatters and the stone disappears.

The fox, as silent and unmoving as the trees, gazes fixedly into the dense woods.

(Ripples...)

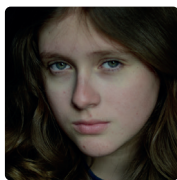
The human forms saunter away, leaving behind them harsh, echoing laughter that rings mockingly in his ears. Their dark shadows are momentarily reflected in his eyes, and the eyes darken, growing blacker than ever, before he turns away.



Perspective (Pencil)
Grace Williams, 12
Katonah, NY

The Bakery

A visit to a favorite Los Angeles bakery sparks a series of memories about the writer's family



By Rubina Davila, 13
Sierra Madre, CA

When I walked into the bakery on Cesar Chavez Avenue in East Los Angeles, my lungs were instantly flooded with the sweet air of butter and sugar wafting from the kitchen while pots and pans clanked and banged loudly and voices called out in Spanish. My mouth watered as my eyes scanned the many kinds of *pan dulce* displayed in neat rows. The lights shone brightly on the sweet breads. I could feel the heat from the pot of homemade tamales, and I craved one of the Mexican sodas in the glass fridge. I clutched my \$5 bill, knowing I could walk out with a large bag of *pan dulce* for my family and a soda for myself and still have change.

I ordered three kinds of *pan dulce*: *elote*, *concha*, and a large *cuerno*, named for their corn, shell, and horn shapes. I reached into the white paper bag of treats, the bottom stained with warm grease.

My papa always said, "If the bottom is greasy, you know it's good."

I bit into the *concha*, and the familiar sweet smell and ridged texture flooded my senses. The top of the bread crumbled and filled my mouth with its sugary flavor. The

center of the bread was especially warm and soft. The smell reminded me of my Aunt Lulu's kitchen. I wondered what it was like for my father to walk to this bakery at four years old, clinging to the hand of my great-grandfather, Agustín, and to taste the delicious *concha* for the first time.

As I walked to the car, I reflected on all of my family members who had once lived here, on the streets of East Los Angeles and nearby Boyle Heights: the Davilas, the Ramoses, the Ordoñezes, and the Villalobos. I could feel the presence of my ancestors who walked down these streets in the 1940s and 1950s enjoying the treats of this bakery. I could picture my grandfather's little dog running down the sidewalk and my grandmother in her favorite orange dress.

Today, my family has grown even bigger and has spread across Southern California, but they still travel miles back to this bakery and wait in line to get *pan dulce* and tamales for Thanksgiving, Christmas, and Easter. The *cuernos* are still my papa's favorite.

Remembering, I could not resist.

I reached into the warm bag and removed the large, freshly baked, yellow-and-gold, horn-shaped cuerno, ripped off the corner, and watched the steam slowly swirling as it spilled its sweet scent into the cool night air. I bit into it as it spilled its warmth onto my taste buds, and the crisp outer layer crunched satisfyingly.

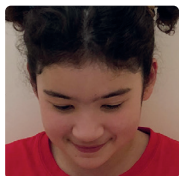
I washed it down with bubbly Coke, instantly cooling the sugary warmth that filled my stomach. It is true what they say: the Coke from Mexico in the green glass bottle tastes better.

The faded, rusted sign out front symbolizes that the bakery remains unchanged and original in this vibrant neighborhood. The same Catholic church where my grandfather went to kindergarten is still across the street. I can tell he misses this place because he tells stories about it a lot. My fingers feel the paper bag to make sure there is an elote inside for him.



Girl in the Sun (Canon PowerShot SX600)
Sage Millen, 13
Vancouver, Canada

The Trials and Tribulations of Swifty Appledoe (Part Two)



By Ariana Kralicek, 12
Auckland, New Zealand

This is the second installation of a novella that we are publishing in three parts in the April, May, and June 2021 issues of Stone Soup.

Chapter 10

It's my first hip-hop class.

After suggesting it to my parents, they reluctantly agreed to send me for a tryout class.

"Swifty, I appreciate you wanting to try new things, but you've got to be dedicated. We have to spend our money wisely," my mom says.

I'm dressed in a thin, white, cotton T-shirt with black leggings. My feet are adorned in running shoes. A backpack sits on my shoulders, stuffed with snacks and bottles of water.

I'm not taking any chances. I rewatched the news piece that inspired me, and the style of dance looks tiring—constantly moving with skilled flips and spins which look impossible. Or that could just be because I've never done it before.

After following Google Maps, my dad and I have ended up outside a grey warehouse. A logo's been sprayed onto one side with vivid purple paint. The words read "Macie's

Dance Studio." There are two wide doors graffitied with bubble words and wacky illustrations.

"See you in an hour."

My dad nods. He holds open the door for me, and I walk inside.

There's a small reception room, an island desk with graffiti on the sides, the table purple.

A woman with a short ponytail and a baggy grey T-shirt notes dates on a small notepad and calls someone's name. A young boy stands up from a red leather couch on the right side of the room. His mother's flicking through a gossip magazine, the cover of it bold with provocative sentences featured in highlighted text.

