

Stone Soup

The Magazine Written and Illustrated by Kids



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StoneSoup

Writing and art by kids, for kids

Editor's Note

Readers! Today marks FIFTY YEARS of *Stone Soup*! Reaching this milestone is an incredible achievement and a testament to the importance of this project for young readers, writers, and artists. Thanks to each one of you for continuing to make *Stone Soup* possible.

The art, poetry, and prose in this issue explore climate change. It felt right to me that our fiftieth issue should be one that explores the most significant political issue facing all of us, and especially our youth, today. Here, you will find a story about what happens when wolves come into close contact with humans, a fantastical tale about a young wizard on a mission to save the forest where she lives, a memoir that reminds us of the beauty and majesty of nature, and incredible artwork that harnesses image and metaphor to show what we are up against, alongside many other powerful pieces.

You will also find the first installment of *Cousins*, a novella that Emily Chang, 14, submitted to our 2022 Book Contest. We are thrilled to be publishing it in the magazine, and hope that you enjoy Nicky and Laila's story as much as we did!

Emma



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A Better World (Oil)
Bobby Jiang, 13
Massachusetts

The Adventures of Jane and Louise: Creek Cleanup

Cousins Jane and Louise turn a boring morning watching their brothers play soccer into a fun, meaningful adventure



By Louise Johnson, 11
North Carolina

I leaned against the window, the cold glass sending a shiver through my body. I didn't want to go to the game. *I'm just going to be cold and bored*, I thought.

"C'mon, Louise. It can't be that bad," my brother said, nudging me. He was dressed head to toe in uniform. His cleats were obnoxiously tapping the bottom of the car in excitement. He always got like this before one of his soccer games. "I mean, you'll get to watch me win, right?" he said. I continued staring out the window and didn't say anything.

"Hey, look at that!" my mom said from the passenger seat. "The Welches are going to be there too! Harold's got a soccer game!"

As soon as I heard "Welches," I bolted upright in my seat. "The Welches?" I cried.

The Welches were our cousins. There were four kids—Jane, Robert, Harold, and Betsy. And the oldest, Jane, was my age. We had been best friends since we were born. Even though we saw each other often, I still looked forward to every time we met.

"Yup," my mom said. "Every single one of them." My smile could be seen for miles.

When we reached the soccer fields, the thought of the cold, wet ground once again sent a chill through my spine. I was more of a summer day than fall morning kind of person. But when I saw Jane, all those feelings were blown away by the late autumn breeze.

I opened the door and ran down the stairs to the fields, only caring about seeing my cousin.

"Jane?" I cried when she was within earshot.

"Hey, Louise!" she said. Her short, curly brown hair bounced behind her as she ran toward me.

"Let's go play!" Jane said, and we ran off as our brothers' soccer games began. We ran around, exploring the nearby playgrounds and updating each other on the latest fourth-grade gossip.

We had done something to help, no matter how big or small that thing was, and we were proud.

While we were exploring the edge of the forest near the soccer fields, we saw a steep little path that led down into the woods. Curiosity got the better of us, and we ran back to where our parents were sitting in their lawn chairs, intently watching the game. When we asked them if we could go explore, they absentmindedly answered yes, and Jane and I ran off happily.

As we trekked through the forest, spying on the families who lived behind the fences and telling jokes that didn't make sense, I started noticing something. The forest and stream were littered with all sorts of trash—beer cans, water bottles, tissues, plastic bags, and more. Disgusted, we ran back to our parents again to ask for a bag.

"Mama, can we have a bag?" I asked. This time she looked up from the game, surprised.

"What do you need a bag for?"

"Picking up trash," Jane chimed in.

"Yeah! There's a ton of trash in the woods. So, can we have a bag?" I asked. Jane and I put on our sweetest faces, and my mom laughed.

"Okay, but don't touch any glass or anything dangerous like that," she said as she pulled an old Walmart bag out of her purse.

"Why do moms always have everything?" I said, my voice only slightly diminished by the wind as we ran back to the woods.

"I don't know! When I'm a mom I won't have time for things like that! I'll be too busy having fun!" Jane yelled.

"Yeah! Me too!" I said as we came to the trail.

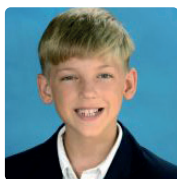
We hiked through the woods, our eyes wide open, looking for any trash we could pick up. We hopped over the stream several times, throwing away whatever didn't belong there. We picked up so much trash—we even had to go back for more bags!

By the time the game was over, Jane and I were filthy but happy. We had done something to help, no matter how big or small that thing was, and we were proud. My brother was both right and wrong—I didn't watch him win, but I definitely had fun.



Window into the Future (Watercolor, acrylic, colored pencil)
Eileen Moon, 12
Washington

Busy Little Beaver



By Judson Morrison, 11
Texas

I am a beaver.
Wood is wood.
I need to find it for the dam.
Did you know I used to be taller than LeBron James?
My prehistoric great (x4) grandfather was 7 ft., 6 in.
Even though my friends only live for 24 years,
I've been here for 30.
Every beaver knows that the best wood is birch.
Axes are useless.
Teeth are much better.
I don't understand humans.
They build tall houses.
Why do they put hygienic mint soap on their teeth?
Why would you use valuable resources to build just a house?
Sometimes they put water on their heads along with eye-wrenching substances.
They think that they are "using the land for industrial purposes,"
But it is for building structures that will get destroyed the next time there is a flood.
Don't get me started on European beavers.
They think they are elegant and unique.
They are slightly larger
With heads like squares.
I am sorry—
I forgot to say my name.
My name is Bucky.
Humans think we "destroy the land."
But, they do so too.
Thank you for your understanding.
FoLoSuo (Goodbye in Beavarian).



Abstract Firewood (iPhone 8, BeCasso)
Tatum Lovely, 13
Pennsylvania

Two Poems



By Jessica Xu, 10
New York

Fox

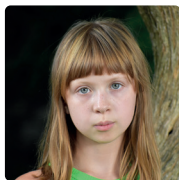
Where have you seen the fox?
In the bushes, hiding.
I saw a fox
As red as blood
Carrying a
Limp rabbit.

Its teeth were sharp
And bared,
Its ears were alert,
And its whiskers twitched.
Its fur felt like scarlet snow
And its tail swung intently.

When I was walking by,
The fox stared at me
With its beady midnight eyes,
And scurried away,
Leaving me
Gazing in its wake.

Red

Red is
the sunset
an apple
a cherry
my Chinese outfit
a lucky color
mermaid's hair
blood
a feather
a fox
a heart
and all
the other lovely things.



Outstretched (Samsung Galaxy A32)
Emma Hoff, 10
New York

A Wizard, Her Wand, and Grandfather Oak

Leeka the wizard and her trusty oak wand pledge to save the depleted forest



By Ellie Wang, 9
Washington

Leeka, the wizard, was frantically looking around for her lost wand. A silk-smooth wand of oak. Stone-sturdy. Embedded with multicolored flashing opals. Perfect for a wand! It was the gold in her heart.

Tired, she gave up. Yet, still hopeful, she decided to search the forest for ivy to decorate, if not her old wand, the future one that would choose her. Stopping her search was something big and twisted into chunks of wood—her wand! Leeka slumped and sighed. “Oh, dear. All morning wasted. Wasted!”

Leeka looked up at the sky and started to recall another faraway time in the quietest forest of all, where the trees reached and stretched to the blue sky, where ivy wrapped the high trees like friends and the mosses hung around the branches like damp pieces of cloth, where the sunbathing foxes snoozed on smooth rocks, and the air smelled fresh from the morning shower—in this quietest forest of all, she had happily trotted back home with White Raspberry, her then-intact opal oak wand.

She sighed back to reality. Oh, how the forest had changed—bereft now of many trees and moss, clean pools, and animal dwellers, except for some new owls. But no ivy, no love, no sweet blackberries, no fresh rain.

There Leeka sat and began to stare at her old wand, wondering if her magic could repair the badly wounded but delightfully old forest. Still, she needed a wand.

Finally, she stood up and took a deep breath. *I will not forget about the old wand. I will salvage it as part of the old forest that needs to be protected.*

Then she sprinted towards the lively center of the forest, where her ancient Great Oak Grandfather lived, alive as alive can be, and her very best friend. He had made her wand from one of his branches and now spoke to her with his kind language, which she had learned to understand.

“Leeka, my dear! So delighted to see you again, my youngest granddaughter!”

“Greetings,” Leeka replied. “Happy to see you again, my oldest great-grandfather.”

Stars covered her like an endless comforting blanket with shining eyes; the moon sang a sweet dreamy song just for her; owls elegantly perched and flew off trees as she fell asleep.

Yet the great old oak noticed Leeka looking down at the ground. *How unusual*, he thought. *What's causing her to be like this?* The puzzled ancient oak bent down and brushed her with one of his branches, feeling a thick barrier of sadness surrounding her. He whispered (so the other, fellow oaks could not hear), "What's wrong? You seem so sad."

Leeka looked up and sniffed. "My wand is broken. Would you kindly mend it?" Then she began her chant sharing why mending the wand would be vital:

My stone-silk-smooth wand is hurt!
He is the gold piece in my heart and yours.
Our bond is now in need of saving,
as is the diminished forest around us.
By healing this wand, our shared magic
will again be in tune—
the rushing river will return to fill the dry bed,
animals will snooze happily in the clean mist.
Protected by our magic, this greenest
of dwelling places will always be a safe refuge,
never a polluted desert!
And every creature's joy will infuse
the magic aura to protect us all!

Grandfather Oak replied, "My heart is broken with yours. Our shared piece of gold, your cherished wand, shall be mended. Your good and compassionate heart, aiming to protect and heal this forest, brings new magical insights to me. By saving this forest, we save many other lives besides our own. Your wand shall be with you tomorrow. Just remember it might be a little bit different!"

"Ah, thank you! You are also a piece of gold in my heart! Will you and I be a little different too?" teased Leeka while handing her wand to the wise old oak.

Night had descended, so Leeka camped out, lying under the starry night. Stars covered her like an endless comforting blanket with shining eyes; the moon sang a sweet dreamy song just for her; owls elegantly perched and flew off trees as she fell asleep.

Leeka awoke to her white oak wand embedded again with opals. White Raspberry was back! She sat up and ran to hug White Raspberry, but he dodged away. He also started hopping around her like a rabbit while he unexpectedly grew a foot taller. She stared at Raspberry in confusion, but reached out and managed to grab him. When she tried to put the wand in her basket, she held it

with so much enthusiasm that it leapt and flew. All of sudden, she was up in the air like a helium balloon, clutching a wand with a mind of its own.

Up in the air, she finally remembered her grandfather had asked her to bear with possible changes. However, she now lacked power over White Raspberry. *How could that be a helpful change? Ah! Or perhaps now she and Raspberry would have equal power?*

White Raspberry spoke up: "I just wanted you to see the devastation caused by deforestation. Look down to your left."

To the left, some trees were withered and gray; others were gone, leaving empty spots. Up so high, she could see other forests crying for help. Leeka became keen to learn how forests could be regenerated and how deforestation could be reversed.

White Raspberry could read her mind, so when Leeka wondered if her new wand would want to learn this new magic, he answered before she had even asked:

"Yes, of course, Leeka! I'm made from those trees, and I will thank them for saving my life by protecting them."

Leeka smiled with thanks and joy. "We just don't know how to perform the right magic, but we can learn, can't we?"

As White Raspberry floated Leeka back down to earth, he telepathically transmitted, *Maybe your Grandfather has ideas.*

Leeka transmitted, *Yes, I had thought of asking him. Do you think we could transmit change through dreams?*

Perhaps. Maybe we should fly to Grandfather now.

Leeka nodded, and as they flew to Old Grandfather Oak, they heard his reply: *Of course I will help you and White Raspberry! Thank you for thinking of all my good neighbors and close friends!*

When she and White Raspberry floated down to the foot of Grandfather Oak, Leeka immediately asked, "Do you think that sending dreams to attract humans to save the forest is a good, effective strategy?"

Old Grandfather cordially replied, "Thank you for asking. My opinion will derive from a poll among all trees."

As Leeka nodded, she felt waves of energy flowing from everywhere in the roots below them. One washed over her and Grandfather Oak to answer, *Dream believers win by millions!*

Wonderful! telepathed Grandfather Oak. *Now I will telepath you and Raspberry to a special place for your research.*

Soon, Leeka and White Raspberry felt themselves turning into trees living beside a glittering stream that chased the dark-blue night sky. But as they relaxed, a nearby tree disappeared, hitting them like a sharp arrow. Wizard and wand then felt the dead tree pass its memories to the living ones, which made the living trees even more desperate to join the glorious dream world, where all their lost friends now lived. Then one night, when the landscape had become barren, the moon, their last friend, sang her last song, a bitter one, as she disappeared forever.

When Leeka and White Raspberry awoke, they said to Grandfather Oak, “We learned that, first and foremost, the trees’ hearts need to be mended.”

“How will you do that?”

White Raspberry replied, “To mend the trees’ hearts, we will plant a dream of hope to restore their strength.”

“Next, we will plant another dream to restore their courage,” continued Leeka.

“Spot on!” encouraged the old oak. “The pair of you may be both good wizards and physicians.”

That night, Leeka and her wand telepathically planted their imagined dream. The trees found themselves leaning against their family members, touching the starry night with their treetops, and the stars covered them like an endless comforting blanket with shining eyes. These starry-night eyes opened the trees’ eyes to their inner beauty and the truth that their hearts were meant to cherish and be cherished. Each heart held a tree with a bird’s nest full of warm feathered friends who sang of living forever, even in storms and droughts, always standing their ground, never giving up. This future vision of fortitude continued with the birds’ promise to live inside the trees’ hearts, never letting them languish but always giving them love. They promised to live in the trees’ souls, because the trees had, for ages, cared for birds and their families.

Grandfather Oak, who had tuned in to the telepathed dreams, became extremely proud of his students. “You and your sent dreams will work the right magic. True love from others makes a tree strong!”

Greatly encouraged, Leeka and Raspberry performed the second telepathed dream. The trees dreamed that their children were begging them: “Please don’t leave! Your knowledge can help us evolve and adapt together. Even the trees no longer with us can support you and us. Please bring back the forest’s cheerful self!” The dreaming trees listened to their children and found the diminished forest less impossible. They began to dream of future flourishing.

The old oak praised Leeka and Raspberry again. “It’s true that we love our children and listen to them. By loving them we grow courage.”

Leeka added, “And from you, we have learned that trees are wise—as wise as the thoughts you give us!” Oak beamed more light around his students.

Then, Leeka and Raspberry wandered again into the deepest part of the forest to telepathically ask the trees and animals what they wanted to transmit to humans. Soon they devised a Big Dream to plant. They transported every human dreamer over the border into a country they could not shape—the world of the dream. Every dreamer found him or herself lying under the canopy of a full-fledged forest, the treetops touching a starry night. Stars covered them like an endless comforting blanket with shining eyes. These eyes opened their eyes to the beauty of old-growth forests. Then the moon sang a sweet dreamy song just for them—a touching song about how the forest would soon be lost forever along with so much else, without humankind’s notice and care. Owls perched in trees

Then one day, our forest—our large family—became our nightmare. Not a hint of new green could be found among us. It was horrible—unbearable—to feel the absence of new green growth and its light.

flew with thoughts for the mailboxes inside the dreamers' minds and hearts, and each woke wanting to protect that soothing Big Dream of a forest.

Now the wizard and her wand listened to the waking humans. Ideas were filling their hearts and minds, and they began chattering:

"We need to plan our buildings around trees instead of cutting them down."

"We need to build homes with stones and bricks to save wood."

Others remembered, "Some of us used to burn peat in our fireplaces to save wood."

Architects heard the advice and dreamed of designing round, solar-powered houses made of glistening quartz stones that encircled trees like castle towers, with plenty of windows open to all the forest magic. These homes would be spaciouly placed apart with a variety of forest trees between them. The architects further dreamed that families would love these new environmentally friendly homes with many windows open to the shape-shifting clouds and the singing of birds, and convinced stonemasons to build them. Besides, there would be plenty of mushrooms to harvest.

City planners decided to turn malls into large, solar-powered greenhouses to feed more of the world. They would choose organic farming methods and would forbid factory farms. They would let animals live and enjoy their natural lifespans.

Humans even dreamed of Rottweilers protecting all areas where fossils of buried sunlight remain. They vowed not to budge, but to bark incessantly at whoever dared to dig up fossils for fuel.

Finally, Leeka and White Raspberry transmitted to humans a dream featuring Old Grandfather Oak speaking to them: "Imagine you are an old-growth tree like me. I once lived in polluted air. We had hoped that the forest would be lush and green again, but as time passed, we worried more and more. We worried about losing everything, yet we tried to be hopeful. Then one day, our forest—our large family—became our nightmare. Not a hint of new green could be found among us. It was horrible—unbearable—to feel the absence of new green growth and its light."

The old-growth oak stopped and shivered from this memory, and then recovered to speak to the dreamers in gratitude: "However, unlike new-growth forests, we old-growth trees received the care of your wise folk on a mission to save us! I overheard them asking their governments to call our old-growth forests world historic sites. Now, we're off limits to clear-cutting and fossil fuel industrialists, and we have become national parks that welcome visitors. They let us 'manage ourselves' just as we always had. We old-growth trees have proven to be highly effective managers of ourselves through our sophisticated root systems that transmit our messages throughout our vast network. Our slogan is 'Damage costs thousands of helping hands.'"

Wizard and wand felt even more inspired. So they presented themselves in the dreams of fossil fuel industrialists, directly asking them, “Why dig up and burn fossil fuels that suffocate trees? Trees exhale oxygen. When there’s less and less oxygen in the air, you and all humans will die. Soon you will die with the whole planet. Saving the planet is also saving our future.”

Leeka and Raspberry then read the dreaming industrialists’ minds and knew that they had begun to think deeply and be more concerned.