A coffee table with competition advertisements piled in the center stands proud, like it's won first place at the Olympics. The walls are splattered with model-esque monochrome posters, dancers reaching up to the sky, mid-somersault, collaborating. At the back end of the room, there is a door that looks like it would belong in a school

classroom leading to rows of studios lined up behind each other.

Just then, a middle-aged woman storms through the door in sporty wear. She's got mousey-brown hair loosely tied up into a bun, while her cheeks are flaming red.

"Lyla!" she says irately. "Our best student has quit!"

Lyla smiles. "Masie, I've got a class to take right now, and we have a new student we need to take care of, but I'll help you later. Is Swifty here?"

I shyly raise my hand.

Lyla nods, and we both walk through the doors into the dance studio.

When we make it inside, there are some other girls and a few boys warming up, chatting to each other calmly. Unlike the ballet class, which had very similar-looking people, there's a mixture of different sizes and ethnicities, which is really cool to see.

To start off, I have to do some stretches and simple moves, which Lyla teaches me.

Next, she talks about the kinds of moves I'll be doing in class, while the others work on a complicated dance they've been learning.

"So, there are four key kinds of movements: up, down, bounce, and drop," she says, gesturing as she does so.

"First we'll learn 'up.' This is where your body rocks upward, like this." She shows me a movement. It's strong but relaxed. I copy her.

We continue to do the move until I've got it.

Next, we move on to down, then bounce and drop.

I don't remember much else. The

class is so fun that time passes like a racing car. By the end of it, I'm sweating a gushing river, but I feel great.

"Swifty, you did awesome today!" Lyla exclaims. "With progress, you can be even better!"

I can see my dad staring through the door. He catches my eyes and gives me a thumbs-up.

"How was it?" he asks cheerfully as we walk back to the car. "Awesome," I reply. "Awesome."

Chapter 11

It's the day of the Milky's ad audition. To be honest, I haven't really thought much about it with all that's been going on lately.

My dad drives me over to the venue because my mum's got a test to see how she and my brother are doing.

The venue is a small theater around our neighborhood. The outside is painted a creamy color.

We walk inside and I get a name tag and badge. A staff member guides us to the main theater, and we walk past rows and rows of empty front seats. My dad gives me a hug when we reach the end.

"Good luck," he whispers, then joins the other parents at the back of the theater. I make my way backstage. My hands are super cold, and my legs feel shaky.

A middle-aged man calls out names and points to spots in the line, just like at the orchestral concerta. I turn out to be one of the first in the line, probably because my last name starts with "A."

Whenever I hear the words “baby” and “brother” put together, I immediately feel jealous and scared. What will life be like after my brother is born?

Stella's a bit further down. I can see her talking to someone who must be one of her acting friends. If only I had someone to talk to.

I like being first to perform because you can get it over and done with quickly, but at the same time, you want to be toward the middle so you can see how everything works.

Luckily, one of the judges comes backstage and gives us a quick talk on how the auditions will run.

“It would be best if you memorized the words,” he says, “but we have a teleprompter going just in case.”

Once he leaves, I nervously jump up and down on the spot. *Come on, Swifty. You got this*, my inner pep talker says.

But I haven't got this. Last night, I was watching my older audition tapes and . . . I was terrible. I don't think I have it in me to be an actor. My nervousness suddenly turns into regret.

And with that, I apologize shyly and profusely, walk out of the audition line, and get my dad.

“Let's go home now,” I say.

He gives me a questioning glance, but he lets the organizer know and then together we quickly walk out of the building.

Chapter 12

“So, how was the audition?” my mum says curiously, fiddling with her fork as we sit around the dinner table.

My dad glances at her, sending one

of his top-secret parent signals.

She sighs. “Oh, sweetie, I'm so sorry.”

“It's okay, Mum,” I reply sheepishly. “I just don't think acting is my thing.”

“Hmm . . .” She smiles empathetically. “Well, would you like to hear some news about your baby brother?”

I stare down at my plate. Whenever I hear the words “baby” and “brother” put together, I immediately feel jealous and scared. What will life be like after my brother is born?

“Sure,” I mumble.

“Well.” My mum grins ecstatically. “He seems to be very healthy. And,” she adds, “he'll be here in a few months' time!”

“W-W-WHAT?!” I stammer. *No no no no no no no. This cannot be happening. I want time to freeze. I want to go back to the day before my mother announced I was having a baby brother. Nothing will be the same again! I don't want this to happen. Please, no. No no no—*

“Swifty, you've gone a bit pale,” my mother points out carefully. My teeth start chattering.

“I. Don't. Want. A. Baby. Brother!” I shriek.

“Zendaya Appledoe, do not yell!” My dad frowns.

“I know you don't love me anymore,” I cry.

I push my chair away from the table and bolt away from my parents. I swing open the front door like it's a

useless thin curtain and tear down my street, streetlamps glowing against the evening sky, then around the corner.

I am the fastest girl on Earth, my shoeless feet slapping against the pavement. I can feel blunt, hard rocks underneath my feet, punching me repeatedly. I can hear my parents' voices floating alongside the wind, but I don't listen. Adrenaline is taking over me once again, and I feel like there's nothing I can do to stop it.

I make it to the end of the road and stop for a second to check for cars. None.

I'm about to sprint across the road when all of a sudden, headlights appear out of nowhere. A revving sound startles me.

No no no—

All of a sudden, hands grasp around my shoulders and pull me back.

"Dad!" I scream.

He hugs me hard.

"Zendaya Appledoe, don't you ever do that again," he mutters, his voice wobbling softly. My mum grabs my hand and squeezes it.

With that, together we walk back home.

"Now, Swifty," my mum starts sternly. "Why are you upset about having a sibling?"

"Just because . . ." I gulp. "I'm worried you won't love me anymore. All the other girls at my school talk about how annoying their brothers are. And I know you're bored of me." I sob, tears rolling down my cheeks like rocks down a mountain, dripping off

of my chin like it's a leaky pipe.

My mum stands up and gives me a really nice, soft hug.

"You're worried that we won't love you after your brother is born. Jerry, do you want to tell her why we decided that Swifty should have a brother?"

My dad nods.

"Swifty," he says. "At the very start of the year, your teacher, Mrs. Mulberry, called us in for a meeting." He continues: "She said that you were having a lot of trouble making friends." I nod, totally embarrassed. "And we've seen this for a while now. We thought if you had a sibling, you wouldn't be so lonely."

I nod in acknowledgement. I guess that does make sense. I smile.

Now I feel a little bit better about my baby brother.

Chapter 13

After a very dramatic night, today is very relaxed.

"Hey, Swifty, remember a while ago you wanted to learn the drums?" my dad ponders as we play catch in our backyard. It's small, but it works. None of us like gardening much anyway.

"Mhmm," I reply, lost in thought.

"Well, do you still want to do it? If you do, though, you've got to be committed."

I pull myself out of my daze and blink. "I still want to do it, Dad, but I don't want to go on my own."

I don't want this to be a repeat of the violin and ballet classes I took, where I was the odd one out. I need to be with others who are in the same

boat with me.

"Well, do you know anyone who plays the drums?" Dad asks. I try to remember someone.

Taj. The guy who sat on my desk. The sporty, careless guy.

I remember that he plays the drums in the school band. I don't really want to talk to him, but if I want to play the drums I'll need to step out of my comfort zone.

So the next day at lunch, I awkwardly tap him on the shoulder.

He spins around, clutching a soccer ball in his arms, a baggy Real Madrid shirt slouching from his thin shoulders.

"What?" he grumbles, his eyes incinerating mine.

Immediately, my face turns bright red, and an invisible person starts to punch my stomach. This is exactly why I don't like to talk in front of others.

"U-u-umm." I stutter yet again. It's annoying when I do this; it's almost always about the littlest things. You might not be able to tell, but I express a lot of social awkwardness. I find it hard to say what I want to say at times.

"I'm just c-curious, be-because . . . I WANT TO TAKE DRUM LESSONS," I blurt boldly before my stuttering can get the best of me.

"Oh." Taj looks strangely at me, which can't be a good thing. "And how can I help you with that?"

Hmm.

"Well, where do you take yours?" I blush.

"The school has classes you can take. Reasonable price," he answers, tossing the soccer ball between his dark brown hands.

"Are there group lessons?" I blurt before I forget.

"Yeah. Well, see ya." He waves to his friends, who are wandering aimlessly, impatiently waiting for the game to begin.

I watch for a few moments as the ball is effortlessly passed between players before it's tackled out of sight.

I squirm in the unfashionably small school seat I'm sitting on. It's got an ugly stripey pattern going across its cloth—vivid red, green, and bright blue.

We're in a small soundproof room, blue carpeting running up the walls. Posters of bands and art that past students have done are tacked up above an old, worn-out drum kit opposite the door. Guitars have been balanced to the side, polished surfaces dented.

Three others are sitting next to me: a girl with limp, mousey hair picking at some fabric and a boy who must think he looks like a rock star when he just looks a bit . . . weird. He's in all black, with long hair mortifyingly styled into a mohawk. I grimace.

A friendly looking man with short brown hair and greyish stubble claps his hands. He's in a black shirt with some kind of '80s band logo printed on its front.

"Hi, I'm Dave, and I'll be your drums teacher for the year."

We all introduce ourselves, and the lesson begins.

"Who'd like to go first?" he asks gently. He can definitely tell none of us are comfortable.

We've just learned a small beat on

a kind of drum he's handed out. I think it's called a snare. The sound it makes is kind of like a rattly hiss mixed in with a clap, and the drum is about as tall as a chair leg.

I really don't want to go yet in case I mess something up, but the others seem to annoyingly feel the same way, which means I'm going to have to be the one to step up.

I delicately raise my hand and start to tap the beat out with a pair of dented drumsticks. It's called a paradiddle because of the way it sounds.

Right left right right, left right left left.

Unconsciously, I bite my lip. *Did I mess something up?*

"Ka pai, Swifty, firstly for volunteering and secondly for getting it right the first time." Dave smiles.

I grin shyly and grip my sticks hard. The lesson continues.

The girl and the boy seem to loosen up a bit, but neither looks particularly interested.

The boy, or as I later find out, Jared, sounds like he knows everything, but when Dave asks him to play, he just shrugs and mutters an unheard excuse.

The girl, Linda, seems like she was dragged into the music lesson. She tries, but she looks uncomfortable.