More hopeful, they returned to Grandfather, who suggested, “Perhaps you could plant a dream in children as they sleep. When I was young and remembered what I had learned, my learning became an effective practice throughout my life.”

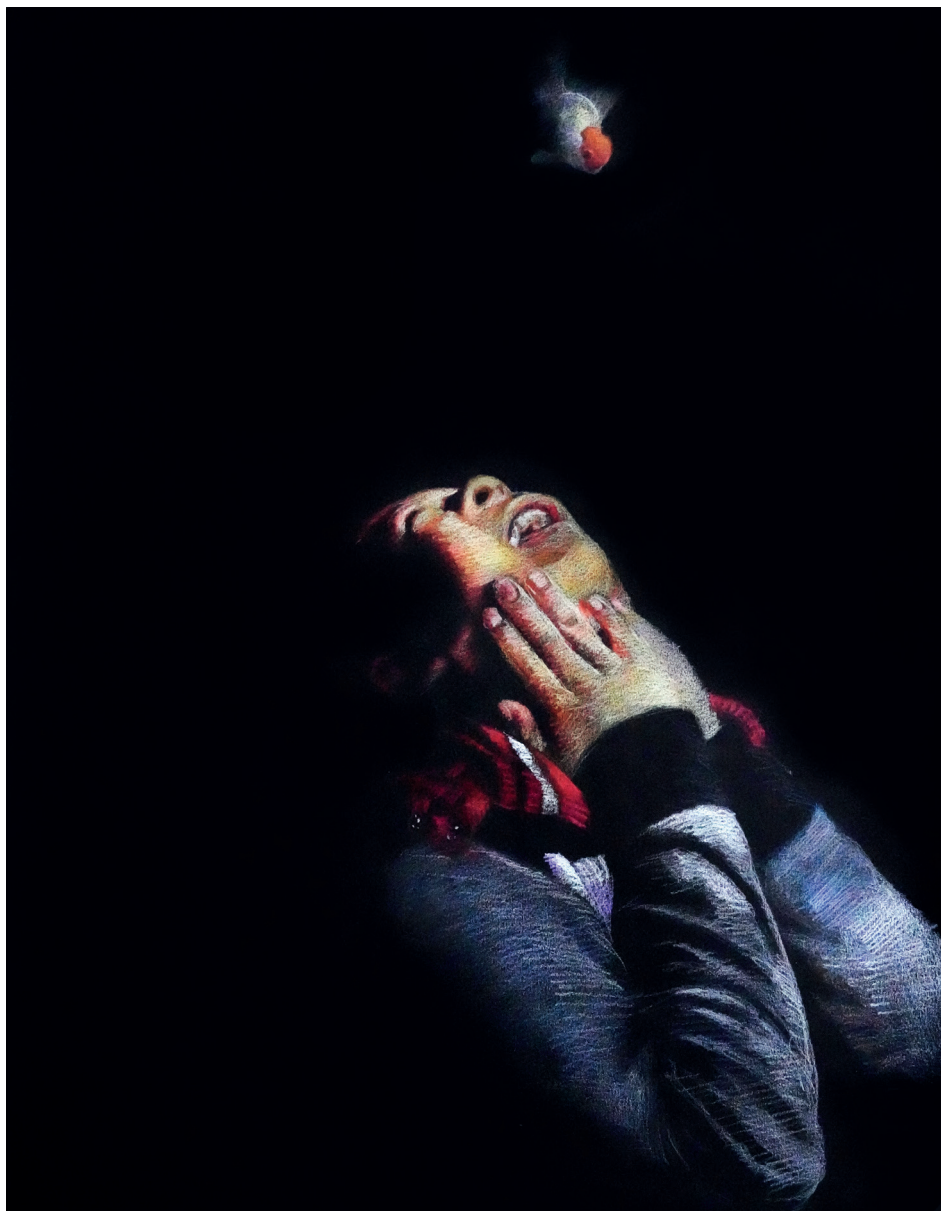
Grandfather Oak’s prodigies assented and planted the following dream: The sleeping children found themselves in a school where they were greeted every day by a tall indoor birch that stretched its branches out and up toward the high skylight. This tree became their home at school; they called it “Buddie” and learned to receive Buddie’s felt senses. During free time, one or more would listen to Buddie tell a story. One of his stories tells of rain, a wondrous form of water that nourishes the river of consciousness and imagination. All the images that fascinate human minds are born and live in this river, and all the images hold different meanings for different people.

Inspired by their dream, many children wanted to make it come true when they woke. They asked their parents to build treehouses behind their homes. Their dream became a neighborhood of trees holding treehouses. Treehouses became small libraries where they could read and write; some became lighthouses for young lighthouse keepers; some became viewpoints for birdwatchers; others were specimens for the curious who examined trees to learn their biology, such as how they store water for dry spells. The young biologist asked, *Does water inspire trees to imagine?*

One morning Leeka woke to the fragrance of a pine tree. Far away she saw a team huddled up discussing something and wondered, *What are they planning?* Raspberry fluttered beside her to telepath, *They are planning a tree farm.*

Leeka nodded and responded, “A few days ago, we sparked children’s imaginations. I hope that when they grow up, the world will be full of happy forests.”

White Raspberry wondered, “Who will be today’s dreamers?”



Arrival (Colored pencil)
Christopher Zhang, 13
Massachusetts



Embrace (Canon EOS 80D)
Audrey Li, 13
New York

Salt

The narrator recalls a memorable trip to Australia's Sunshine Coast



By Amber Zhao, 11
Brisbane, Australia

People call the Gold Coast Australia's Miami. They sing the praises of how it attracts swarms of tourists to a world where skyscrapers pierce a sky speckled with stars and nightclubs pulse with frenetic music, of bikini-clad meter maids and gleaming pools, of glitter and shimmering allure. Slip onto a golden beach crowded with laughter that floats on the warm breeze, that curls around you like a cat's tail. Lay a picnic blanket beneath an endless dome of sky. Looking onto the panorama of turquoise sea, tell yourself: this is paradise.

It was not the Gold Coast my friend Ivy and I were traveling to. It was the Sunshine Coast, its twin up north, and I was skeptical. Others visiting the one-hundred sun-kissed kilometers that comprised its wonders had called it enchantingly beautiful. On the first afternoon, I looked out onto the sand—a sun-kissed shore that could've been plucked from anywhere on Earth—and skepticism wormed into my thoughts.

Yet the next morning, we made a trek with our families out to the Point Cartwright Lighthouse: something of a local icon. Built and automated in 1978, the building was showing signs of disrepair, and it had been painstakingly rebuilt, now with a fresh coat of paint. This meant we couldn't explore the rabbit warren of rooms carved into its stone. After exploring the lighthouse's exterior, I found myself in a little glade surrounded by trees. On plaques fixed to pieces of wood, I read obituaries, blessings, grievances. *Born Asleep*, read one. *Our little baby boy. Gone Fishing*, read another. This chance discovery was a monument to grief, and I felt both humbled and somber when I read so many of those names—even an infant who had been born and died on the same day, its plaque next to a heartbreaking picture of a baby with angel wings.

We wended our way through rocky tips that rose from the ground like giants' fingers to the shore. The sea crashed gray and forbidding against the sand, which trickled into my sandal no matter how hard I shook it. It whipped the rocks, sending up colossal sprays of foam, like a prisoner lashing against the bars of its cage. I breathed in the briny air and let my little worries be washed away by the sea's clash and fury. I have always loved the wild spaces of nature, where you can be drowned, you can be paralyzed, you can lose yourself in its elemental force.

You can be buried, scattered with the sweeping tide. Confronted with the ocean's mighty thunder, one can forget everything if they try.

After an afternoon spent shopping and watching movies, my family walked to the beach. We were one of few—clouds brewed violently in the sky. I stopped protesting about safety after the clouds slid apart and a shaft of sunlight streamed through the storm, glowing luminous gold against the gray. It was extraordinary and a little frightening too. The clouds drew on, and the pocket of peace stayed, and it seemed like we were the only people on Earth. We walked on towards the west and the sun, bathed in purple-gold against the darkness. It was as if we were on a journey to the ends of the Earth.

Some things never change; your faculty for wonder is one. I turned that moment over and over, knowing it would become a precious memory.

On the third day's evening, when Mum invited me to go to the beach with my brother Justin and Ivy's sister Bella, I jumped at the chance. The night wrapped velvety around us, rich with the scent of salt and jasmine. The wind whistled through the curve of the dunes. Justin and Bella scampered towards the east, their hair tangling around their cheeks.

Though I tried to stop myself, I found myself chasing Bella and Justin, laughing. This freedom, all by ourselves on a Maroochy-dore night, released some buried sadness in me. All my worries, I imagine, were lost along with the tide.

My family left Maroochy-dore on the fourth day, but impressions of that holiday will last. It's a place of refreshment and peace, where you can taste salt on your tongue and the wind wraps around your ankles as if beckoning you on an adventure. Parrots found on our balcony who seemed to recognize our curious selves as one of their own. That molten gold sun that traced a trail through the churning sea. The sea's long, sorrowful moan threading into my sleep. The salt that crept into sandals, into sofas, into floorboards, into everything.

Though we left Maroochy-dore, those memories will stay with me forever.

The Full Moonlit Sky



By Artem Kushch, 12
Massachusetts

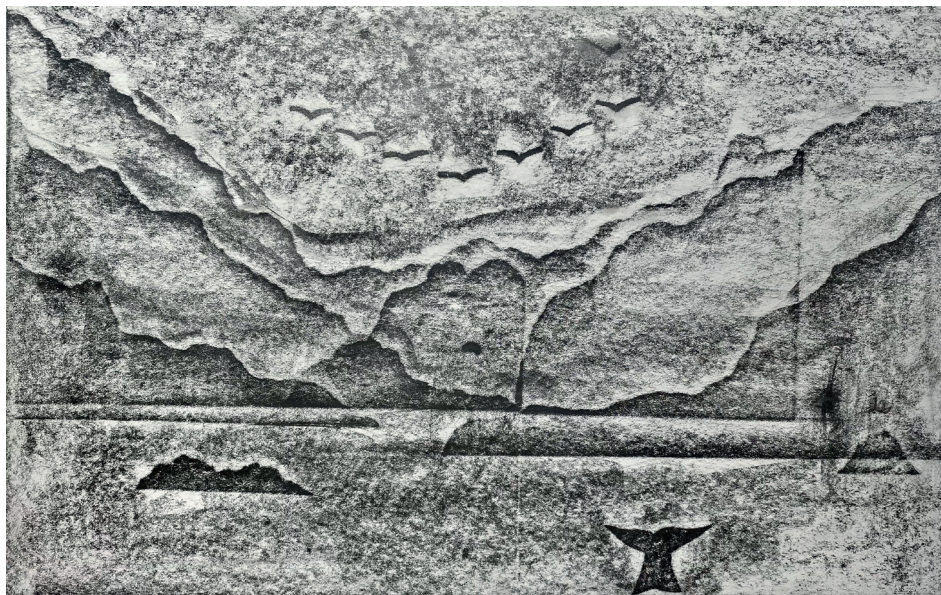
The full moonlit sky

Mom's perfume

The smell of fresh vanilla still in the flower on an open field



Coastal Scene I (Paper, glue)
 Sage Millen, 12
 British Columbia, Canada



Coastal Scene II (Graphite)



Peaceful Pond (Oil)
Christopher Zhang, 13
Massachusetts

Spring



By Celia Chen, 11
North Carolina

Hmmm . . .
Is it?
Is the time ripe?
Or is it not . . .
Hmmm . . .
Better go check in case it is,
Better not delay the bliss,
Maybe it is,
There is a smell of grass,
Maybe it is,
The chickadees are exploring,
Maybe it is coming . . .
I better check . . .
And there it is—
Here at last!
The harsh winter has now passed,
The evidence is clear,
The frost is melted to a smear,
The soil is alive,
Things are awakening,
Stretching,
Leaving only a slight tingling,
Confirming this miraculous arrival.



Climate Change (Pencil, Procreate)
Eva Chen, 12
Washington

Keystone Fairies

A call to action to protect the unique types of fairies that are helping preserve our ecosystems



By Emory Lim, 9
California

A keystone species is a species so important to its ecosystem that if you took it away, the whole ecosystem would collapse. An example of this is the sea otter. Sea otters eat sea urchins, which eat kelp forests, which produce a lot of oxygen. Because sea otters are endangered, there are more sea urchins, which means less kelp forests, and that equals a whole smaller amount of air.

Quite a few fairy species are keystone species, like the moonglow fairy. The moonglow fairy flies up to the moon and back every year in a flutter (that's what a group of fairies is called!), presumably during the spring. Owls, bats, and other aerial predators rely on this fact to catch a full meal of fairies.

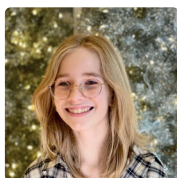
Moonglow fairies are also pollinators to many plants, like trumpet vine, moonflower, and bougainvillea. The typical moonglow fairy lives for five to six years, and when they die, they provide important nutrients to the soil.

Another fairy keystone is the willow fairy, which is one of the few omnivorous fairies. They keep the mosquito population in check so illnesses like malaria and the bubonic plague don't spread. However, willow fairy habitats are disappearing fast, as they only live in weeping willow trees. This is an example of a keystone species becoming vulnerable. On the IFSO's (International Fairy Safety Organization) Endangered Fairies List, willow fairies are critically endangered.

The last fairy keystone we are going to discuss is the honeybee fairy. Honeybee fairies are so small they can hitch a ride on the bellies of bees! When the bee lands on a flower, the honeybee fairy dismounts and rolls herself in pollen with the bee. This way, the plants get pollinated twice as fast! But, because honeybee fairies live with honeybees, and honeybees are endangered, honeybee fairies are categorized as extremely vulnerable on the IFSO Endangered Fairies List.

Because so many keystone fairies are endangered, thus endangering their ecosystems, we have to start thinking about the effect our icky plastics and gasses have on them. And we can't do "quick fixes," either—we can't just plant willow trees willy-nilly. We need to stop destroying natural spaces so there are more areas for willow trees to grow.

Fairies and animals influence their ecosystems and us. If we act quickly, we can still fix all the problems we've made for ourselves. Starting with the fairies.



Into the Woods (Charcoal)
Ivory Vanover, 12
Texas

Where I Belong

A young wolf finds himself drawn to another, dangerous world



By Sarah Iwanaga, 12
Indonesia

The wolf pack silently wandered through the forest, our leader in front. I stood by my mother, straining my ears for any sound that could mean danger. Trotting towards a tree, I lowered my nose to sniff at it. My mother nudged me with her nuzzle.

“Keep together with the rest of the pack, son,” she whispered, tilting her head towards them. “You’ll get lost.”

Darting after the cluster of wolves, I stared at my surroundings.

Gigantic trees loomed over us, a soft breeze ruffling our fur. The trees swayed gracefully, small rays of the full moon’s light slithering through the many branches. Owls hooted, bugs buzzed, and water trickled down some rocks. Everything was peaceful—until all of the adult wolves’ heads snapped towards one side.

I only heard it after the others: shouts. Children’s cries of joy as they played together. Their laughs as someone cracked a joke. Peeking through the leaves, I saw the lights of houses. Man-made structures covered the area, where children chased one another. All I saw was happiness. The wolves froze, eyes fixed on the Legulus (meaning “gatherer”: they called them that because the beings attracted many different kinds of scents). Then they dashed into the trees. My mother dragged me deep into the forest.

My mother loves me. She feeds me when I’m hungry, plays with me when I’m bored, and curls up with me when I’m cold. But there’s one rule she has that I don’t understand: Never go near Legulus.

Shaking myself, I looked up at my mother. She had bent down to lick me as other wolves poured into the cave we were in. The leader carefully peeked out before turning his head back to us and giving everyone a relieving signal. Everyone seemed to relax, except for me, who was more puzzled than scared. Confused, I whined and gnawed at Mother’s leg. Even while standing, my head only reached her elbow.

Soon, we all settled to sleep. I curled against my mother’s warm body and stared at the vast, blue sky. Stars were blinking around the surface as they looked down upon us. The moon’s rays lit everything up, creating eerie shadows of the trees. I turned my head, peering at another cub that was a bit larger than me.

"I want to tell you something." His face turned towards mine. "Never tell anyone about what I am going to tell you."

She slept curled up between her mother and father. Sighing, I stared next to me, where my father would've been.

My father passed away years ago. I was only a few months old when one day, the leader came up to us and said in a low and calm tone, "He is gone."

We were devastated. It felt like yesterday: me, curled up against my mother's body, weeping. I still remember the day before he'd died, how he had told me something as we watched the sunset.

"Ever since I first saw Legulus, I was fascinated by them. They seemed like such caring and gentle creatures. So unique and talented, in many ways. But of course, others thought I was crazy." He gave a sigh. "My dream was to one day be amongst them."

For a moment, only the sound of nature was heard. I sat by him, watching the sun's orange glow slowly melt away.

"I want to tell you something." His face turned towards mine. "Never tell anyone about what I am going to tell you."

I playfully licked his nose, edging closer to him.

"Not even Mother?" I asked.

"Not even Mother."

"Why?"

He sighed a deep, soft sound that was filled with a sorrow that the small, foolish me didn't recognize. Turning back towards the sun, he said, "Because, if you do, it will bring trouble for all of us. You, me, Mother. So. Do you promise?"

For a moment, I stared into his deep, blue eyes glinting in the dim light. They were always filled with happiness, excitement, and kindness. But at that moment, I noticed, they were also filled with longing.

"I promise," I said finally, turning away and resting my head on his paws. "What is it?"

A faint smile played on his face before he opened his mouth. "I will tell you a story," he said.

I gave a sniff. "Mum can't know of a story?"

He playfully placed his paw on my head, forcing me to shrug it off. "A unique story. About a wolf."

"What type of wolf?" I immediately pressed, lifting my head to look at him.