So I decide to combat my social awkwardness and start talking to her. "Hey."

"Umm . . . hi."

"How are you finding the class?"

"I mean, it's okay. I was actually originally meant to do piano, but the teacher got booked out."

"Well, I think drums are way more

fun than piano."

"I guess you're right." She smiles. "My grandad's into classical music. He wanted me to learn the piano. He worked at Dux Orchestral Academy. Maybe you've heard of him?"

Dux Orchestral Academy?

"Umm, what's his name?"

"Darius Cello. He can be a bit strict at times, but he's nice."

Cello. Cello. I rack my brain. No, surely it can't be. There are thousands of people with the surname Cello.

"As in, the violin teacher?" I mutter nervously.

"Yeah. He doesn't work there anymore, though. He got a bad reputation because one of his students wasn't happy with his teaching. She was actually interviewed in the *New Zealand Herald*. Terrible, isn't it?"

Stones of guilt weigh down my stomach. "Uhh, yeah," I mumble.

I nervously twist the drumsticks around as I clutch them in my cold, sweaty hands.

"Okay, guys." Dave interrupts my remorseful train of thought. "That's it for today. See you next week?"

As we leave the class, he holds out a cookie tin filled with chocolate chip biscuits. I take one and thank him.

Jared nods at Dave and picks up one before running down the hallway outside, fists pumping in the warm air.

Linda follows after me, hanging close by my side. "So, can we be friends?"

I swallow another wave of guilt and nod, stretching a fake smile across my sweaty face. *What if she finds out?*

"Cool! This sounds a bit soon, but do you wanna come over this afternoon?"

We can practice some skills, and I can show you some stuff . . .”

She trails off, blushing profusely. I glance at her.

“Sorry, it’s just I’ve never had any nice friends like you,” she says shyly.

“It’s okay. I’ll come over!” I reply.

As we head off in separate directions to our classrooms, a thought niggles my mind.

After school, I walk to Linda’s house with her.

The experience is as new for her as it is for me. I’ve never hung out with anyone until now.

We arrive at a cottage-like house completely out of place beside the neighboring houses. The exterior is painted creamy white, which glows below a sea-blue roof. Pink flowers bunch at the windows, and a lusciously green garden lies behind a rickety wooden white gate.

Linda unlatches the gate and beckons me to walk through. A thin gravel path winds toward the front door. We step inside her home.

Like the exterior, it is decorated like a Victorian cottage. Lifelike paintings and greyish photos of stern-looking people adorn the dark wooden walls, hanging above patterned antique furniture. The whole house smells musty, like a museum.

We drop our bags at the door. Linda leads me toward another room next to an aged kitchen where an old man sits on a rocking chair, eyes glued to a small flat-screen TV.

He has a bushy white beard tangled up in his beige tweed suit.

The buttons look like they’re about to burst.

The screen in front of him flickers across his thick-rimmed glasses, which shield beetle-like eyes from the vivid light.

The thought that I was having before chatters from the back of my mind. My memory whizzes back to my first violin class.

Hmm.

The man in front of me looks eerily similar to my violin teacher.

“Grandfather.” Linda breaks the silence. Her voice echoes across the small room. The man jolts out of his daydream and twists his head to look at her.

“Linda!” he cries. He reaches over the arms of the chair for a quick hug. “How was school?”

His gaze flickers over to me, eyes scanning carefully.

“Good,” she replies uneasily. “Grandfather, this is Swifty! She’s my new friend.”

Linda’s grandfather seems to be lost for a second, but comes back. “Swishy . . . nice to meet you. You seem familiar.”

I don’t bother to correct him. I don’t want to seem too rude, and besides, it’s only a nickname.

He beckons to me to shake his hand.

I do. His palm is dry and cracked, hard white calluses lining the bottoms of his fingers.

“I’m Darius, Darius Cello. I used to teach violin at the Dux Orchestral Academy.”

Oh no. It can’t be.

But it is. It’s him.

“I used to take violin lessons there,”

“Swiftly. I thought you were my friend. How could you have done this to my grandfather?!”

I blurt before I can stop myself.

His lips thin, along with his eyes.

“Are you the person who—” he questions, his voice growing louder with every word. I interrupt.

Linda can’t know. She’s my only friend.

“H-hey, look! The nature channel sh-should be on in a few minutes!” I shout. I snatch the remote and change channels.

An old man’s soothing voice slices through the tension like a knife through butter. He has a quiet English accent, which is cut off by the shriek of a hawk.

It raises its talons just as they slide into the innocent flesh of its prey. I hope that’s not going to happen to me.

“You know, I enjoyed working at Dux Orchestral Academy,” Mr. Cello glares at me. His beetle eyes have become ants. “Until you came, I thought I would have a job there for life. But then it was all ruined. Because you had the nerve—”

“To p-play at the c-concerta!” I scream in fear.

Linda cocks her head and stares at the two of us.

“Swiftly, did you learn the violin? That is so cool!” she squeals. I grin shakily. That was a close one.

We continue to watch the nature show. Mr. Cello stays quiet, but he looks grumpy. Eventually Linda switches off the TV and offers to make some afternoon tea. She leaves the room.

Mr. Cello glares at me through his glasses.