"A cheeky, curious wolf that loved to explore. He—"

"He's just like me!"

A wince flashed across my father's face. "Just like you," he echoed. "Then, one day, like always, he was exploring the woods when he came across a Legulus. He was tall, an adult. The scent of wood, smoke, and leaves wafted off him. The wolf was curious. Like always. He walked toward the Legulus and when the Legulus saw the wolf, he did not do anything. He was not like the usual hunters that would usually wander in the woods. Instead, he was kind and caring, and his laugh was soft and nice. In no time,

the young wolf befriended him. The wolf learned his name was Orson. Orson was like a second parent. Sometimes, Orson would sit by a fire and feed him bits of meat—delicious, coated in fat, and cooked above the blazing fire.

“But there was one flaw in their relationship. Wolves despise Legulus. They view them as dangerous creatures. If they knew about him, they would surely chase him. So, for Orson’s sake, the wolf hid his existence from the rest of the wolves. He secretly met with him when the sun set. He covered the scent of the treats by chewing twigs and rats. He disguised Orson’s scent with mud.

“Their relationship grew. But Orson began to miss their meetings. He would be gone, and come back the next day worn out. The young wolf grew worried. Finally, Orson stopped coming altogether. Every day, for two months, the wolf waited for him. But he never came. The wolf thought he had passed away. Then one day, out of the blue, he came back—this time with lots of meat and a raging fire that burned as they cuddled together under the bright stars. This time, Orson stayed for the night, talking to him, hugging him, and pressing his forehead to the wolf’s. Then he left. The wolf knew he wasn’t coming back, that Orson was saying goodbye.

“But the next morning, the wolf couldn’t hold it together. He dashed after Orson’s fading aroma, through the trees, onto Legulus land, following his friend’s trail. Finally, when his nose was dry from sniffing, his body weak from running and his mouth tired of panting, he found it: a small house, coated in a thin layer of the first snowflakes. He smelled the familiar burn of wood, a wisp of Orson’s scent. It was carried away by the wind. Then, he saw him: Orson, sitting inside his house. In his arms was a small boy, sleeping peacefully. He saw the smile on Orson’s face. Then he knew. Orson had a new life, a new family. He had a life. Without the wolf.

“The wolf sadly walked back to his pack, worn out and dejected. He never went back to Orson’s house. But he never told the wolves about it. He never spoke a word about his time with him. It was a secret. But he longed for Orson. Every day, he stared up into the sky and longed to be with his friend, cuddled next to him as they watched the stars.”

I sat in silence for a while after my father stopped. Then I said, “What happened to the wolf after that?”

“He would continue to live life,” my father said quietly, “until he died a peaceful death.”

“Why didn’t he go back to Orson?”

“Because,” my father said, “Orson was happy with his family. He didn’t want to get in the way. It was their life.”

I gave a little pout. “If the story ended with the wolf living with Orson and the little boy, it would’ve been nice.”

My father gave a small smile. He stayed silent. I slid into my sleep. The next day he was gone.

The sun shone brightly as birds sang cheerfully, and the world began to wake. I drowsily lifted my head and got up on my feet. Yawning, I shook myself and scanned the other wolves that were starting to stir to find Mother. I found her still deep asleep. Looking around, I found only a few wolves awake, some searching the ground for any scraps from yesterday's hunt.

My paws met moist leaves as I stepped out into the early morning breeze. The sky was orange, and the scent of wet wood wafted through the air. Grinning, I leapt out of the cave, pouncing into puddles. Cold water wet my fur as leaves and grass grabbed at me. Tongue hanging, I dashed through the trees, past startled squirrels, a sleeping snake, and frogs jumping across the forest floor. My heart pounded in my chest as the world awakened around me.

I could see a clearing in front of me. The rays of light peeked through the many branches, highlighting leaves. It became larger and larger as my paws sped eagerly. Then, head first, I broke through the border of leaves and mushrooms. I peered around, and looked down below me. Tall grasses covered the area. They danced along with the wind, swaying gracefully. Grass occasionally twitched, probably where a creature was waking.

My eyes landed on something. A man, clearly visible amongst the green grass. He held something in his arm. I strained my eyes, but could not make out what it was, as he was quite a long distance away. *Was it . . . a stick?* Two options immediately popped into my head. Mother would tell me to run, since "Legulus are dangerous." I thought for a moment. But this Legulus wasn't showing any sign of threat. He was pointing it at stuff and waving it around now; surely he wanted to play. I remembered Mother's words: "All Legulus are a threat to us. They hunt us like rats." The other option shone more brightly.

Bursting into the field, I leapt down the sloped land before dashing towards the man. My heart thumped in excitement, tail wagging as I drew closer. Only after he had turned around and started walking away from me did I see the boy. His head barely peeked over the tall grass, brown hair cheerfully bouncing up and down every step he took. He started following the man, but suddenly shouted something before hurrying back. The man turned and disappeared into the forest as the boy retraced his steps. He was running straight towards me. I froze. My mind raced, but my body didn't react. Then he saw me.

A startled expression was on his face. He seemed to be considering something. I knew I should've run. I knew I should've dashed into the trees behind me and ran back to mother and continued the day as if nothing happened. But I couldn't—a strong pull was pulling me towards the boy, the urge to get closer. But, then again, what if this boy was a danger? I crouched low, eyes glued to him. He took a step toward me. My heart gave a leap, but I sensed no threat in the way he moved or looked. Finally, he crouched down, reaching his arm out and calling out to me, "Hey! Come here!"

His voice was high, welcoming and joyful. Finally, I crept forward, a warm feeling crawling down my spine as he called for me again. I was within reach now. His arm moved towards my neck. I knew I should be aware, alert and bolting into the forest.

Yet, I thought as I looked into the small boy's face, how much of a threat could this curious boy be?

We spent the whole day together. The man didn't return—I'd assumed he had gone home—and I always kept my distance. When the sun was way above our heads, he took something out from his bag. The aroma of meat floated through the air and reached my nose. He held out a piece to me. I barely hesitated before gulping it down. It was different from fresh meat—plain, in a way. But it was delicious, and I eyed his lunch for more. He just gave a small chuckle that warmed my heart before tossing me another piece.

That day, I made sure we didn't bump into the wolves. We took a long walk around, past some streams and through some woods. All the while I stuck to his side. In the evening, when I knew I had to go back to Mother soon, I laid down on the very edge of the grass field, laying my head next to the boy. His soft brown eyes scanned me, then he reached his arms out. He laid his hand on my head. My muscles jumped, but my body warmed and trusted the gentle hand. Soon, he stroked me on my back, and I knew he was harmless and was my friend.

After that, we met every day in the same field, at the same time. He would call me Night. He would always have the same thing as lunch, and it seemed his father, I'd assumed, always gave it to him. I had never even come close enough to the father to identify his scent, but it seemed that the boy wanted me far away whenever his father came to pick him up—he always shooed me into the forest. It was like how I hid him from the wolf pack.

"Atlas!" his father's voice boomed through the grass field. I learned his name was that. Every night, I thought about him and his hand resting on my back. It reminded me of the story Father had always told me. I wondered what this story meant. I knew the pained expression and unique story had a meaning twisted into it, hidden right underneath my nose, but I didn't know what it was. Every day, I feared the boy's disappearance. I feared he would leave me as Orson had left the wolf in the story. Yet he never did. Every day, he came back and laughed as I devoured my share of his strange, pink meat. Then he would hurry to run after his father's voice calling for him. Every day was the same, joyful, heaven-like day. Until one day. That one day changed everything.

It was a normal evening. Atlas threw his belongings into his bag and got up, brushing off the leaves on his knees. Shaking myself off, I got up with him and we both turned to the right to make our way down the path for our daily stroll. Suddenly, I heard a howl. I froze, ears twitching. Atlas stopped as well, pausing before calling for me. I didn't move. Another howl. This time closer.

Atlas seemed to stop as well, a shiver of fear running down his back. Then I saw her. Her eyes stood out through the green leaves as she stared at the boy—a hungry predator in her eyes. Her body was rigid, the hair on her back bristling.

“When a bond is formed, wolves cannot tear themselves away from the Legulus. So when the Legulus leaves, the wolf follows.”

Atlas followed my gaze and gave a cry as he spotted my mother. She called for me, eyes still trained on Atlas. I bounded over to her, knowing what she would say after bringing me to a “safer place.”

Then, a familiar call rang through the forest. Atlas’s father was calling for him. I heard his footsteps, and soon he appeared behind Atlas. Upon seeing us, the wolves, he clung to Atlas’s arm before shoving him behind his body. Both Atlas and I stood there, frozen. Both our parents stared at each other. Parent to parent. Father to Mother. Legulus to Wolf. They stood there for a while, my mother in the shadows of the forest before she gestured for me to go back. I gave a protesting whine.

Still eyeing Atlas’s father, she gave me a nudge with her snout. When I still didn’t go, she grabbed me by the scruff and tugged. My heart filled with rage, and my paws dug into the soil. I pulled free and growled at my mother.

She seemed shocked at first, then angry as she gave a warning. I stood still, a low rumble escaping my mouth. I stopped, turning to Atlas and making my way toward him. He didn’t seem scared, although I could tell he was wary of my mother. Atlas crouched down, taking me in his arms and ruffled my fur.

My mother seemed shocked and there was emotion on her face. Was it—sadness?

Clutching Atlas’s arms tightly, his father turned and they went home.

My mother bounded towards me and wrinkled her nose at the smell of Atlas on my fur. I followed her obediently, knowing I was in trouble.

She didn’t seem angry. Sad, rather. We walked in silence back up to where the rest of the wolves lay resting for the night. Finally, my mother spoke.

“When a bond is formed, wolves cannot tear themselves away from the Legulus. So when the Legulus leaves, the wolf follows.”

I stared at her, surprised at the sudden break in silence.

“Mum—what do you mean?”

She didn’t say anything. We reached the other wolves as a sick feeling rested in my stomach. My mother told me to go to the leader of the wolves.

He rested in the back of the cave. Little glimpses of sunlight glistened on his gray coat. When he looked up to meet my gaze, his yellow eyes burned through me like he knew every secret and was reading me for any flaws. Yet his eyes didn’t judge. They acknowledged. Finally, he spoke, his voice strong, despite his age.

“Sit. I must tell you something.”

I settled by him, watching as he waited for me to rest. He sat there in silence like he was thinking about what to say.

“There is a reason why wolves are meant to stay away from Legulus.”

My mind raced. So, *it wasn’t because they were “dangerous beings”?* Then why? Why would it be so important to keep wolves away from Legulus?

“It’s because,” he said, reading my thoughts, “the bond between a wolf and a

Legulus is strong. Once it's formed, it is hard to break. That is, at least, for the wolf."

I sat there, confused. He continued, despite my puzzled expression. "Wolves would frequently befriend Legulus. They would form a bond like no other. The wolf would be overjoyed. Then one day, the Legulus would leave. Sometimes it might be because they perished. Or because they moved. The wolf would then tell everyone they were going to find the Legulus, and usually, never return. Others who did would usually spend the rest of their days dejected and sad. That's why cubs are taught that Legulus are dangerous. To stop the misery and missing wolves."

The truth sank in like a rock sinking to the bottom of a lake. "That's . . . it's impossible."

"How?"

"Legulus would never leave them. Atlas would never . . ." *Would he?*

Then a thought struck me. It was like a blow to the head, and it made me dizzy. "Father . . . he . . .?"

"Yes, your father was one of them. He told us he was going to go. He never returned. Despite all the warnings." He gave a soft sigh, turning to me.

I just shrank back, shaking my head. "Why do they do that? Legulus wouldn't build a relationship just to lead wolves away from their homes . . . would they?"

He shook his head. "The truth is much simpler. Wolves decide to leave the wolf life and live a carefree life with Legulus. They live in their house. Never hunt again, never care. But leave their friends and family behind."

He leaned in, his breath stirring my fur.

"Mother wants to keep you safe. To keep you from leaving her behind. The rest is up to you."

The new information and realizations were too much to handle. So many truths and lies were uncovered. But I had the answer to a question I had been asking my whole life. It was my father. His story. The story he'd told me had been about him. And I had convinced him to go. To run away from his family. Run away to his death.

Tears rolled out my eyes the whole night. My head ached from thinking, and I was frustrated, confused, and scared. Mixed feelings were twirling in a violent tornado in my chest. *Had I led my father to his death? Was it his death? Or was he . . . still alive?* I stood up straight. The relationship between Atlas and I could not be saved. The truth was the truth. But I could find my father. Tell him to come back. Convince him that I was just a small, foolish kid. I had been wrong, but I was right now.

The next morning, I woke up exhausted from last night's realizations. But there was one thing that I had thought about. Yesterday, I had finally had a whiff of Atlas's father's scent. It was nearly familiar. I knew there was no mistake. Atlas's father was Orson.

Despite my mother's pleas and warnings, I set off to meet Atlas. It was late, and I had my doubts about him being there. But as I broke into the clearing, I spotted him sitting under a tree. A relieved weight was lifted off my shoulders as

It seemed like a dream, looking into the face of the person I knew so well, and missed so dearly.

I started bounding towards him, carefree. Then Orson walked out from behind a tree. My body went rigid. Atlas called to me in a reassuring tone. Hesitantly, I continued to make my way towards them, giving Orson wary glances. I made my way all the way to Atlas and licked his hands as they wrapped around me. Orson made his way towards Atlas and knelt down to give me a pat.

I let him, taking in his scent. This was the man my father gave up everything to be with. Then, Orson got up and beckoned. I sensed Atlas's worries but was puzzled about what. Atlas trailed his father, calling for me to follow. Trotting beside Atlas, I made my way through the grass, following Orson. As we walked, questions filled my head. There was so much to take in—I felt like anything could be a lie. Finally, Orson stopped. He whistled. It rang through the air, through forest and grass. After some waiting, someone appeared out of the grass. Orson smiled, and called out to him,

“Fumus,” he cried, throwing his arms out wide.

The wolf hesitated. He spotted me. I spotted him. It seemed like a dream, looking into the face of the person I knew so well, and missed so dearly.

“Father!”

We all played together, laughed together, and ate together. Father was like his usual self, cheerful and full of energy. He would sit beside Orson, and Orson would wrap his arm around his neck. Finally, after chasing Father, eating lots, and begging Atlas for more, I flopped down to the floor, exhausted. The sun shone brightly, light shining over the field, now flattened by all of us running around. I knelt beside Father and Atlas, my mouth threatening to pop with all the questions I had.

“Why did you leave the wolves?” I asked hesitantly, breaking the silence between us.

“I was happiest with Orson,” he said. “And I didn’t mean to abandon you. I told you the story just in case I left, hoping one day you would understand and come looking for me.”

I sat there, thinking. “Do you know why they tell us Legulus are dangerous?”

Father nodded. “They still do think so, in a way. Not like in the predator way, though. They think wolves get attached and can’t leave their Legulus.”

We stayed silent, each pondering the many thoughts that ran through our heads. Instead, we turned our attention to Atlas and Orson’s conversation.

“This is why I didn’t want you to make friends with a wolf,” Orson said. “They can’t live in the wild anymore. And school will start soon; you will need to leave.”

“I know. But, I can’t just leave Night behind,” complained Atlas, twirling some of my fur between his fingers. “There has to be a way, Dad. You did it with Fumus.”

“It was a mistake,” Orson said. “Fumus can’t live in the wild anymore. He can’t fend for himself, can’t hunt for food. But he chose me, Atlas. He chose me over living with his pack.”

“I’m sure Night would choose me too,” Atlas said quietly.

I got up and licked his face in what I hoped was a reassuring manner. A grin broke onto his face as he playfully pushed me away and ruffled my fur.

"See?" he said. "He chose me!"

That day, Orson and Atlas walked back. I knew they were going home. To my surprise, Father followed them.

"I can't live with you," he said. "Son, go back to the pack; you don't belong with Legulus."

I stood still, torn between two decisions. Then, I made up my mind.

"No," I said confidently, stepping towards him. "I can't just leave Atlas."

My father's blue gaze was trained on me, but I stared back. Finally, he sighed. "Fine," he said.

My heart gave a leap of joy as I rushed to Atlas's side, jumping on him in excitement.

As we drew closer, the scent became unbearable. Fuel wafted through the air, itching my throat and making my eyes water. Dozens of people were everywhere. It was busy, clustered, and noisy. People shouted and laughed. Some ran; others didn't. People ate, played, and talked. It was a place where anything and everything happened. It was frightening, like realizing how small I was. The village loomed over us, freely letting all noises out. I stuck close to Atlas, but even then, I had trouble not getting lost. I would turn around and find they had disappeared. And lights. Lights were everywhere, blinding, like small pieces of the sun.

Finally, the crowd thinned, and the noise died down as we reached an area with fewer people. I felt exhausted from the day and the busy village. However, my father seemed fine, like it was a normal day. He just went inside the house and hopped on a sofa to settle down next to Orson. The house was small, and filled with the scent of Orson, Atlas, and Father. Yet it seemed quiet and bare compared to the constant noises of the forest, and trees guarding us. I settled under a chair, sneezing from the smell of the rough carpet, missing the moist feel of dirt under my paws.

The next day was unreal. We stayed in the house for the rest of the day. Breakfast was some meat in a bowl. There was no need to go hunting. We didn't even need to take a stroll to get some water from a stream. It just flowed out from the tap, into another bowl. There was no worrying that we wouldn't be able to catch our lunch. It always came in a bowl. Despite Atlas and Father's company, I felt a strong urge to do something. We hadn't been doing anything. Only playing, eating, playing, and eating. I remembered Fang's words. This was the carefree life that wolves got used to. This life prevented them from being wolves that could live in the wild, hunting for food and always alert for any predators lurking in the shadows. Here, there were no shadows for any predators to hide in.