“Swishy, you are a very rude girl.” He frowns. “I can’t believe you would—”

“I kn-kn-know, right!” I jump in. “That d-documentary was outst-st-stand—”

“NO. I will not be interrupted again. You complained about my incredible teaching methods. You had me fired!” Mr. Cello bursts into tears. A boulder of guilt and remorse smashes me in the stomach.

“M-mr. Cello, I-I’m sorry,” I stutter. Just then, Linda tears into the room.

“Grandfather!” she cries, wrapping him in a reassuring hug. “What’s wrong?!”

“Your friend SWISHY was the one who got me fired!” he shrieks.

My mouth drops open in shock. I’ve gone cold. Linda gapes at me in horror.

“Swiftly. I thought you were my friend. How could you have done this to my grandfather?!” The look on her face is too heart-wrenching to describe.

“I’m sorry!” I cry before I sprint out of the room, tears streaming down my face.

I grab my bag and tumble outside, running down the gravelly path and hurriedly trying to unlatch the gate.

It won’t give.

Why won’t it give?!

It finally does.

I race down the street and run in the direction of where I think the school is.

I can see the sky turning a light

pink and suddenly remember that I haven't told my parents where I'd be.

I see a bus stop.

I run over, slump on the bench, and sob.

Chapter 14

"Are you ok, honey?" Through the blurred shield of tears obscuring my red eyes, a vague shape of a plump human takes form. They're dressed in a large purple coat with a bright, flowery scarf slung around their shoulders.

The person sits down next to me as I rub my tears away, leaving thin, salty tracks across my face. They hand me a crumpled tissue, which I gratefully take and dab at my eyes with.

"N-no, I'm not okay," I finally answer. "I've just lost my f-first friend, and my o-old violin teacher hates me. And m-my parents d-don't even know where I am." I blink at the stony ground. I can see a torn muesli bar wrapper, a ten cent coin, and a plastic cup.

I kick the cup between my feet. It has an airy, hollow sound to it.

"Well, firstly, dearie," the person says, "you obviously never meant to hurt your friend. I mean, looking at you right now, you seem like you really care about them! And I don't think you should worry about your violin teacher. They don't sound very nice to me, if you know what I mean. You seem like a lovely person to me." They pause for a moment. "I'm Connie, by the way, short for Connor. What's your name?"

"Zendaya." I sniff. "But everyone calls me Swifty."

"Is it okay if I call you Swifty?"

Connie asks.

"Yes." I smile.

They check their watch and glance at the bus timetable.

"Well," Connie remarks. "There's a bus coming in about five minutes, heading to St. Luke's Road. Do you live near there?"

I nod.

"Splendid! In the meantime, why don't you call your parents? You can use my phone, if you want." Connie hands me their phone. It's got a rainbow roughly painted onto the case, with silver sparkles lining the edges.

I tap in the digits of our home phone number, then call.

The ringing sounds vintage, like a fifties phone. My stomach swirls briefly, like a whirlpool, until finally someone picks up.

"Hello?"

"Mum?!" Her voice is crackly from the reception, but it makes the sea tornado in my stomach a lot less chaotic.

"Swifty! Where are you? We've been looking everywhere! We were going to call the police."

Connie stands up and leans out of the bus stop box, peering at the street sign. They beckon to me to pass the phone over.

"Hello! This is Connie Evans. Your daughter is with me and safe!" they cheerily exclaim. "We're currently on Pinewood Road. There is a bus coming very soon though. Would you like me to take your daughter with me on it?"

I can hear a crackle.

"Awesome. Should be there in

less than twenty.” Connie hands their phone back over to me.

“See you soon, Mum!” I say.

“See ya, love you,” she crackles.

We hang up just as a large blue bus with tinted windows swings around the corner. The doors puff exhaustedly open, and we both step inside.

Connie hands a folded-up piece of cash to the driver, who scarily looks like he’s about to fall asleep.

I grab a seat at the very back, stretching out on the wide space. The bus is pretty much empty, peak hour having already passed.

Connie skips to the back and smiles at me, planting herself delicately in the corner. The bus jolts forward, then steadily rolls off into the thin stream of traffic that dots the road. I stare out of the tinted window, watching the houses and shops outside whiz past. They are like streamers of bright colors enveloping the bus.

Eventually, we arrive at my house. I can’t wait to see Mum and Dad.

I step outside into the chilly air. It hits me like a huge gust of wind. Connie follows me to the door as I ring our bell.

I can hear footsteps from inside the house before someone finally opens the door. It’s Dad.

“Zendaya!” he cries.

He scoops me up into a hug.

My mum sprints towards me. “Swiftly!”

She hugs me, then Connie. “Thank you so much for taking care of her. Is there anything we can do for you?”

Connie shakes their head. “No, it’s okay.”

“Would you like a ride home?” my dad asks. “It’s quite cold at the moment, and dark.”

Connie thinks for a moment.

“If it’s not too much trouble . . .”

“No problemo.”

My mum walks into our kitchen, painted a creamy yellow, and grabs a spoon. “I’ll make you some hot chocolate, Swiftly.”

I follow her and sit down on a chair beneath the marble kitchen bench. The shelves containing multicolor packets and spices are a soft wood brown. Underneath them is a silver stove, then by that, checkerboard tiles blanketing the clean floor.