I felt relieved when we went back to the field. I enjoyed the soft breeze and longed for my mother. Getting away from the crowded streets was a relief. It was everything mixed together, and it was too much to be alert. The fields felt like home. Atlas was quiet, ruffling my fur. I had heard him and Orson talking yesterday. It seemed they had made a decision, but I didn't know what it was about. Father sat next to me, grooming his paws.

We spent another day like the first one, exhausting ourselves, playing, resting, and then getting back up to play again. It continued until the evening. Then, we got up to go. Only then did I realize the sad but understanding look on Atlas's face. He gave me a hug but didn't call for me when they left. Father gave me a look.

"Stay. This is where you belong."

Deep inside, I knew this was true. I belonged with the rest of the wolves. But I couldn't bring myself to do that.

"No! I can live like you, Father," I pleaded, running up to him as he turned away.

"This is no blessing, son," he said, turning to me. "I can't catch my own food. I don't have a choice. If I go back to the pack, I won't be able to hunt. I'll be like a cub. But you, you can still hunt. It's not too late for you to turn back, son. This is a curse. I'm stuck with this life forever. You're not."

Atlas bent over, and for a moment, I wished he would call for me and I would run after him. But he didn't. He cuddled me in his arms, and whispered, "You're not a dog, Night. You're a wolf. Wolves aren't meant to eat canned food. They aren't supposed to be locked in a house or wandering through a village. They're supposed to be with the rest of the wolves." He stood up. "Go," he said. "You can come to my house anytime. But you can't live with us, Night. Go back to your wolf pack. Hunt. Hide. Live like a wolf."

My legs felt numb as I walked towards the cave where I knew my pack would be. Soon, I smelled their presence. Wolf fur, and fresh meat, probably leftovers from their dinner. I walked in, eyes searching for my mother. I found her, sitting in a corner. As soon as she saw me, she cried out in relief and brought me in, scolding me for going. I told her everything. From Father being alive to the bustling village. When I had finished, she looked shocked, puzzled, and overwhelmed with emotions. "He is alive?" she breathed. "He has been, for all these years?"

That night, I cuddled with my mother; something I missed doing during my short stay at Orson's house. The breeze ruffled my fur. The moon shone brightly. The stars looked down at us as we drifted into our sleep. I knew this is where I belonged. Below the stars.



Dream of Universe (Watercolor)
Sophia Zhang, 12
Texas

Two Poems



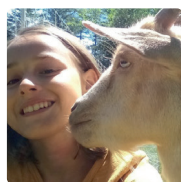
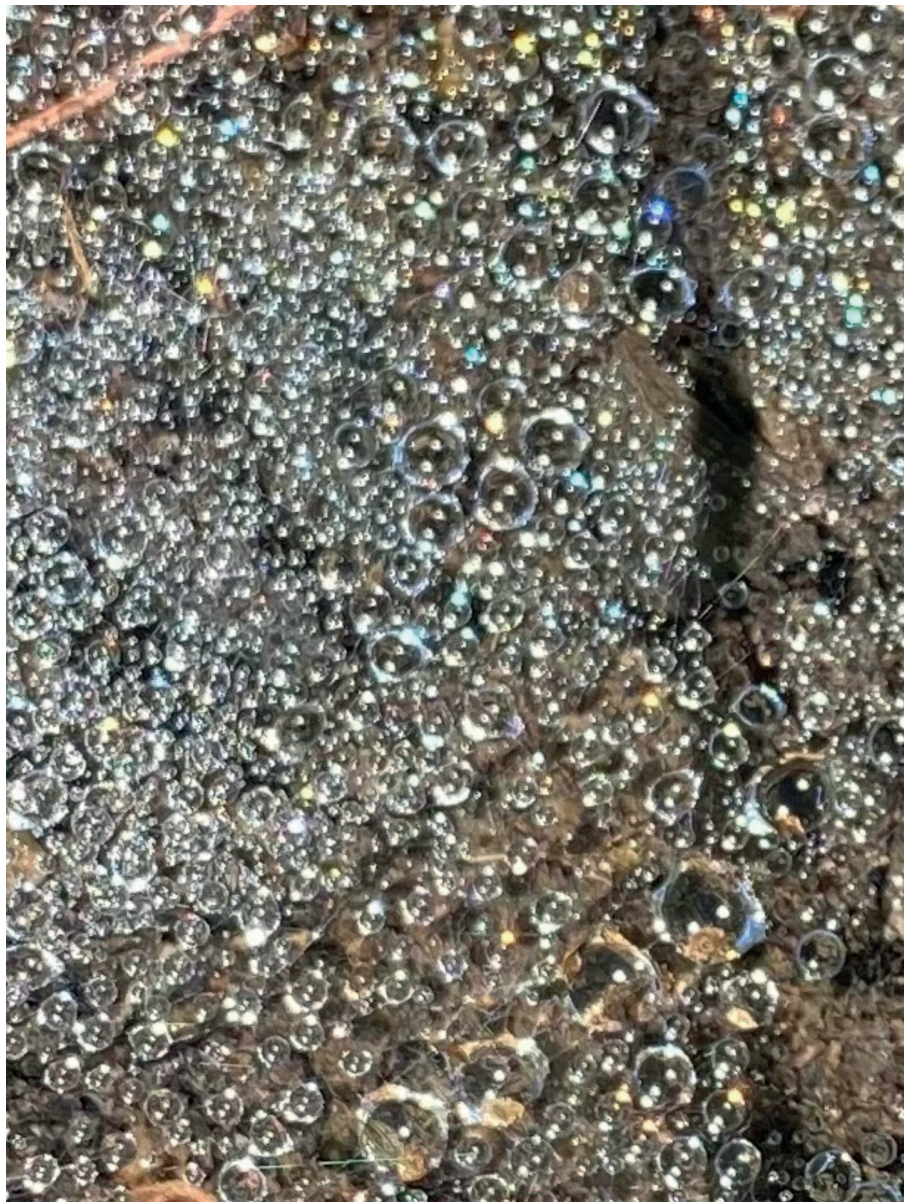
By Saketh Lingisetty, 13
Massachusetts

A Tilting Tribute to Myself

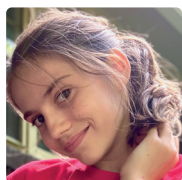
I question myself, as much as I would like to
As much as a tumultuous wave whose reason is still due
My backpack is full, but is it an illusion?
I think it probably is, but it sometimes really is full
I go to a nature park, and why are there loops in the road everywhere?
A day that appears to be monotonous is not the reality
A day that truly is monotonous is definitely rare
I'm a multi-musician, but am I proficient in one way or another?
An answer pans across the dewdrops of the pond
The acoustics around me, the chirps wrapping around my eardrum
The table is not turning, but it's tilting
I know that I am excellent in certain things
Hence, I make a tribute
And there's no specific reason
It's just another idea of questionable originality

Reality Vacuum

A vacuum, residing in the backdrop of life
You never choose the adventure
It opens up to you
The flowers on the field you would think of
May get vacuumed in by a force of nature
Into dense woods
There are dandelions
Deporting parachutes out into the free sky
I pick up a pencil
It brings me my future
It takes me to my nostalgia
You pick up a basketball, a pen, whatever you think it might be
It brings you your future
It reminds us of a chromatic past, the fruit of progress and liberation
A fruit of the strong resonance that we have with the world
A dandelion narrowly escaping the revving of the vacuum
Torn into shreds of life, under the tree with many fruits
We need not say apples, pears, or cherries
These fruits are not describable but are expressible
We indirectly control the vacuum, the source of countless feelings
How so that the dandelion spreads its message with the wind?
It's the backdrop of life, thanks to that universal vacuum.



Dewdrops on Spider Web (iPhone 11)
Zoe Badgett, 12
Maine



Melancholy (iPhone SE)
Amity Doyle, 13
New York



The Queen Portrait (iPhone 8, Picsart)
Tatum Lovely, 12
Pennsylvania

Cousins (Part I)

Nicky's rivalry with her perfect cousin grows as she learns they have even more in common than she thought



By Emily Chang, 14
New York

This is the first installment of Emily Chang's novella, which received honorable mention in our 2022Book Contest. We will be publishing the novella over the course of three issues.

Prologue

(I'm no literary nut, no matter what Aunt Illy thinks. Laila was the one who gave me the idea to write this story, so I'll start it the way she did.)

If you asked me what my biggest problem was during the first eleven years of my life, I would have told you it was Laila Alicie Kenton von Luzenborg. Also known as my cousin. Also known as the most annoying person on the planet.

But the summer before seventh grade changed all that completely. And I owe it all to Ms. Fleming.

Dear Aunt Illy,

Sorry I haven't written back in a while. There are a lot of things I've been putting off, like my summer homework, even though it's already August. Not too smart, I know, but it's a huge reading and math packet that will take forever to get through. And I guess starting it will just remind me that I'm about to start seventh grade, which I am NOT looking forward to.

Thanks for asking about swimming. It's going pretty well for me, since I always love swimming, though it's also part of the craziness. Our last swim meet is in less than a week, and we've been practicing every day. The top three of the whole meet (Clearfield and our competitors) will get to go to the H2O World Heights Championships. It's a really big nationwide program, and I've always wanted to go there.

I'm not completely sure I'll get in, though. Last meet I clocked a great PR for the two-hundred free, which is my favorite race, and Coach Hattie always lets me do it. But the competition is against

Hatcheton Central, and we've never beaten them in total points yet. They're always getting awesome swimmers from all over the state, but Clearfield is just us. So I'm nervous too.

Do you think you'll be able to come to the swim meet? It's next Wednesday. If you can't, that's okay, but I'm always glad to see you. And maybe I'll have a better chance of winning if you come.

Anyway, how have you been? You said that you got a side job at a bakery—how is that going?

—Nicky

Chapter 1: Why I Was Digging through My Neighbor's Trash Cans on Saturday Morning

It was 9:30 in the morning, and I was going down the sidewalk toward Ms. Fleming's house.

My Saturday mornings always went this way—I'd walk a few blocks to where my elderly neighbor lived, help her out with any odd jobs she needed done, and then it would be time for swim practice. Today would be one of our last practices of the season. I was looking forward to training again with my teammates, perfecting our strokes and strategies one last time before the swim meet with Hatcheton Central.

At this moment, though, I had other things to focus on.

I helped Ms. Fleming out every Saturday, and I knew I couldn't bail out on her just because I was anxious to go to swim team today. She needed my full attention.

Ms. Fleming was in her seventies and had lived in the neighborhood for as long as I could remember. I'd been helping her out for the past few years, from the time my mom and I met her when she was giving out gingersnaps at a block party.

Since then, I'd gotten to know her quite well. Odd jobs would turn into odd conversations and stories about Ms. Fleming's life, which were always fascinating. So Saturdays were the highlight of my week for two reasons: because it was one of several swim practice days, and because of Ms. Fleming.

When I reached her small gray house, I saw that the front door was open a crack. After ringing the doorbell twice and receiving no response, I peeked in. "Hello?"

Still nothing. "Ms. Fleming?" I called, stepping into the doorway and feeling the cool blast of the air conditioner. The white-tiled kitchen was empty, and there was no sound but the slow *drip, drip, drip* from the leaking faucet.

From behind me, I suddenly heard a breathless "Oh, Nicole!"

I spun around to see Ms. Fleming standing on the doorstep, looking flustered. She was holding down a bright orange hat on top of her head and leaning on her cane, and her normally cheerful expression had been replaced by a confused frown.

"Have you seen my wig?" she asked me, still breathing hard.

I hadn't. I'd just gotten here, after all. I didn't even know Ms. Fleming wore a wig, and I tried to hide my surprise. "No, but I can try to find it."

"Thank you, Nicole." The distress on her face melted into a smile, dimples showing in her wrinkled features. I opened the front door all the way, and Ms. Fleming and I both stepped inside. I saw a half-eaten bowl of tuna salad on the table.

Situations like this no longer surprised me. Ms. Fleming had always been a little scattered, but lately, she seemed more forgetful than usual. She'd been losing a lot of her things. Like two weeks ago, when we'd found her slippers in the microwave. Or some time before that—her toothbrush in the refrigerator next to a bowl of lemon pudding.

Finding her stuff sure put the "odd" in "odd jobs." Not that I minded, though—helping Ms. Fleming was more than just a task that my mom had volunteered me for. Ms. Fleming could be good company, even if she sometimes did forget things.

So the wig was gray. I knew that much. And remembering how Ms. Fleming looked ordinarily, I knew it was about shoulder length or shorter.

"I can check the laundry room," I told her, and she nodded, heading into her bedroom.

Recalling the time we found Ms. Fleming's reading glasses about to be tumbled with a load of dirty laundry, I checked the washing machine first. No luck there. I looked around the rest of the room, but found no wig.

Suddenly, just as I was about to open the door of the hall closet, a shrill ringing made me jump.

I rushed into the bathroom, where the sound seemed to be coming from. Ms. Fleming was already there, leaning over the bathtub.

When I came closer, I saw the little black alarm clock on the tub floor. I picked it up and shut it off quickly.

"I'm not sure how it got there," Ms. Fleming said, looking down at the alarm clock. It didn't seem to be broken, just a little wet.

"Huh. That's okay," I said, holding up the clock by its handle to examine it. "Where would you like me to put it?"

"In my bedroom is fine," Ms. Fleming said. "Or, actually, I'll put it away myself. I haven't finished looking through my clothes drawers. That wig must be around here somewhere . . ."

After finding nothing in the hall closet, I searched through the kitchen, dragging over a chair to get to the cabinets I was too short to reach. Still no wig.

Going back into the hallway again, a little frustrated and sweaty by now, I nearly bumped into Ms. Fleming. She was standing still in the middle of the floor and staring up at the ceiling.

"What is it?" I looked up too, and that was when I saw a white cord dangling just above my head. I'd never noticed it before.

"The attic," Ms. Fleming answered softly. She took hold of the cord. I moved aside just in time as she pulled out a creaking set of stairs that came down in a mass of dust and splintery wood.

I coughed as the dust settled, then looked back up the stairs that disappeared

near the top in darkness. "I don't think it's up there," I told Ms. Fleming, but she kept staring into the attic, a peculiar look on her face.

"You haven't been there recently, right?" I asked.

"No," she said, "I can't." She thumped her cane on the floor. "I haven't been up there in years."

She paused, her lips parted halfway as if she wanted to ask something more.

I figured it out. "Do you want me to take a look?"

"Not today." Ms. Fleming finally tore her gaze from the shadows of the attic.

"Sorry I got sidetracked, Nicole. Right now I need my hair more than I need old memories."

Ms. Fleming did have the habit of losing track of her thoughts, but I wondered if there was something deeper about her gaze at the attic than her usual forgetfulness. There was something in her eye that I hadn't seen before, and I was tempted to ask her further.

But she'd asked for her wig first, so I got back to work looking for it.

I must have gotten really desperate to search the trash cans behind the house, but it was lucky I did. Nestled between two bulgy garbage bags was the wig.

"I found it!" I called to Ms. Fleming through her back window. She said something I couldn't hear, but I could tell from her smile that she was just as relieved as I was.

I held my breath and reached in, trying not to think about the fact that I had plunged the entire top half of my body into a garbage can. I was glad that Ms. Fleming tied her trash bags tight, which blocked out the smell—sort of.

The grayish hair brushed my fingertips, but then slipped in deeper. I stretched farther, farther—

"Ew, Nicky," an all-too-familiar voice suddenly squeaked from behind me.

"Couldn't find the pool so you went swimming in the trash, huh?"

Don't listen. Just ignore. Just get the wig and go in.

"I mean, you clearly needed extra practice," the obnoxious voice went on, "but I didn't think you'd go so far as to use other people's trash cans—wait a second. Isn't this . . ."

I could feel the sweat trickling down my back and sticking to my T-shirt. I pulled myself up with the wig in hand and brushed my short brown hair out of my face. *Oh, sweet oxygen. Blessed fresh air.*

But I could only enjoy it for a second.

"What do you want, Laila?" I sighed, turning around. I held the wig behind my back. "Are you waiting for a turn? Your diving does need work."

At first, Laila Alicie didn't answer. She was squinting at me—no, *past* me—with an uncharacteristic puzzlement on her face. But she snapped back quickly, and I was almost sure I had imagined her moment of quiet.

"Ew, no. I was just going to your house to give you this invitation. For my birthday party. My mom forced me to, you know." Laila, the party princess, tossed her blonde curls and held out a pink envelope with frilly edges.

Why did people assume that since Laila Alicie and I were both girls, the same age, and on top of that, *cousins*—that we should be best friends forever?

Yes, I sure knew. Laila Alicie Kenton von Luzenborg was the most popular kid in school ever since third grade. The best piano player in the county, who wasn't afraid of bragging about it. My biggest rival ever since I joined the swim team.

And she was, quite unfortunately, my cousin.

"So? D'ya want it?" She wiggled the envelope at me impatiently, which made the sparkly bracelets on her wrist clink together. "I don't actually care if you come or not."

I had no doubt about that, because I didn't care much either. Still, I snatched the invitation from her fingers, then turned to go back into the house.

But alas, I'd forgotten to hide the wig from Laila's sight. The smirk spreading across her face told me I was too late.

"Oh my goodness, is that a wig? Are you going bald, Nicky?"

Just ignore. Just go in.

I stepped into the house through the back door, slamming it shut behind me. The noise startled Ms. Fleming, who was standing by the back window. "Sorry," I apologized. "But I found your wig."

"Who were you talking to outside?" Ms. Fleming asked, turning to me.

I suppressed a sigh and found myself tucking the pink envelope behind my back as I thought about what to say. Though I'd been helping Ms. Fleming for a few years and knew her even before then, she probably didn't know I had a cousin, since I'd never bothered to tell her. And I didn't want to explain now.

Why did people assume that since Laila Alicie and I were both girls, the same age, and on top of that, *cousins*—that we should be best friends forever? Though I'd known Ms. Fleming long enough to be able to tell that she wasn't the average meddling adult, I still wasn't sure if she'd think the same way. And I really couldn't handle that today—what with the wig hunt, the nuisance known as Laila's birthday invitation, and the stress of the season's last swim meet coming up.

So I settled for, "Um, just someone from school." Which was true, though less true than I would have liked.

But Ms. Fleming was gazing at me with that odd look on her face again—like her expression when she'd been staring into the attic. Did she suspect me of lying? I couldn't tell. Either way, it scared me just a little.

So I held out the wig to her. "Do we have to wash it or anything?"

Ms. Fleming blinked hard. "Oh, yes. Where did you say you found it?"

"Uh . . . in the garbage can." Though I was seriously wondering, I wasn't about to ask her how it got there. It might hurt her feelings if she weren't able to tell me.

She smiled. "Then it only needs a quick wash. I'll show you how."

Ms. Fleming hobbled across the kitchen to the sink, wig in hand. I followed, placing the birthday invitation on the kitchen table. She reached for a bottle on the counter that had a picture of a green spiky plant labeled ALOE LOTION.

Ordinarily, I was no expert in hair products. But something didn't seem quite right, especially when I caught sight of another bottle on a high shelf above the sink, this one with WIG SHAMPOO written on it in block letters.

"Wait, Ms. Fleming!" I scrambled onto the kitchen counter, reaching for the bottle. "I think you need this one." I swiped at the bottle, missing it by inches. Stupid puny height of four foot seven.

I made a grab for the bottle again, but my knee skidded on the wet surface of the countertop. Before I could realize what was happening, I felt myself slipping off the counter.

A twisting pain shot through my ankle, and then I found myself crumpled on the floor.

Ouch.

I clutched my foot, gasping with pain. My ankle felt like it was on fire. The room was a blur.

"Oh, Nicole!" I heard a distant voice from somewhere above me, but my brain could only concentrate on the pain, the horrible throbbing in my foot . . .

Slowly, I came back to my senses. I saw Ms. Fleming prop up her cane against the kitchen table and stretch out her hand toward me, but I knew she wouldn't be able to support my weight completely—she wasn't in perfect condition either.

I tried to sit up, but my left foot was weirdly twisted and swollen and I was afraid to move it. "Can you—call my mom?" I asked her through clenched teeth.

"Of course." Ms. Fleming shuffled over to the phone as fast as she could manage.

I heard snippets of exchanged words as Ms. Fleming explained my predicament. "Yes . . . she's hurt . . . fell off the counter . . . I'm sorry . . ."

Ms. Fleming put down the phone. "She's coming over to pick you up. I'm so sorry, Nicole."

"It's okay." I struggled to balance on my right foot, half limping and half hopping as Ms. Fleming guided me over to a chair. It had all happened so suddenly. "I think . . . I think I sprained my ankle."

"Does it hurt very much? I'm so sorry," she said anxiously, trying to push another chair over so I could prop up my foot.

I shrugged. It did hurt, a lot, but that wasn't what brought the stinging tears to my eyes. No, it was the realization.

With a sprained ankle, how could I possibly compete in the upcoming swim meet?

Chapter 2: Why My Cousin Knew Where to Find Wig Shampoo

Minutes passed as I stayed there, stretched out on Ms. Fleming's kitchen chairs. They felt like hours.

Ms. Fleming, twisting her hands in distress, apologized over and over. I tried to tell her that it wasn't her fault, but she didn't seem to get it. And I couldn't ignore the physical pain or the words that kept pounding through my head: *Swim meet. Swim meet.*

The doorbell rang. Ms. Fleming got up quickly with her cane and went to answer it. My back was to the door, so my surprise at the voice who greeted her was all the greater.

"Hello, Ms. Fleming. Is that you, Nicky?"

At the sound of that voice, I twisted around in the chair. "Aunt Kay?"

Sure enough, there was my aunt, standing next to my mother, her twin sister. At first glance, you wouldn't be able to tell them apart—they both had the same almond-shaped eyes and curly brown hair. But Aunt Kay stood a fraction of an inch taller, and had fewer of the worry lines that had been permanently etched into my mother's face.

And then I saw the figure behind them peering around into the doorway—

"What are you doing here?" Laila Alicie and I blurted out at the exact same time.

Ms. Fleming was holding open the door. She stared blankly at Laila and then turned her gaze to me. "Oh," she finally said. "I made a mistake."

"Don't worry about it," my mom said. "Thank you for calling Kay." She stepped into the kitchen when Ms. Fleming beckoned her in. My aunt followed, and Laila edged around to the opposite side of the kitchen, near the sink. She wouldn't look at me. Was anyone going to explain what was happening right now? Hadn't Ms. Fleming only called my mother? Why the whole parade?

"How's your ankle?" my mom asked, bending down beside me.

I shrugged, struggling to blink back tears. I wasn't going to cry in front of everybody. "It hurts."

"Let's get you into the car. And thank you, Ms. Fleming." My mom took my arm, and I leaned on her as I rose to one foot.

"I'm terribly sorry," Ms. Fleming sighed again.

"Oh, don't worry about it. Nicky's always doing reckless things." My mom flashed a half smile at me. I tried to smile back as I limped across the kitchen with her. Aunt Kay asked Ms. Fleming something about her telephone—she was partly in charge of the landline company here, so I figured that was why—but I tried to focus on keeping my balance on the tiled floor. Until a sudden movement in the corner of my eye caught my attention.

"Laila, what are you doing?" Aunt Kay voiced my own thoughts.

"Just getting the shampoo." Laila stood on tiptoe near the kitchen sink, but to my surprise, she didn't reach for the bottle on the shelf that I'd tried to get. Instead, she opened a cabinet beside that shelf and took out a different square container.

"What do you mean shampoo?" Aunt Kay asked at the same time I snapped, "That isn't it."

But when Laila ignored both of us and handed the container filled halfway

Laila Alicie didn't come over here every Saturday to help clean the house like I did. Or did she?

with white goopy stuff to Ms. Fleming, I saw the letters on the side in loopy handwriting. WIG SHAMPOO, USE FIRST.

"Ah, thank you, Laila. Now I remember," Ms. Fleming smiled and set the clear plastic container down beside the sink. "No wonder I always get the two of you confused."

She got the two of us confused? And why did Laila go through Ms. Fleming's stuff like this was her own house? How did she know where there was a different stash of shampoo? I hadn't known that.

Laila's smile looked strained as she glanced at me quickly. I could tell she was just as surprised as I was. "It's . . . no problem. I'll see you next week," she said to Ms. Fleming.

"Come on, Nicky." My mom gently nudged my arm. "We have to go to swim practice."

At those words, my heart sank. "What do you mean? I can't swim!"

"But Laila has to go, remember?" My mom led me out the door. "We'll drop her off there. Then we'll head over to the urgent care and see what they can do about your ankle. I'll let Coach Hattie know you can't make it today."

I nodded slowly. My thoughts were spinning with the mention of swim team again, along with the new mystery of how Laila could possibly know Ms. Fleming so well. We were all neighbors, sure, who lived within a few blocks of each other. But for my cousin to know where Ms. Fleming's wig shampoo was kept . . . *Laila Alicie* didn't come over here every Saturday to help clean the house like I did.

Or did she?

"Bye, Ms. Fleming," Laila called over her shoulder as she followed me.

Then I felt her toe nudge the back of my right heel, which jolted me out of my thoughts. I nearly lost my balance. "Watch it, will you?"

"Sorry," Laila muttered, falling back a step.

I found myself sincerely doubting that someone like this could have the capacity to regularly help clean a house.

"Goodbye, Laila. I do hope you'll heal, Nicole. Goodbye, May and Kay. Thank you all for coming over!" Ms. Fleming stood in the doorway, waving. We made our way to what Laila called the "sapphire blue" Tesla that belonged to Aunt Kay and Uncle Pierre.

My mom helped me into the backseat. I winced, trying to get my foot settled on the uneven car floor. Laila got in from the other side and closed the door right before she buckled her seatbelt. As Aunt Kay backed the car out of the driveway, I could still see Ms. Fleming leaning against the doorframe and waving goodbye to us.

"So . . ." I dragged out the word, trying to figure out where to start. "Did Ms. Fleming call you, Aunt Kay?"

"She did," Aunt Kay said as we drove out of the neighborhood. "She thought I was May, I guess. Not much of a surprise there."

That sounded about right. People were always getting my mom and Aunt Kay

confused—they were twin sisters, though my mom often said that Aunt Kay was more than just a twin—she was a best friend.

When my dad had died in a car accident before I was born, Aunt Kay was the one who stepped in and made sure my mom was financially and emotionally stable. So I agreed that Aunt Kay was one of the friendliest people we knew, always willing to lend a helping hand.

And sometimes I wondered how a person like Laila could be related to her.

“Your aunt and Laila were just heading over to swim practice, so she picked me up when she heard what happened to you,” my mom added. “How did you hurt your ankle, anyway?”

“Oh.” Remembering what had happened, I slumped in my seat and stared out the window. We were turning onto the highway’s entrance ramp. “I was trying to get something for Ms. Fleming and I fell off the counter.”

I heard a muffled snort from beside me and turned to see Laila covering her mouth with both hands. “What?”

Laila took her hands off her face, and giggles burst out of her. “You fell off the counter—trying to get wig shampoo.”

I glared at her. “Uh, yeah. Why is that so funny?”

“Oh, I don’t know. It just is.” Laila kept giggling.

“Can you stop?” I snapped. “It isn’t funny at all having a sprained ankle.”

She stopped laughing but didn’t stop talking. “Well, it isn’t the huge deal you’re making it out to be, either. I’ve sprained my ankle, what, like three times? It’s not the end of the world, Nicky.”

“You didn’t sprain your ankle what-like-three-times right before the last swim meet of the season,” I shot back. “If you couldn’t have a chance at the World Heights H₂O, you wouldn’t be saying that right now.”

“Maybe,” Laila sniffed, “but—”

“And you’re just happy that you’ll have less competition,” I went on, “because you know I’d beat you if I had the chance.”

Laila rolled her eyes. “No you *wouldn’t*. Everyone knows I carried the team for the relay last meet.”

“Uh, it wasn’t you, it was Heidi. And all of us. You’re not the only one—”

“Well, who cares? I’m just saying. Stop acting like it’s my fault you sprained your stupid ankle. It’s *not* my fault you’re so clumsy.”

“Girls!” my mom scolded from the front seat. “Some civility, please?”

“Oh, and Laila,” Aunt Kay said. “Did you give Nicky a birthday invitation?”

“Yes, I did. You said I had to, remember?” Laila said, eyeing me.

“Next Tuesday, isn’t it?” my mom said. “We’ll definitely be there. Nicky, can I see the invitation?”

Realizing that I had left the frilly pink envelope on Ms. Fleming’s kitchen table, I mumbled, “I think I left it at Ms. Fleming’s house.”

“Right before you fell off a counter trying to get wig shampoo,” Laila said under her breath.

“Oh yeah, and that,” I said, turning back to her. “How did you know—”

"Where she kept the shampoo?" Laila smiled smugly at me. "I bought the new bottle for her before we realized she already had some. And the old shampoo bottle melted when she put her curling iron on it by accident. But then we realized she doesn't need a curling iron if—" Laila stopped and squinted at me. "Why do you even care?"

"Why do I care? I go to her house every week, for your information," I snapped.

"Oh. I buy her groceries. I just didn't know—I mean, I didn't think you..." Laila trailed off.

I couldn't help rolling my eyes. If only she knew I was thinking the exact same thing. Laila Alicie, showoff and gold trophy flaunter, buying groceries for our elderly neighbor? I just couldn't picture that.

"Wait a second. Nicky, you work for Ms. Fleming too?" Aunt Kay asked, glancing at me in the rearview mirror.

"Yeah, I do. I help clean her house and stuff right before swim team."

I could see her eyebrows shoot up. "Wow. That's..."

"A real coincidence?" my mom finished. "I was thinking the same thing."

"Anyway, Ms. Fleming has been around here since . . . we moved into this neighborhood, right?" Aunt Kay said.

"I think so," my mom answered. "And that was more than twenty years ago."

"She must be over seventy by now," Aunt Kay sighed. "And I don't think she has family living around here anymore. It's great that you both can help her out."

"Yeah." I normally didn't think much about how old Ms. Fleming was, but that made sense. So did the fact that she needed someone to buy her groceries. But she must have been really desperate if Laila got the job.

An interlude of silence passed before another thought suddenly occurred to me. "So if you knew Ms. Fleming had a wig," I said to Laila, "why were you making fun of it when you came by?"

For a moment, Laila looked confused, as if she didn't know which episode I was referencing. Then her face turned bright red. "Why do you have to interrogate me? I just forgot—I didn't mean—well, fine. I shouldn't have. You're right and I'm wrong. Happy?" she snapped, crossing her arms over her chest and burrowing deeper into the seat. "And besides, it's not like you never make fun of me."

She said this last part much more quietly. I was about to respond, but she shot me a death glare and then turned to look out the car window.

"Calm down, girls," my mom sighed. "You don't need to argue about *everything*. You two seem to end up together so much, I just don't see why you both..."

She didn't continue out loud, but I knew how she was finishing that sentence in her head: *Why we both couldn't stand each other. Why we both were so different. Why we never seemed to have the best-friends dynamic that came so easily to our mothers.*

And honestly, I didn't know the answer. It wasn't like I enjoyed arguing with Laila. No way. Adults always seem to think that arguing is something we kids can control. But you can't control another person, especially another person you just don't understand.

And right now, I especially couldn't understand why such tense silence was radiating from Laila. She had been staring out the window as we drove off the highway and neared the rec center. She barely seemed to notice when Aunt Kay pulled up at the front entrance. And when she finally moved, it was only to get her swim bag and open the car door.

Laila didn't look at me once or say a word before she shut the door and disappeared into the building.

Chapter 3:

Why I Became a Parrot on the Drive Home

"Better than the average sprained ankle, actually. But still be sure to rest and take it easy, okay?" The doctor slipped crutches under my arms and helped me balance as I tried to scoot off the table.

"Okay. Thanks," I said, swallowing the lump in my throat that had formed. I grasped the crutches and held steady, taking a deep breath.

I'd gotten minor injuries before, of course. Cramps, scrapes, nothing huge. The time I fell off a jungle gym and broke my arm at six years old, though, was not so minor. But I had gotten over that quickly enough too. So if I'd sprained my ankle at any other time, I would have shrugged it off with everything else. A week or so to recover? No big deal. I was tough.

But right now was different. Right now, I was wobbling on crutches in a doctor's office that smelled like disinfectant when I should have been in the pool, practicing for the last swim meet of the season.

After we dropped Laila off, my mom and Aunt Kay had switched cars at our house so my mom could drive us here and back. But when I imagined Laila there at the pool, where I should have been, I couldn't help but feel a bitter stab of jealousy.

My mom could probably tell what I was thinking. She caught my eye and nodded encouragingly to me, her sad smile saying, *I know it's a disappointment. But there'll be other chances.*

I wanted to believe her. I knew she was probably right.

But that didn't help the ache inside.

"Here, try going across the room." The doctor's friendly voice brought me back to the present.

I steadied myself on my right foot and swung the crutches forward. Swing, step, swing, step, repeat. "You've got the hang of it!"

That was true. Crutches weren't too hard to manage, I found. I made it across the room and back twice.

"Thanks so much," my mom said to the doctor. She handed over the forms she had been filling in for me.

"It's no problem," the doctor replied, opening the door for us. "And, Nicole? Don't worry. You'll be on your feet soon enough."

The car ride home with my mom was mostly quiet. I stared out the window from the backseat, watching the houses and trees whizzing past.

I didn't think I'd ever missed a swim meet before. We would probably go to the meet anyway, so I could cheer on my team. Of course it wouldn't be the same as actually swimming with them, but it would have to do. I glared at my wrapped foot and the crutches that lay across the seat next to me.

For some reason, that made my thoughts drift back to Ms. Fleming. I'd left her house much earlier than usual—without really saying goodbye, I realized guiltily. I hoped she'd be okay—we'd planned for me to do a few more things around the house that I hadn't gotten to. I hoped she'd wash her wig fine without me. I hoped she wouldn't try to climb into the attic by herself to find the "old memories" she'd been talking about. What *did* Ms. Fleming keep in her attic? I couldn't help wondering that.

"The next few weeks are going to be busy," my mom said suddenly, bringing me out of my thoughts. "So we've got the swim meet, Laila's party, and after that we're planning a trip to the Hyacinth Cove lake beach."

"We're planning a trip?" I asked. "Who's 'we'?"

"Well, mostly your aunt and uncle," she admitted. "We wanted to do something fun together before the summer's over. It'll be a big family outing."

I knew that a "big family outing" meant my Aunt Kay and Uncle Pierre, Laila and her brothers, possibly Aunt Phoebe who was Uncle Pierre's sister, Uncle Benjamin and Aunt Carissa, Uncle Ryder who was Aunt Carissa's brother, the little cousins on their side, and—

"Is Aunt Illy coming?" I asked, turning to my mom. "We haven't seen her in so long."

"Actually, she might," my mom replied, smiling. "I can ask her. And that would be really nice, since . . . you're right. We haven't seen her for a while."

Aunt Ilyana was the youngest of my mother's siblings. She was a freelance writer who labored over her poetry and short stories all day, yet somehow she always found time to send mail to me. Ever since I was little, we had been exchanging letters, which were the only things I didn't mind writing.

I loved hearing about Aunt Illy's latest stories or travels. And she was always interested when I told her about school or swimming or whatever else was going on in my life. A family outing wouldn't really be one without her.

"And the week after that," my mom continued, the smile on her face growing, "you start school. Seventh grade! Won't that be exciting?" She sounded way cheerier than I felt.

"Seventh grade? Uh . . ." I looked down at my lap. Sixth grade had been tough enough.

"Anyway, speaking of school," my mom said slowly, switching to a different tone that I knew all too well. "How's that summer assignment going? Have you finished it?"

"Summer assignment?" I groaned. "No . . ."