My mum opens a tin of chocolate powder and scoops out a dark brown mountain of it, emptying it into a large purple mug. Next, she walks over to the fridge and pours a cascading waterfall of milk into it. She sets it in the microwave and hits one minute on the timer, then joins me at the kitchen bench.

“So, tell me what happened.”

I pick at my fingernails, then begin.

Chapter 15

I start school reluctantly. It’s likely that I’m going to see Linda at some point during the day. *What if she’s told everyone about what happened last night?*

As I walk through the school gate, past the office, and toward my class, the worst possible scenario happens. We lock eyes.

She’s sitting on one of the benches outside her classroom.

As she sees me, she shakes her head and seems to project all of her

sadness toward me. I nod acceptingly and carry on, remorse dragging me down. I open the classroom door and make my way to my desk.

There seem to be more people crowding around Stella's desk than usual. Taj is leaning on my desk yet again.

I tap him on the shoulder, just before Mrs. Mulberry walks in, her high heels clicking on the linoleum floor.

"Good morning, class!" she says gleefully. "Good morning, Mrs. Mulberry!" we all reply. Stella's fan club head out to their own classes.

"Now, class." She turns all teachery and serious. "Elections for Term Four's student council are underway. If you're sitting here thinking, 'I'm responsible and ready to take a leading role,' then I suggest you try out. It's good if you're aiming for a student award this year. They're in a week's time. All you need to do is write a short, one-minute speech on why you should be a part of it, and present it to our class."

I snap back to Earth.

I can see Stella grinning smugly. She's the current councilor for our class this term, obviously. Brooke's somehow been appointed her standby in case Stella's sick on the day of a meeting, which she never is.

I take a deep breath. If Stella's going to run for Term Four, then I am too.

Last night I was working on a speech for the student council, and I have a pretty good first draft. But normally the student councilors all do

something cool to show their support for the community, and I have no idea what to do.

A coat drive? Sell lemonade? Have a bake sale? All of these are classic options, but I want to try something different.

So at lunchtime, I head up to the library and type in organizations I could help. One catches my eye.

It's an organization called Locks of Love. They give wigs made of donated hair to kids who have lost their own hair. I subconsciously finger my long, curly black hair. It's coming down to my waist. That should be definitely enough. And it's a pain to brush in the mornings and tie up for school. I've always liked the look of short hair anyway . . .

My mind wanders for the rest of the day.

After school, I look up YouTube videos on how to cut your own hair from home.

Hmm. Seems simple enough. There are some videos of fails, but none of them look too bad.

"Dad, where are the kitchen scissors?" I ask as I wander into the living room.

"Hang on." He rushes off into the kitchen, coming back with a fat pair.

"Here. Are you doing an art project or something?"

"Umm . . . kind of," I reply slyly.

I tear upstairs to the bathroom sink, grabbing a hair tie on the way up.

I stare at my reflection in the mirror, shower and tub reflected behind me. Pale tiles line the shower stall, in a distorted pattern.

This is "before" me.

Yes. I am. I am going to make someone, somewhere in the world, feel special and awesome. I am going to give them my hair.

Wait. I want to remember this.

I race away to the bedroom and snatch my tablet from its charging station. Okay. I snap a quick picture of myself. Let's see what "after" looks like.

I lock the bathroom door and tie my curly hair into a tight ponytail, just below the nape of my neck.

Oh my gosh. Am I seriously doing this?

Yes. I am. I am going to make someone, somewhere in the world, feel special and awesome. I am going to give them my hair.

I shakily grab the scissors and start cutting. "Shh, shh," my hair whispers.

My head starts to feel lighter, my hair moving in a wave as I slice through the fibers. Wow. If this is what a bob looks like, this is great. My hair poofs up a lot more, but in a satisfying way. About three quarters of the way through, though, I hear my name being called. It's my dad.

"Swiftly, are you okay in there?"

"Uhh, yeah, just stomach pains. Owwww!" I lie.

"Do you want me to come in? I'm coming in. You've been in there for about half an hour."

Oh, shoot.

I hear the click of a key in the door. *Oh no. What can I do? Hide the scissors? But where?*

It's too late.

The door swings open.

My dad gapes at me in utter horror.

His face has gone a shade of—well, lighter than his normal skin color. He

clasps his hands to his mouth.

"Oh my gosh," he whispers. Well, he didn't actually say that. He said something else which I'm not going to write down. But it was still similar to "oh my gosh."

"Swiftly, what are you doing?!" he half whispers again, half shouts.

"I'm running for the student council," I reply serenely.

"And do all the people running have to cut nearly all their hair off?" my dad asks waveringly.

"No, of course not!" I laugh. Okay, am I in shock? My dad definitely is. He looks like he's seen someone jump off a cliff.

"Then why are you cutting your hair?" Oh no. He looks angry. Furious, in fact.

"Well, you see," I explain. "Pretty much anyone who runs for student council does a good turn. And I was looking up organizations to help today and . . ." I pause. "I'm donating my hair to Locks of Love."

My dad stares at me in awe. "I'm very angry at you," he mutters. "But I am also extremely proud. But there will still be consequences, young lady. Now, may I finish cutting your hair?"