She sighed. "School starts in a few weeks. You've got to finish it. If you need help, just tell me, but get it done, okay?"

"Okay," I mumbled.

"Since you'll have to take it easy on your ankle, just try and finish it this week. And I was thinking of one more thing . . . that's right, we have to buy your new school supplies soon!"

"School supplies?"

"And we'll do that when we go shopping for Laila's birthday present."

"Shopping?!" Now that was almost worse than math.

"Yes, shopping." She glanced at me. "Nicky, have you forgotten how to talk in your own words? You keep repeating what I say."

"Repeating what I say?" I replied, grinning.

She shook her head and grinned back at me too as our house came into view. The car slowed into the driveway.

"But I can't really go shopping," I mused, "with my ankle and all . . ."

"Ha, nice try," she laughed. "But I'm not buying all your stuff for you. Besides, you have to tell me what Laila likes."

"I have no clue what Laila likes," I grumbled.

"Just try and think about it."

"Something pink, probably . . ."

"That's a start." The car stopped in front of our house and my mom turned off the engine. "Now, I'm going to make lunch and get some things done. You get cracking on that assignment, okay?"

"I will," I sighed. I couldn't swim, so I'd have nothing better to do anyway.

I nudged the car door open with my good foot, then planted my crutches on the ground. The hot sun beat down on me as I swung-stepped myself toward the house, toward summer homework and an unavoidably boring afternoon.

Dear Nicky,

It's completely fine if you couldn't respond, I understand that. And it does sound like you've been very dedicated to your swim team. Unfortunately, I'll be working all day next Wednesday (sorry about that!), though I'm sure you will do great at the swim meet.

And I'm doing well, thanks for asking! Also busy as you predicted—I've just started a remote writing conference that runs for two weeks, and I'm co-hosting one of the workshops, which is why my Wednesday is stuffed.

The bakery I mentioned is actually a mochi donut shop. Have you tried those before? My personal favorite flavor is black sugar. I don't make the donuts, though. I'm just the cashier at the shop who gets freebies sometimes.

Oh, summer homework. I certainly remember dreading things like that when I was in school. I was especially annoyed by the math section, which always tended to be too long. SUMMER is SUMMER, I would think, so why did they want to give us even more work?! (Is that how you feel?)

As for seventh grade, I'll be honest and tell you that my seventh grade was nearly the same as sixth grade. Maybe that won't be how yours is, but don't stress over it too much just because it's a grade level up. I know it seems like a big step, and in some ways it is, but it's really just school.

Anyway, I'll be wishing you the best of luck with that, your homework, and especially at your swim meet. Go, Clearfield!

Love,
Ilyana

Chapter 4: Why My Eyes Were Almost Blazed to Death by the Color Pink

Walking down a flat hallway on crutches is relatively easy.

Limping down a set of stairs on crutches is not easy.

I figured this out the next morning.

Only when I was halfway down the stairs did I realize that I could have sat on the steps and scooted down without having to use the crutches at all. I did that, dragging the crutches behind me. They bumped against each step, and when I finally reached the bottom, I let them go. One clattered to the tile floor beside me. The other one slid down the last stair and hit me in the back.

Needless to say, my day wasn't going so well.

Neither had yesterday afternoon. I'd tried to focus on the stupid math packet, but my mind kept wandering. It had seemed like every other minute, I found myself staring out the window, or doodling in the margins next to a problem I was supposed to be working on, or fighting the huge frustration of not being able to go to the swim meet on Wednesday. And then the ice pack that my mom had given me kept falling off my wrapped foot, which had been propped up on a chair. Not the best way to work on math problems.

So when my mom asked me how I was doing that morning, I didn't really know how to put it all into words. "Fractions and decimals are trying to kill me," I ended up saying as I limped to the kitchen table. "They're squishing up my brain."

"Squish them back," my mom said absently. She had her work clothes on and was sitting with her laptop on the table and typing. She glanced at the screen, then scribbled something down on a piece of paper.

"Houses?" I asked, propping up my crutches against the table and peering over her shoulder. My mom was a real estate agent.

"Yep, houses," she replied. She shut the laptop and then turned to me. "Nicky, I've got an appointment in half an hour. You can take care of yourself?"

"Sure." I would have been stranded in the house anyway.

"There are ice packs in the freezer if you need them," she continued, packing

Sometimes you don't realize how much small things matter until you've lost them.

her laptop into a case. "Try not to move around too much, and keep your foot elevated. I'd recommend you sit at the kitchen table when you do your assignment so you can get new ice packs if you need them."

She retrieved her keys from a hook near the door, her purse from another hook, and tossed them into the larger bag with the laptop inside it. "I'll be back around ten. Oh, and then we can go find a birthday present for Laila. Better early than later, right?"

"I guess so," I sighed, sitting down at the table. There was a slice of toast and some scrambled eggs on a plate for me, but even blueberry jelly on the bread couldn't cancel out my dread of shopping. And for Laila Alicie too. "Well, have fun showing off houses."

"Have fun squishing numbers," she returned. "See you." She slung her bag over her shoulder and then was gone, leaving me to my breakfast.

As I nibbled on my toast, I tried to think about what Laila Alicie would possibly want for her birthday. If I were Laila (though that wasn't the nicest scenario to imagine), what would I want?

Well, she was obsessed with those glittery bracelets she was always wearing, but it wasn't like she needed more of them. Same went for clothes. And hair accessories. And pretty much everything else I could think of.

I tried another tactic. What were some birthday presents that I'd gotten and enjoyed? The time Aunt Illy had sent me Rollerblades had been an awesome surprise, and it had been funny realizing that her random question about my foot size hadn't been random at all. But that wouldn't work for Laila, who already had two pink, glittery pairs of Rollerblades. Yet another dead end.

I finished my food, dusting the crumbs off my fingers before standing up. I had to get my math packet from upstairs if I was supposed to work at the kitchen table like my mom had said.

And then I found out that while limping down a set of stairs on crutches was not easy, climbing up the stairs with crutches was even harder.

The agonizing trip upstairs just to get my math packet and back down seemed to take hours and most of my energy. I stopped by the window next to the kitchen table to catch my breath.

I guess I never would have thought about how much I needed one foot until now. Sometimes you don't realize how much small things matter until you've lost them.

My mom was back home at ten on the dot, just as she had promised. And then we drove to the nearby shopping center to buy school supplies and possibly a birthday present for Laila. Just as she had promised.

Usually I tried to get school shopping done as fast as possible. I never

understood those kids who gushed over the smells of new notebooks and pens and erasers and whatnot. What do new notebooks smell like? Paper. Big deal.

We entered the office supplies store, my mom pushing a red shopping cart and I hobbling on crutches. “So have you figured out what we should get for Laila?”

I shrugged. “I couldn’t come up with anything. But I tried to.”

“Well,” my mom said thoughtfully, “Aunt Kay tells me that Laila’s just gotten into journaling, which I think is very good. Maybe you could buy her something like—”

“One of these?” I picked a plain black notebook off a shelf.

“What is that, fifty cents?” My mom shook her head. “But, yes, I was thinking something along the lines of a nice notebook or pen set.”

There was a pink version of the same notebook, though I didn’t mention it since my mom had already expressed her disapproval of fifty-cent gifts. I tossed the black notebook and a few others into the shopping cart anyway. The school supply list asked for five notebooks of different colors, but five black notebooks were faster.

We continued through the store, slowly checking off items on the school’s list. I kept my eyes peeled for anything that was pink, but there was nothing special. Would we have to go to another store? I sure hoped not. I was beginning to despair of finding a present here that both my mom and Laila would approve of, when we rounded a corner and I suddenly saw something.

There was one almost-empty display stand with a hardbound journal sitting on the rack. I picked it up.

The journal was a screaming hot pink with glitter and supposedly “aesthetic” decorations sprinkled over the front cover. There was so much pink in one place that it almost hurt my eyes to look at it, so I knew Laila would like it. Better yet, it came with pastel highlighters in a little pouch, and a set of stickers.

I glanced at the price tag. Way more than fifty cents.

“Now that’s a good selection.” My mom was looking over my shoulder. “And it’s the last one too. Nice find, Nicky.”

I put the journal package into the cart. That was over.

Or so I thought.

“We can go to the boutique next door and find a birthday card for Laila,” my mom said. “I was thinking of going there anyway, if we couldn’t—”

“Uh, there are birthday cards here,” I said hastily, and looked around for birthday cards so I could actually back up this claim. Lucky for me, there was a rotating display stand nearby with a meager assortment of greeting cards. I picked one with a picture of a cupcake with sprinkles on it that read, “There’s only a 0.27% chance that any given day is your birthday. You’re in luck!” I had no idea if that statistic was true, but who cared if Laila hated math as much as I did. The card joined the rest of the stuff in our shopping cart.

When we got home, my mom had me wrap Laila’s birthday gift. I taped pink tissue paper over the journal and tied it with string. Then I signed my name inside

the birthday card and had my mom write something in it too before I taped it onto the wrapped journal.

Now that was over. Finally.

Chapter 5: Why I Decided to Add to the Cupcake Birthday Card

The next few days passed in a monotone of never-ending summer homework, forced confinement at home while my mom went to her appointments, and just overall humid August gloom.

And then Wednesday dawned gray and foggy, mirroring my own thoughts when I woke up that morning with my alarm clock. Because the first thing I saw was my swim bag on its hook on the wall, and the first thing I remembered was why I wouldn't be swimming with my team that day.

I stayed in bed for longer than usual. When I finally managed to will myself up, I had to wrap my sprained ankle with the bandage. My ankle was getting better — it didn't hurt so much when I put a bit of weight on it—but the doctor had said to wrap it whenever I could.

I wound the elastic around my foot slowly, thinking of everything that I'd have to miss. The team relay we'd been practicing. My individual medley. The two-hundred free, my personal favorite race, which *Laila Alicie* was going to swim instead of me.

I had been sure that today would be our best meet yet. And I had been hoping so badly to go to the H₂O Championships. This year, I'd thought, I had actually stood a chance.

But not anymore.

The meet would be at seven o'clock. I got dressed, grabbed my crutches, and started downstairs.

When my mom and I got to the rec center's parking lot, Aunt Kay, Uncle Pierre, and Laila's two older brothers Adrian and Julien were standing outside the building. Laila herself had probably gone inside already.

Adrian was the first to see us approaching. "Hey, Nicky!" he called, waving. "Too bad about your foot. You would've been great."

"Maybe." I shrugged, but I was secretly pleased. Compliments from Adrian were rarer than raw steak. Teasing from him, on the other hand...

"I mean, you would've been great at tripping and falling flat on your face. Like you did at your first meet, remember? Blam! Right into the water." He cackled loudly. Almost every time Adrian came to one of our swim meets, he mentioned how I slipped and fell in the pool my first time. I should have known.

"Aw, leave her alone," Julien said to his brother, while I tried to hit Adrian with

a crutch. Julien was seventeen, two years older than Adrian, and a little more moderate with the teasing. But I didn't really care. Both of them were more tolerable than Laila.

"Let's just go in. It's boiling out here," Adrian said, waving a hand in the humid air and dodging me.

The adults exchanged greetings as the six of us headed inside. The rec center was loud and bustling, with three times as many people as usual. Every sound echoed and re-echoed off the glass walls that enclosed the pool. We went to find seats on the bleachers.

But before we sat down, I heard a voice from behind me. "Do I see Nicky?"

I looked over my shoulder and saw Coach Hattie walking over. She greeted my mom and our other relatives, and then turned to me.

"I'm so sorry about your foot. I know this must be a bummer for you, I'm sorry. But look"—she lowered her voice so only I could hear—"there'll be other chances, okay? And I know how hard you've worked this season, and I want you to know that you've come pretty far."

"Thanks," I managed to say quietly. Usually, Coach Hattie wasn't someone you'd call warm and fuzzy, but I knew she meant what she said right now.

"Now come on back and join the rest of us, if it's all right with your foot." When I balked, she frowned at me. "You're still part of the team, aren't you?"

"Yep." I glanced at my mom, who nodded encouragingly. I followed Coach Hattie to a room off to the side of the pool, which Julien the theater nerd always called "backstage." My teammates were in the middle of doing dryland exercises to warm up, and though I normally dreaded dryland, I found myself wishing right then that I could join them.

When my teammates saw me, they crowded around.

"Hey, we heard about your ankle."

"Are you okay?"

"Sorry, Nicky. That must be rough."

"How'd it happen?"

"Hush, child. Nicky, you don't have to tell Arlen if you don't want to."

"What? I just—"

"I'm okay enough, Heidi," I said, trying to catch up with everyone's questions. "And Arlen, it's fine, I only—"

"Whoa, whoa, whoa! Did I tell you it was okay to stop in the middle of twenty push-ups?" Coach Hattie barked. Everyone quieted down. "Did I?"

They went back to their spots in the room to finish the twenty push-ups in question, and that was when I saw Laila Alicie in the corner. She hadn't gotten up at all, but had finished the push-ups and was now sitting cross-legged with her eyes closed, taking deep breaths in and out. I knew that was what she did right before every swim meet. Then Coach Hattie called twenty-five arm circles and Laila got to her feet with everyone else.

After that, Coach Hattie began going over the schedule, though according to her, everyone should know their events backwards and forwards already. One of

the first events was the two-hundred medley relay, which I would have been part of. Rosalind, Fred, Heidi, and Arlen (who was subbing in for me) were swimming.

"One more thing," Coach Hattie said just as the team was about to leave to do warm-ups in the pool. "I know you'll all do great today. Just focus, be strong, give it your all. And remember that we're a team. We're all working together today. So trust each other and cheer each other on."

She looked around the room, meeting each of our eyes in turn. "And I'll see you all on the other side. Now let's go."

She stepped aside from the doorway, and with a new surge of energy, the team crowded out of the room. I followed them and ended up beside Heidi, who walked slowly enough so that I on crutches could keep up.

"Arlen's gonna do fine, but we'll miss you for the first race," she said.

"Yeah. Good luck, though," I started to say, but then I nearly bumped into a tall figure and almost slipped.

"Sorry," I stammered, turning to look at this figure. She was clearly a swimmer from Hatcheton, and her black swimsuit had *Caihong Cui* stitched on the chest in white thread. She towered a foot above me, and as if that weren't intimidating enough, the glare she shot was enough to make me stumble backwards a step.

"Watch where you're going," she snapped, and brushed past us before I could say another word.

"Wow, she's nice," Heidi muttered. "She looks like a boxer or something."

"You'll have to race with her," I said ruefully. I didn't remember seeing or hearing of a Caihong Cui from our past few meets with Hatcheton Central. Maybe she had just joined. Either way, she definitely seemed like a hard competitor.

"Let's hope she's not in my events. Well, I'm gonna go," Heidi said, adjusting her swim cap and heading toward the rest of the team already in the pool. "See you later, Nicky. You better be cheering for us at the medley relay or we'll find you and kill you."

I laughed and promised I would be there. When Heidi had gone, I returned to my family sitting near the bottom row of the bleachers. I had a staring contest with Adrian, told my mom that my foot was feeling okay, played that hand-slapping game with Adrian, listened to Julien tell me about the songs he played on his guitar, had another staring contest with Adrian, and then the first event was being announced. I hurried back to my other teammates, the twenty-five or so of them who weren't in this race but were gathered closer to the pool.

The swimmers lined up on the wall, and then the official started them off. Rosalind, our swimmer for the backstroke, shot off the wall with a slight lead over the Hatcheton swimmer. "Go, Rosin!" I shouted.

I heard Adrian, from some distance away, start up a chant for our team. "Clearfield! Clearfield!"

I joined in, and so did a bunch of families near us, as Rosalind touched the wall and Fred started with the breaststroke. We still had a lead, though it had gotten smaller.

Heidi was next, and I cheered louder. Hatcheton was catching up, but Heidi surged ahead strong with her last strokes of the butterfly. Arlen started the

freestyle and finished so quickly that I barely had a moment to blink before the stands erupted in applause.

Our team had won. Looking up at the clocks, I saw that they'd gotten a decent time too. I was standing up now, yelling my head off with the rest of the team.

Our four teammates pulled themselves out of the water. "That was so good," I told them, unable to control the smile stretching across my face.

Heidi was laughing and gasping as she retrieved her towel from a chair. "I know, right? You guys were great!—" She turned to Arlen and Fred and Rosin, who were dripping wet and laughing with her. Then they went to talk to Coach Hattie, who congratulated them too, and the rest of us got ready for the next event.

Our team won the next race too—the individual medley, which Annie swam—and the one after that, and the one after that. With each finished race, my hopes rose higher. We'd never beaten Hatcheton Central at a meet before. And now, though they'd won a few events of course, we were ahead by more points than we'd ever been.

A few hours passed, and the events for today neared a close.

And then it was time for my favorite race. The two-hundred freestyle. The one I had been practicing all week and before for today's meet.

The one that Laila Alicie was going to swim now, in my place.

I bit my lip as Laila adjusted her goggles and got onto the starting blocks. Even from where I was, I could see her taking deep breaths, her prerace routine.

And then I looked over to her left side and was totally caught off guard.

Laila's competitor from Hatcheton was Caihong Cui.

Laila glanced over to Caihong, then turned back just as quickly. She stared straight ahead, hard.

"Swimmers, take your mark," the announcer said.

"Set—go!"

Laila and Caihong launched into the pool together. They both pulled forward and Laila had a slight lead. But it wouldn't last, I knew. After the flip turn at the opposite wall, Caihong's push got her right next to Laila as they churned back through the water.

The two-hundred free was my favorite race, since it was about focus and stamina (which, funnily enough, were two things I never seemed to have outside of the pool). The strokes don't change, and your concentration's just on going straight forward and on those three flip turns.

Laila seemed to understand this. She sliced through the water, never wavering, never drifting aside. But the problem was, Caihong was doing the exact same thing.

The final stretch.

I sucked in a breath, watching them. Laila inched just ahead of Caihong, her neat strokes pulling her ahead. But just a few feet from the end, Caihong had a sudden burst of speed. She surged forward, reached the wall, and pulled herself up.

Laila emerged a split second later.

The team started cheering as Laila got out of the pool, taking heaving breaths.

Her face was red, and she seemed to be crying and laughing at the same time.

"That. Was. Amazing," Annie squealed, and though Laila didn't have the breath to say anything back, she nodded. The team surrounded her, congratulating her and patting her on the back.

Laila hadn't beaten Caihong, but she'd gotten our team's best-ever time for the two-hundred free. Meaning, she'd broken my record.

I gave her a quick smile and a congratulations too, though she barely seemed to notice me. *She'd broken my record.* I wondered how I would have done for this race, if I just hadn't . . .

I looked down at my ankle, suddenly hating my clumsiness more than I had ever before.

From the corner of my eye, I saw Caihong getting out of the pool and striding toward the Hatcheton team beside her coach. She seemed angry for some reason, and I couldn't figure out why.

Until I saw the final point totals for today's events on the scoreboard. Clearfield had won. Our point totals towered above Hatcheton's by quite a lot.

Our whole team started screaming like crazy. I recovered from my momentary distraction and cheered with them. And next we were going to hear who the top three swimmers were—the ones with the most individual points, who would get to go to the H₂O Championships.

"In third place," the announcer started, and we quieted down. "Representing Clearfield, Heidi Whitlock."

Heidi's eyes widened, and she was speechless for a second. Only when we buried her in hugs could she move again.

"In second place, representing Clearfield, Laila Alicie Kenton von Luzenborg."

"Yes!" Laila pumped her fists in the air as the screaming got louder.

"And in first place—" I already knew who this would be, if Laila had placed second.

"Representing Hatcheton Central, Caihong Cui!"

Our team clapped and cheered for her too, though the cheers from Hatcheton's team didn't seem quite as loud as ours had just been.

"Congratulations to all swimmers. This concludes the events for today. You are now dismissed."

"We're going to H₂O!" Laila shouted to Heidi. She spun around, her hands up, yelling to no one in particular, "We're going to H₂O!"

I might have been going to H₂O. Laila had won my race.

But I put on a smile to say goodbye to my teammates, who wished me a healed foot. This would be the last time we all were together until next season, and I didn't want to bring them down with my own disappointments.

Hugs went around again until we finally tore away from each other to go our separate ways. Well, it was only I who went a separate way—most of the others were going to the locker rooms because *they* had gotten to swim today.

I headed toward my family. They were all smiling wide, especially Adrian and Julien. We waited for Laila, and Uncle Pierre went to get the car.

I don't know why I wrote, just above my name, Happy birthday, Laila. I know you'll do great at H₂O. But that was what I did.

"That was one smashing swim meet," Adrian said to me. "You aren't too disappointed, are you?"

"Uh . . . no," I said, trying to mean it. "I mean, we won! Even though . . ."

"Even though?"

I shrugged, looking down. I didn't want to tell Adrian, or anyone, for that matter, why I just couldn't bring myself to congratulate Laila truly.

Adrian looked like he was about to ask further, but a voice from somewhere behind us cut him off.

"No, I can't control myself! None of this was any sort of the challenge I was promised!"

I swiveled around to see Caihong stalking across the deck with the Hatcheton coach, who was speaking in low tones to her. "Isn't that the first place kid?" Adrian asked me, and I nodded, still watching Caihong.

Her face was stormy. "But our team was so—" Her coach interrupted her by saying something, but she shook her head in a huff.

And that was when Laila came over, smiling and holding her swim stuff.

"Congrats, La-la! You did great," Julien said.

"Yeah," Adrian said, turning to her. "You were like, supersonic speed."

Laila giggled. "Let's go home and have ice cream," she said happily.

"This isn't over." Suddenly, Caihong was beside Laila, glaring at her. She didn't seem to notice any of the rest of us standing there.

"Hey, what—" Adrian started, but Caihong interrupted him.

"Maybe your team won, but we're not done. Maybe you forgot that I'll be at H₂O too. But I won't be held down by a weak team there, okay?"

Laila had turned a bit pale. "Um, okay," she said. "But we—"

"I'll see you there. We can figure out who's the real winner then." And with that, Caihong Cui turned and walked off. She passed right by her coach, who had just seen us and had been heading toward Caihong, but now had to pursue her in the opposite direction.

But Caihong *had* won. First place kid, as Adrian had said. That didn't satisfy her?

"She said H₂O₂," Adrian muttered.

"Wow. She was . . ." Julien trailed off.

Laila didn't say anything. She was still pale.

Aunt Kay sighed. "Don't worry about that. Your team was wonderful today."

"Yep, you all did great," my mom agreed. "Nicky and I have to run now—I've got an appointment in fifteen minutes. But you're fine, Laila. Don't let that kid get under your skin."

Laila nodded, but she wasn't smiling anymore.

If you asked me why I did what I did that afternoon, I really wouldn't be able to tell you.

I don't know why I went straight to Laila's birthday gift when we got home.

I don't know why I opened the cupcake birthday card again.

I don't know why I wrote, just above my name, *Happy birthday, Laila. I know you'll do great at H₂O.*

But that was what I did.

Dear Aunt Illy,

Actually, I never got to compete at the swim meet (which was yesterday). Long story short, I sprained my ankle and I won't be able to swim for a while. That was really disappointing, to be honest. Even though Clearfield won, I couldn't swim in the races we've been practicing for so long, so I was sort of useless. And on top of that, I won't have another chance to go to H₂O until next year.

And you're totally right about summer homework (which I started, but I'm nowhere close to finishing). That's exactly how I feel, and I'm glad I'm not the only one. Though the reading and writing section is just as hard for me as the math. I'm sure you never had that problem, though, being a professional writer and all.

I skipped to the back page of the packet and saw the last question, which says to write a whole essay or story about my summer. I'll probably go with the essay, since stories are even harder—I can't write a pretty sentence to save my life. Still, I have no idea how I'll manage an entire essay. No offense to you, but I can't stand writing. Writing for school, I mean. I like writing letters to you because you don't grade me or anything. So maybe I should go to your writing workshop thing. It might be less boring if you're the one teaching it.

I haven't tried mochi donuts before, though they do sound good. Maybe I will one day. And I was wondering, did Aunt Kay tell you about our trip to the lake? Will you be there?

—Nicky

Chapter 6: Why One More Guest Was Coming to Laila's Party

By Thursday, I had finally retired from crutches and barely felt my ankle the next day. I'd also finished the math section of the giant homework packet (though I had yet to start the reading section, which was equally long and equally full of torture). And I had a Saturday visit with Ms. Fleming to look forward to. Overall, I guess I should have been happy. Or satisfied. Or something.

But for the rest of that week, I kept thinking back to the swim meet, replaying the events that had led to our team victory, remembering how I hadn't helped with that team victory but had had to sit on the sidelines instead. And though I didn't mean to, my mind always drifted to that look on Laila's face right before we'd left the pool. The dread in her eyes. The usual confidence gone from her poise.

So it was a relief when Saturday rolled around. I would be able to get my mind off the swim meet, instead concentrating on helping Ms. Fleming with whatever she needed that week.

When I knocked on her front door in the morning, Ms. Fleming opened it right away. (Her wig was back to its ordinary position and looked quite clean.)

Her eyes widened when she saw me. "Nicole, you're walking! It's as if nothing happened to you! Or—" her eyebrows scrunched up—"you did hurt your foot last week, didn't you? And it's better now?"

"Yeah, it feels a lot better," I said, as she let me into the house.

"I'm so glad. Since last week, I've been thinking . . . well, you're sure your ankle is fine?"

"It feels almost normal, really. I can actually walk up stairs now." I wondered what she was trying to tell me. Maybe she wasn't sure of her memory?

But when Ms. Fleming heard what I said, her whole face seemed to light up. "Well, since last week, I've been thinking about this. Would you be able to go up to the attic today and help me clear out . . . ah . . . some things?"

"Sure," I said eagerly. Now I remembered how in the middle of the wig hunt last week, we had stopped for the attic, but I hadn't seen anything up there but dust and darkness. Again I wondered what Ms. Fleming had there—and today I would be able to find out.

"Thank you," Ms. Fleming said, closing the front door and coming into the kitchen with me. "I can't quite recall what I've kept there. It's been so long. I know there are lots of things . . . old clothes, I think, and knickknacks . . . if you could organize them, that would be wonderful. I think there are some extra boxes in the laundry room if you need them."

After retrieving a couple of cardboard boxes, some masking tape, and a marker, I went into the hallway behind the kitchen. I stood on tiptoe to reach the string that unfolded the drop-down stairs, pulled—and the stairs came creaking down. They weren't quite as dusty as last time.

Once again, I stood at the bottom of the steps, staring up. There was probably a light bulb up there. At least I hoped so.

"Thank you, Nicole," Ms. Fleming said, smiling. "I think I'll make some cookies while you're busy with that. Come back down if you get hungry, okay?"

"Sure, thanks." I had started climbing the stairs and was almost at the top now. The attic's rafters were coming into sight, and so was—to my relief—a chain for a light switch. I shifted the boxes to one arm, pulled on the chain, and a single bright bulb clicked to life.

"Oh, and if you find anything interesting that you like, keep it," she called up after me.

“Okay.” I looked down one more time before I stepped completely into the dim attic, which had a faintly musty smell, mixed with the scent of pine.

It took a moment for my eyes to adjust. The room was glowing faintly with the yellow light. An empty bed frame leaned against one wall beside a rolled-up rug, some large picture frames, a mannequin (which had a wig on it and a T-shirt that said “LOOK UP”), a giant old radio, and something that I guessed was an upright loom. There was even more stuff against the opposite wall that I couldn’t see as clearly. And three square cardboard boxes were piled up against the one other wall (some closed, and some open with things spilling out), along with a few others of different sizes. There were also two suitcases beside those boxes—one had a really weird shape that definitely wasn’t rectangular. And nearly everything was draped in dusty cobwebs.

Where was I supposed to start?

Setting down the empty boxes in my arms, I walked over to the other side of the attic, the floorboards creaking softly under my steps. I opened one of the large square boxes on the top of a stack. Something shiny glinted from inside, and I picked it up.

My breath caught in my throat as I lifted a shimmering purple gown out of the box. It unfolded in layers as I held it up to the light, with a few mothballs tumbling out onto the floor. The sleeves were airy fabric, and there was a satin sash around the waist. The entire thing was covered in tiny glittery beads.

It certainly wasn’t something I would wear, but it was pretty nonetheless. I folded it back up awkwardly, putting it to the side as I reached back into the box.

Another dress. This time, a soft green one with long sleeves. The one after that was a fire-engine red, and then there was another purple one, a yellow skirt with sunflowers, a pink plaid skirt, a blue sailor dress, and a pile of lacy sweaters on the bottom.

I tried to picture Ms. Fleming with these fancy clothes. Surprisingly, it wasn’t that hard. I wondered why she’d put them all here instead of wearing them.

Looking at the dresses heaped around me, I realized that I had taken out all the clothes when they’d been packed up just fine. I hoped I wouldn’t be disorganizing Ms. Fleming’s attic instead of organizing it like she’d asked. My clothes-folding skills weren’t top tier, and I would probably put the dresses back messier than how they’d come.

But just as I was about to put the sweaters away again, I saw something flat and rectangular at the bottom of the box. It was a small wire-bound notebook, I saw, when I took it out. The cover was pale green and had no title. I flipped to the first page, which was covered in small, neat letters.

“Sometimes I’m not sure of my personal degrees of trust. I often believe I gave you too much of myself, but other times I wish I had shown you more. There are days when—”

I shut the notebook. This was clearly a personal diary, most likely Ms. Fleming’s. I wasn’t going to read through her private thoughts. But why had there been a journal at the bottom of a box full of old clothes?

I set the notebook aside and put the clothes away, stuffing mothballs back in. I managed to tuck in the last dress almost as neatly as I had found it, which was

a relief. The second and third boxes were full of fancy clothes too, and I didn't bother to go through them in case my luck with clothes folding didn't feel like striking twice. And by this time, I had realized that the boxes were probably organized enough. I probably should have been focusing on the piles of seemingly random stuff instead of going through the boxes.

After debating for a second, I headed to a far corner, which looked the most jumbled. I had to start from somewhere. No point in avoiding the mess if I had to get to it all eventually.

Tucked against the wall were a bunch of mason jars full of colored sand and seashells, set on their sides on top of hardback books. I brushed away cobwebs and picked up the jars carefully, dreading the idea of sand and shattered glass all over Ms. Fleming's attic floor.

The books below the glass jars didn't seem to be ordered in any particular way; underneath *Greatest Poets of the World* were *Analyses of the American Civil War* and *50 Cake Recipes that Will Impress All Your Friends*. There wasn't time to go through all the titles, but I moved all the books aside in case something else was underneath them.

It was a good thing I did, because at the bottom, under *World Adventures: Skydiving and Other Escapades*, there was a bulky knitted blue blanket folded up, flattened by the books and very, very dusty.

And then picking up the blanket revealed another journal.

By the time I was nearing the end of this wall's piles, I had found a stack of hats, an assortment of antique trays, some more mason jars with sand, pressed flowers in glass cases, more books—novels, this time—a plastic container full of keychains, a bundle of maps, and more. There were also four more journals, oddly enough, each one at the bottom of a pile of things. One of them was just a plain paper notepad, two others were leatherbound, and one even had a tiny lock on it (though the key was tied to a string right beside the lock). I squashed the temptation to open any of them.

Last on this wall's pile, I found a stack of puzzles, a blank sketchpad, and yet another journal underneath it all. This one was different, though—it had many more pages and was almost three inches thick. While all the others were plain, muted colors, this one was bright orange, and had *DIARY OF PHYLLIS FLEMING (F.F.), PRIVITE!* written on the cover in wobbly marker letters.

I placed it on top of the four other notebooks from before, and then looked around the attic. Things were scattered everywhere. I had to get them organized into boxes now, in configurations that would make more sense than glass jars ready to roll off stacks of books.

Clothes separated into two boxes—that was easy enough—books in another. I lined a box with blankets and put the mason jars inside it. The napkin holder with the giraffe face on it went next to the antique trays and assorted mugs.

Organizing everything, putting it back, and labeling it all took a lot longer than taking out the stuff. But eventually things were in decent places, with the help

of the extra boxes I had brought up from the laundry room. I stacked up all the boxes against the far wall and stepped back to survey my work.

I'd gone through about half of the attic—there were the other boxes of assorted sizes still waiting to be organized, and the larger things leaning against the far wall—which meant I was half done.

I pushed sweaty hair out of my face. My ankle was a little sore, but going through Ms. Fleming's attic was probably the most interesting thing I'd ever done, so I didn't feel it too badly.

An hour, maybe two, must have passed already, and I wanted to see how Ms. Fleming was doing. Before I started downstairs, though, my eye lingered on that small box I had put the five journals in.

Maybe I could ask Ms. Fleming about them.

The warm smell of gingersnaps wafted up when I made my way down the attic steps. A plate of cookies was waiting for me at the kitchen table, along with a glass of lemonade. "Thanks," I said to Ms. Fleming, who was sitting at the table already with some cookies of her own.

"Of course," she said, as I sat down next to her and bit into a gingersnap. "How are things going up there? It sounded very . . . energetic, from this floor." A smile twinkled in her eyes.

"Sounded—oh." I realized how loud my dragging things across the floor must have been from below. But Ms. Fleming didn't seem to mind; the smile in her eyes reached her lips as she waited for me to continue.

"Well, I'm about halfway through," I said. "There are a lot of interesting things you have. Oh, and I found a couple of journals all in different places. I didn't read them or anything," I rushed to add, "but there were four or five of them. Do you still write stuff?"

"Not anymore," she said. "Journals . . . they must have been from a long time ago. I started writing when I was very young, maybe your age or before that, but I don't remember when I stopped." She got up with the pitcher of lemonade in hand and walked over to a plant on the kitchen counter. I didn't understand at first, not until she was just about to tip the pitcher into—

"This isn't water," she realized just in time, right when I was about to jump up from my chair and tell her the same thing. "It isn't water. What was I thinking?" she said, laughing now. She put the lemonade back on the table, filled a clean pitcher with water, and went back to water the plant.

I wasn't quite sure if I should laugh with Ms. Fleming. But it seemed a good sign that she'd caught her own mistake and thought it was funny. Maybe she was feeling better today?

But then she put down the pitcher so abruptly that the water almost splashed out. "Oh, Nicole, I meant to tell you this earlier! I found something that you left here last week." She picked up something from behind the potted plant and came back to sit next to me.

“You know, Laila delivers groceries for me. She’s very nice. Just like you.”

And then she laid an all-too-familiar pink, frilly envelope on the table.

I choked on a piece of gingersnap in my mouth. Ms. Fleming looked at me, her eyebrows knit together, puzzled.

“Isn’t this from your cousin?” she asked. “And Nicole, I didn’t realize Laila was your cousin, not until last week! But it makes so much sense now, doesn’t it?”

I didn’t know what she meant by that. “Um . . . well, Laila’s having a birthday party, that’s all.”

“Yes, I called her. I’ll be coming to her party too. She insists.” Ms. Fleming took a card from the envelope. The front of the invitation had swooping letters in dark pink that read:

YOU ARE INVITED! TO THE CELEBRATION OF
LAILA ALICIE’S 12TH BIRTHDAY!

at Belvedere Restaurant and Party Hall
(address on back)

The party will be from 11:00–2:00 PM
on Tuesday, August 19th. Lunch will be served.

R.S.V.P. by Thursday, August 14th to
Kay Kenton von Luzenborg (555-484-0624)
Hope to see you there!

Ms. Fleming smiled at me. “It must be so special to have a cousin your same age, Nicole!”

“I guess so.” I forced a smile back, but then her face clouded over as if she knew I was faking it.