I nod shyly, and pass him the scissors. He snips the last few remaining strands.

"Erm, this needs a professional hairdresser," he points out. "I'm gonna call one of my good friends."

Fifteen minutes later, a man arrives at our doorstep. He's called McClinty Jones, and he's wearing a lavish grey-striped tuxedo with

pointy mauve leather shoes on his feet. Flashy gold-rimmed sunglasses adorn his nose.

"Hmm," he mutters, stroking his brown-blond goatee.

He rummages through his hairdressing kit and finds a buzzer and a scrapbook.

"Zis bob is too short to fix. Pick a hairstyle and I will do it for you." He sounds German.

I flip through the pages and stop on a picture. The model's hair is shaved at the sides and long at the top.

"I want that one, please." I point to the picture.

"Good choice," he replies, and starts shaving and snipping away.

When I finally get to look at myself in the mirror, I gasp in astonishment. I look amazing!

McClinty's styled my hair into a mohawk using scented gel, with dyed pink streaks running through.

"Thank you, man." My dad stares at my reflection in surprise. "How much is it?"

"Nusink." McClinty replies. "Svifty is dooving a good turn. I shall do von back."

My dad shakes his hand, and with that, McClinty packs up his gear and sweeps my cut hair into a small pile in the center of the bathroom, which he maneuvers into a bag.

Soon he vanishes, like he was never here. Just in time as well. I can hear my mother's car pulling into our driveway. My dad and I send a father-daughter glance to each other, kind of like his and mum's parent one.

My dad grabs a towel hanging

from the rack, and my chopped ponytail. "Let's go down," he says anxiously. We head downstairs, and as soon as we get to the bottom, he throws the sheet around me. All I can see is a sky blue and faint silhouettes moving around.

"Hey, honey!"

"Hi, honey."

"Swiftly and I have a surprise for you."

"Okay—can I see now?"

"Err, sure. But first, let me warn you . . . err, we've cut her hair."

"Oh my gosh! Swiftly's hair!"

"Err, yes."

"Her beautiful hair!"

"So . . . she decided to cut her hair to donate!"

"What?! Oh gosh, what does she look like now?"

The towel is whipped off. Warm, bright light floods my eyesight.

I hear my mum gasp. I'm not sure if it's in shock, horror, or surprise. Maybe all three. "Oh, Swiftly! Are you sure you don't regret this?" My mum rubs her eyes, aghast.

"Mum, I'm doing this to help a kid who's feeling weird or uncomfortable about themselves. I want to make them feel better."

She sighs in exhaustion and rubs her eyes again.

"It's going to be hard to get used to. But I'm proud of you."

Chapter 16

The next day, I wave goodbye to my parents as I head off to school. I'm pretty early because I'm walking there, which takes about half an hour. My mum's having tummy aches, so

she's going to go get a check-up.

When I arrive at class, all eyes are set on me.

I've tied my hair up into a ponytail at the end, the pink strands brightening up my hair. The word that comes to me to describe it is crepuscular, although I'm not sure if that's quite right.

"Wow," a boy in my class says, his eyes widening in astonishment.

"Swiftly, if I do say so myself, you look incredible!" a girl in my class compliments me. My inner self shrinks into a tight ball and starts rolling around.

Then Stella and her posse walk in.

"Interesting haircut, Swiftly!" Stella smiles uncertainly. Karen speeds up her pace and hangs beside Stella as she whispers something hastily her ear, eyes darting toward me.

Now it's Brooke's turn. Great.

"Honestly, Swiftly. I have told you this so many times and you never listen! You just think that the way you look doesn't matter, but it does. You have terrible style. It's going to take a long time for it grow back, but you're still gonna look ugl—"

Oh no. Brooke, you went too far.

"Look, Brooke. You may think the whole world revolves around you, but that's not the case. I cut my hair for charity, and a very nice guy styled it like this. You have no right to say that to me because I don't see you lending a hand to anything or anyone."

"You are a self-obsessed—"

Just as Brooke is about to brutally and theatrically attack, swinging her clawed fist, Mrs. Mulberry saunters into class.

"Good morning cla—GIRLS! Break

it up!" she roars.

I jolt, and so does the rest of the class. Mrs. Mulberry never shouts. Well, unless it's necessary.

"Now, what is going here?" she snaps. "Brooke, you first."

"I was just walking into class, Mrs. Mulberry, and then SWISHY here tripped me up and called me a name!" Brooke lies, even going as far as to call me Swishy. Ugh. I hate her.

"Actually Mrs. Mulberry, that's not the case," Stella explains.

What?! Stella defending me?!

"It was just something that went out of control. Brooke did nothing wrong, but neither did Swiftly."

I wouldn't agree with that, but Stella defended me! Maybe I don't hate her as much as I used to. Well, just a teeny bit.

Stella avoids my gaze as I attempt to send her a thankful nod. I guess she's not allowed to go against Brooke like that.

"Well then, class, we have a Korean lesson in twenty minutes. Room 4 has swapped times with us because they need to get on with something. So why don't we head outside for a very quick game and—"

Suddenly Principal Fintan barges into the classroom, hidden panic stretched across his normally joyful face. He's in a suit with a red tie, which looks way too serious for school. He's young but already starting to bald, a small patch indiscreetly covered up with thin auburn strands.

"Sorry, Kate and Room 3, but I'm afraid we have an emergency. Swiftly, could you come with me, please? Pack up all your things."

I shoot a befuddled glance toward Mrs. Mulberry as I cram my books,

drink bottle, and pencil case into my backpack. She shrugs and gives me a small wave.

I wave to my class awkwardly, and they all return the gesture back in a muddled way. I follow Principal Fintan up the hallway, school bags lining the path to his office. He clicks open the door, his name stuck on in 3D black letters, and invites me inside.

My grandma is sitting on one chair opposite his desk. *Why is she here?* Principal Fintan pulls out a chair for me and I lower myself down slowly.

He sits behind his desk, the cushion attached to his chair faintly hissing like a fart. I want to laugh, but the situation seems too serious so I don't.

He types something into his laptop, set up to the side of his folder-strewn desk. In fact, there are folders *everywhere*. On bookshelves, tabletops, office bins, containers, and cubbies. A disorganized rainbow of information.

"G-g-grandma?" I splutter.

"W-what's g-going on?"

"Grace," she mumbles. *Wait. That's my mother's name. What's happening? Is Mum ok?*

Principal Fintan takes over. "We have some exciting news. Your brother has just been born, Swifty."

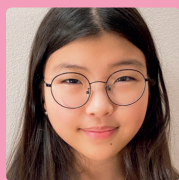
Adrenaline takes over. I feel like a motorcycle that's just been kick-started. "W-w-we gotta g-g-go!" I yell powerfully, still stuttering.

"To the hospital!" my grandma yells, suddenly alive with fiery energy.

... to be continued in the June 2021 issue of Stone Soup.

Highlights from Stonesoup.com

From the Stone Soup Blog



An excerpt from
"A Day in the Life of a Sixth Grader"

By Lauren Minyoung Yoon, 11
Northbrook, IL

7:15 a.m. – When my alarm goes off, I always wonder if I could just throw it on the ground, then go back to sleep. Well, I can't do that, actually, because my dad is my alarm and I would be in trouble trying to throw him to the ground. 7:15 is the worst part of the day. After the alarm goes off, the quiet, peaceful house starts to wake up: my dad yelling at us to wake up, my little sister screaming at me to give her her clothes (which I don't have), my mom going through her makeup desk wondering which mascara she should put on, and me trying to find my favorite hoodie.

7:30 a.m. – My hair is all sticky and oily, and my mom screams at me to take a quick shower. I know not to argue because if I do, I have to look sticky, smelly, ugly, and oily when I go to school. When I'm in the shower, I instantly regret it because it's sooooo cold. But you can't just get out of shower when you're already wet. So I just stay in there for five minutes and then get out and runnnn to my room for warmth.

7:45 a.m. – What you are probably imagining is a lovely and fancy breakfast full of warmth and happiness. Well, if that's what you are thinking, you are wrong. My breakfast goes like this: my little sister complaining that she has way too much food, me arguing with my sister, my mom telling my sister to just eat, and my dad screaming at us to be quiet. *That's* how my breakfast goes.

About the Stone Soup Blog

We publish original work—writing, art, book reviews, multimedia projects, and more—by young people on the Stone Soup Blog. You can read more posts by young bloggers, and find out more about submitting a blog post, at <https://stonesoup.com/stone-soup-blog>.

Honor Roll

Welcome to the Stone Soup Honor Roll. Every month, we receive submissions from hundreds of kids from around the world. Unfortunately, we don't have space to publish all the great work we receive. We want to commend some of these talented writers and artists and encourage them to keep creating.

STORIES

Hanbei Bao, 10
Chance Brainard, 13
Oola Breen-Ryan, 9
Isabella Bull, 11
Amelia Driver, 10
Claire Hansen, 12

POETRY

Eli Brosowsky, 12
Raya Ilieva, 11
Pauline McAndrew, 12
Ava Shorten, 11
Emma Telpis, 12
Olivia Vallejo, 8

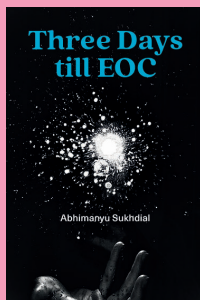
ART

Aya David-Ramati, 10
Cleo Friedman, 8
Hussein Ismail, 11
Leila Keller, 11
Aditi Nair, 12
Uma Nambiar, 13
Rose Scaramuzzi, 12
Liam Tang, 10

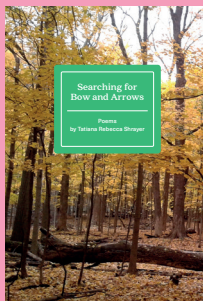
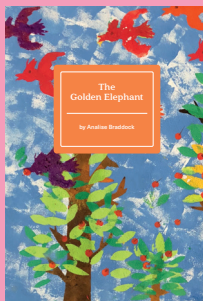
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Published on September 1, 2020, *Three Days till EOC* by Abhimanyu Sukhdial, the winning novella in our 2019 Book Contest. Hardback, 72 pages, \$9.99.



Don't miss the two poetry collections we published in July, available as e-books at \$4.99 each.

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