“Don’t you know each other well?” she asked, confused.

“Yes, but we’re not super close. I mean—well, yeah. We see each other a lot.” I bit my lip, knowing how awkward I was sounding.

“You know, Laila delivers groceries for me. She’s very nice. Just like you.”

I only nodded, not trusting my tongue for this.

“But you don’t get along too well?”

“Not really,” I said, shrugging. “We don’t have that much in common.”

Then a bunch of things that Ms. Fleming could point out rushed through my head. Like how Laila and I both helped her with things. And how we went to the same school. And how we were both on the swim team.

The swim team . . . Laila’s stricken expression flew through my mind again, and suddenly I didn’t feel so hungry for gingersnaps anymore.

But Ms. Fleming didn’t mention any of that. “Oh, I see,” was all she said, in a quiet voice. “I’m sorry to hear that.”

The silence grew uncomfortable until I finally thought of something to say. “Well, about the stuff in the attic—do you want me to bring it down so you can go through it too? I put about half of it into boxes, but maybe you want to see.”

“Oh, that.” Ms. Fleming blinked, smiling. “Yes, I’d like that. But we can do it next week, Nicole. I’ve kept you long enough today.”

“Sure,” I said, standing up to put my glass and plate in the sink. “Thanks for the cookies. And the lemonade. They were really good.”

“Of course. Thank you for sorting out my attic. It’s such a great help when you come over, Nicole.” Ms. Fleming led me to the door.

I started for home, waving goodbye as I walked down the sidewalk. Ms. Fleming, standing in her doorway, waved back.

But after Ms. Fleming had shut her door, I couldn’t help but wonder if her last smile to me had quite reached her eyes.

Chapter 7: Why I Felt Like a Spy behind a Menu Fortress

August 19. My cousin’s birthday. It arrived far too soon.

I sat in the backseat of our car, the blinding sunlight streaming in through the front window. Laila’s birthday present was in my lap. The highlighters rattled against the hard binding of the notebook whenever my mom drove over bumps on the road.

I knew where the party would be, but I had no idea what we’d actually do there. Once, Laila had had a glow-in-the-dark disco party, which was definitely not my thing. And last year’s party had been at a fancy craft center, which would have been moderately okay if *glittery slime* hadn’t been the fad. On the bright side, I supposed, party themes couldn’t get much worse than that. Today’s was at a fancy restaurant we went to very occasionally, and they probably didn’t let you make slime there.

My mom turned in to the parking lot. “Crowded today,” she remarked.

She was right. Cars were jammed into what seemed like every available parking space, and other cars were waiting around for spots. My mom sighed, drove around and back out of the parking lot, and went to find a space on the street.

When we finally were able to get out of the car, we had to walk three blocks to get to the restaurant. All this trouble just for Laila’s birthday party. And by now I knew we were late.

The entrance was just as crowded with people, but we got inside and followed the sign that read *LAILA ALICIE’S BIRTHDAY PARTY: LEFT ENTRANCE*.

Aunt Kay, who was standing by the said left entrance, greeted us. “Nicky! May! I knew you would make it. Seats are over there—” she motioned to one side of the room, where tables and booths lined the wall—“and in a few minutes we’ll start waffle-making.”

Waffle-making. That explained the strange tall machines standing along the other side of the room.

I hesitated a moment before stacking Laila’s present and card with the pile of other birthday gifts on a nearby table. I thought back to what I’d written in the card, wishing Laila luck at H_2O . Why had I written that, anyway? Would Laila even read my card? And if she did, would she actually take it seriously?

I shook my head, knowing that I was overthinking this. So I just dropped the stuff on the table and hurried into the party room.

The floors had soft red carpet, and pink and white balloons were tied in clusters in every corner. And the room was already full of people. How many had Laila invited?

There were a lot of kids from school that I recognized but had never talked to—they were from Laila's friend group. Laila, wearing a frilly *guess-what-color* dress, was chattering excitedly to them. Others I saw were from the swim team. And my relatives were there, of course. Uncle Marcos and Aunt Phoebe, from Laila's side of the family, stood talking with Adrian and Julien in the far corner. Aunt Carissa and Uncle Benjamin had also arrived with my other three cousins—Alexander, Tilly, and Rose, who was the baby. My mom and I went to greet our family members.

When Alex saw me, he ran over. "Knock, knock!"

"Who's there?" I said.

"Beets."

"Beets who?"

"Beats me!" Alex started laughing, and I grinned too. Though his knock-knock jokes were corny, his five-year-old silliness usually made me smile.

Tilly, the three-year-old, twirled over in a puffy sky-blue dress. "Hi, Nicky!" she said. "Do you know where Laila is? I want to show her this." She spun in a circle and her skirt fanned out around her.

I pointed her toward Laila, but didn't bother to go greet the birthday girl myself. Instead, I went over to the other swim team kids.

Heidi wasn't here; only about a third of the team had been able to come. "You're off crutches!" was the first thing Rosalind said when she saw me.

"Yep. Hopefully forever," I said, grinning.

"Too bad the season's over," Arlen sighed. "It was one of our best."

"It *would've* been one of our best," Annie corrected. "It was too bad Nicky couldn't join us."

I smiled a little, appreciating that my teammates had actually felt my absence. I was glad that we had won, of course, but a little part of me was still sore that I'd missed swimming at the meet.

But before I could reply to Annie, I felt a gentle tap on my shoulder. "Nicole? Do you know if—am I in the right place? I suppose I am."

It was Ms. Fleming. She was clutching her cane and looking around nervously.

"Yes," I said, turning around and speaking louder so she could hear me over the noise of the rest of the room. "Hi, Ms. Fleming! This is—"

"You made it!" I flinched at the sudden squeal that came from right next to me.

Laila had swept away from her friends and magically appeared beside us. "I'm so glad you could come, Ms. Fleming! These are my swim team friends—" she gestured to the six or so of them standing there, who shyly waved—"and guys, this is Ms. Fleming. She's my neighbor."

Ms. Fleming gave a timid smile, and Laila kept on talking. "And do you want

to meet the rest of my family? I don't know if you know my cousins." She led Ms. Fleming away from us and to the other side of the room, where Alex and Tilly were dancing around.

Laila had said her "cousins," as if I weren't one. I didn't really care, but it just went to show how rude she could be sometimes.

"Do you know her too?" Arlen asked me, and it took me a second to realize he was asking about Ms. Fleming.

"Oh, yeah," I said. "I live pretty close by Ms. Fleming's house."

I leaned against the wall, watching Laila. She was chatting happily with Ms. Fleming, leading her around the room. Both of them were smiling.

"All right, everybody! My name is Graham. Let's get this party started!" A booming voice from a megaphone made me stand up straight against the wall. A party host from Belvedere Restaurant was standing at the front of the room.

"First off, a very happy birthday to Laila Alicie here." Cue cheers and squeals from Laila's school friends group. The swim team and everyone else clapped. Laila, who was also standing near the front, beamed at them all.

"And now, what Laila and you all have been waiting for—waffles and chocolate!"

He went on to explain how the waffle machines worked. There were enough of them for three or so of us to share each one. We'd pick batter type, toppings, and fruit to put into the individual griddles, close the waffle print thing, and then wait a few minutes before taking out the finished waffle. There was also an ice cream table nearby for when the waffles were done.

"Waffles are, like, my favorite!" Laila exclaimed when Graham took a breath. "Especially à la mode. That's French, in case you didn't know." She smiled, and her sparkly friends laughed.

Well, I hadn't known, and I didn't care. But I went with Arlen and Sunny to one of the tall machines for waffles anyway.

"I think I'll make a lemon zest one," Sunny called, though I could barely hear her over the noise of everyone else.

"I'm going for chocolate chips," Arlen yelled back.

When it was my turn, I made plain batter with strawberries. I watched the batter sizzle in the griddle before covering it and waiting.

Sunny was already munching on her waffle from a paper plate. "Really good," she said between mouthfuls.

I wouldn't have called this whole party "really good" exactly, though the waffles were fine. This was somewhat better than Laila Alicie's previous birthday parties. Like usual, she ignored me. Like usual, it was loud and crammed with people. But waffles were better than slime and dancing.

I saw Laila fluttering all over the room, first helping Tilly with her waffle toppings, then laughing at something one of her friends said, then stopping to talk to one of the swim team people.

Then my eyes wandered over to Ms. Fleming. She held a chocolate waffle and looked just as happy as the birthday girl. She caught my gaze and waved to me, smiling. I tried to smile back, for her sake.

Waffles and chocolate continued for a while, with Graham the party guy saying things or cracking jokes every so often. I ate my waffle. I made a dark chocolate bar with bits of orange zest in it. I ate half of my chocolate bar and put the other half away in its foil wrapping. I hung around with the swim team kids at first, but they were mostly talking to Laila and meeting her ten million other friends that she had brought here. I sat down at a table in the far corner. I watched the rest of the room from the table in the far corner.

So much noise. So many people.

I was so ready to go home.

The waffles and chocolate were just a snack, I guess, because after most people had gone a few rounds of both machines, Graham with the megaphone directed us to the tables for lunch. Kids went to join their families at tables, or their friends, if their families hadn't come.

At a large round table, I found my relatives, including Laila, who was directly across from me. A bunch of Laila's friends were there too.

I squished in between Alex and the empty seat beside my mom. What time was it, anyway?

"About twelve-thirty," my mom told me when I asked.

Still an hour and a half to go. I helped Alex decide on his lunch, which ended up being just pasta and meatballs. I decided on the same, since I didn't care that much.

"But, Mom!" I heard Laila say from across the table. "They said they bought me a bunch of phone cases. And cool PopSockets. Now you definitely have to get me a phone!"

"Mine was a pink glitter shake case," one of her friends chimed in. "And shockproof."

"Laila, for the last time, you are not owning a cell phone until high school." Aunt Kay was firm. "Sorry, Maya. She'll just have to wait to use that phone case."

Laila and I were the only ones in our school who didn't have cell phones yet, thanks to the solid stances of our mothers on that subject. Though *she* seemed to care about it way more than I did, which was silly.

My thoughts drifted back to what I'd written on the birthday card. Now I was starting to wish that I hadn't said anything about H₂O. Especially since shallow Laila wouldn't even care.

I propped up one of the giant cardboard menus so I wouldn't have to hear Laila and her pink, glittery friends jabbering away.

"Are you spying?" Alex whispered from beside me.

"Not really," I said.

"Can I spy too?" He stood his cardboard menu up beside mine.

"Sure, if you want."

Alex arranged our two menus, Aunt Carissa's, and Rose's to make a wall that shielded the two of us from the rest of the room. He left a crack open, where he peeked out.

And then I heard a voice beside me. "Is it okay if I sit here?" Ms. Fleming was standing behind my chair.

"Yeah, of course!" I moved my chair and half of the menu wall over to make space for her to sit down in the empty seat next to me.

"Knock, knock," Alex said, sticking his head between me and his menu to see Ms. Fleming. I remembered how Laila had just introduced them to each other before.

"Who's there?"

"Who."

"Who who?"

"Ha! You're an owl!"

Ms. Fleming laughed. Seeing her happy cheered me up a little too. That is, until she started talking.

"Isn't this a wonderful party?" she sighed, looking around the room. "You know, I haven't been out of the house for a while. Your aunt drove me here today. Oh, you come to Laila's birthday parties every year, don't you?"

When I nodded, she sighed happily again. "The waffles were delicious. And I haven't actually been to this restaurant before. It's very nice, isn't it?"

The waiter came just then. After we gave our orders, he came around to collect the menus, but Alex hid ours under the table. I figured he wanted to save them for "spying" later, and I didn't protest.

And Ms. Fleming continued chatting cheerily about how enjoyable the party was, and how nice it must be for me and Laila and our whole family to get together like this. I felt bad for only half-listening sometimes, but Ms. Fleming just didn't understand what a pain Laila could be, and how birthday parties canceled out none of that.

A side door swung open and waiters walked in. When they brought our food, I tried to enjoy it. Alex made a face on his plate out of meatballs and noodles covered with tomato sauce. He tried to make it smile, but the pasta mouth was too wiggly and it looked like it was cringing. Ms. Fleming had ordered a tuna salad.

When we were about halfway through lunch, Ms. Fleming took her cane and stood up.

"Nicole, it was so nice to see you today, and this party was lovely," she said to me. "But I'd best be getting home now."

"Okay," I said, turning around and trying to smile at her. "See you on Saturday."

The smile Ms. Fleming returned was way more real. She was about to leave with Aunt Kay, who was probably driving her home, when Laila suddenly got up and rushed around to our side of the table. "Oh, I hope you had a good time, Ms. Fleming! Thank you so much for coming over!"

Ms. Fleming turned around, surprised. "Why, thank you for inviting me, Laila! I haven't had this much fun in years," she said happily. "Happy birthday. I'm sorry I can't stay for the cake."

"That's okay," Laila said, giving Ms. Fleming a hug before they left the party room. I turned away.

I finished my food before most of the others at our table were done. So did Alex, who started playing with the menus again. Even though Ms. Fleming had gone, or maybe because Ms. Fleming had gone, the whole room seemed louder and more oppressive than before.

Why was it that everyone, even Ms. Fleming, could talk and laugh and enjoy themselves here, except for me?

Looking out from behind the menus that Alex had stood up on the table, I saw Laila back and laughing with her friends again. I retreated behind the menu again.

Why was it that everyone, even Ms. Fleming, could talk and laugh and enjoy themselves here, except for me? I was starting to actually feel like a spy, despite what I had told Alex.

A spy in a party where I didn't belong.

Aunt Carissa, sitting nearby, thanked me for helping Alex with his lunch (since she had been busy struggling to feed Rose her avocado tortilla). But right when I was about to tell her "It's no problem," one of the menus, which Alex had propped up on the table, toppled onto my water glass. Ice water spilled over the red tablecloth and splashed on my clothes. Heads turned to us.

"Alex!" Aunt Carissa scolded. "Be careful!"

"I'm sorry." Alex was distressed. "I didn't mean—"

"It's fine," I mumbled. I picked up the water glass and tried to dry my shirt with a cloth napkin. It wasn't much help.

Lunch continued to drag on—nothing had changed besides the fact that my shirt was now soggy. I turned away, frustrated, trying once more to squeeze out the water.

By this time, almost everyone was done with their food, and they were just talking to each other. I saw Graham picking up the megaphone and heading to the door.

"All right, all right, bring it in slowly . . ."

I craned my neck to see what was going on in the doorway, but I didn't need to. Two waiters came into sight holding a giant double-layer cake with pink and white frosting. Lit candles stood on the top. Laila Alicia's birthday cake.

Laila and the others surrounding her moved aside as the waiters set the cake down on the round table. There were *oohs* and *aahs* from around the room. Laila's eyes widened as she took in the sight. I guess she wasn't expecting such a huge cake either, though Aunt Kay often went over the top.

"Happy birthday, Laila!" Graham boomed from the megaphone. "One, two, three . . . Happy birthday to youuuu . . ." The whole room joined in.

"Happy birthday, dear Laila . . ."

Then a camera flashed, the lights dimmed, and the last off-key strains of the song died down.

Laila sat at the table with her friends crowding around her. She smiled, her face illuminated by the glow of twelve candles.

She closed her eyes, waited just a beat longer.

Then she breathed in, her eyelids fluttering, and finally blew out the candles. And the room erupted in cheers and clapping and Laila opened her eyes, laughing with her friends over the sweet smoke and cake icing.

Laughing. Laughing. Everyone was so happy. Everyone was so happy to celebrate Laila. Laila's birthday.

And I, soggy-shirted and miserable, had never felt so much like an outsider.

Dear Nicky,

I'm so sorry to hear that you sprained your ankle. I know it must have been difficult to miss your opportunities because of that.

I remember when I was younger, I wanted to submit a story to a certain competition that promised publication, nationwide fame, and fun writer goodies to top it off. The age limit was for kids fourteen and under, but my fifteenth birthday was coming up. I worked on the thing for hours every day, and on the night before my birthday, I stayed up past midnight adding the finishing touches. Problem was, I wasn't eligible for the contest after that. Because it was past midnight, the next day, and I wasn't fourteen anymore.

So I understand where you're coming from. People kept telling me that there would be a next time, which is true, but I hated hearing that. Because I knew (and you know) that the next time will never be quite the same.

However, from what you've told me over the weeks and months, I don't think you should think of yourself as "useless" in regards to your swim team. You've trained with your team, practiced and labored with them, and so you must have contributed to the team victory. And I personally congratulate you for that, and for bearing through this difficulty. How's your ankle doing now? I hope it'll heal quickly.

As for writing, I'm actually surprised that you dislike it. That's completely fine, of course, but your letters to me often seem like stories, and I think you express yourself well compared to the vast majority of people on this planet. Writing's not all about flowery language, it's about showing your ideas clearly, and I've noticed that you normally don't waste words.

But yes, I know my saying this won't magically help you finish an essay. I'd love to help you in writing, though, if you have any questions or need feedback. I would try not to bore you!

It was just Laila Alicie's birthday, right? Unfortunately I couldn't make it to her party, so let me know how it went. But I will be coming to our family lake trip! I'm looking forward to seeing you and all the other cousins. And I'll be sure to bring mochi donuts for you to try.

Love,
Ilyana

... to be continued in the July/August 2023 issue.

Highlight from Stonesoup.com

From the Stone Soup Blog



Jonathan Livingston Seagull

Reviewed by Nova Macknik-Conde, 11
New York

Several people are kept in a cave. They have lived in the cave their entire lives, chained to the ground, watching blurry shadows dance on the stone wall in front of them. They think that this is all there is to the world. But one day, one of the captives breaks free of his bonds and leaves the cave. He is amazed by all he sees outside, but when he returns to tell the other prisoners of his findings, nobody believes him. Instead, they kill him.

This story is known as the allegory of the cave. Plato, an ancient Greek philosopher, wrote it in reference to his teacher, Socrates, another Greek philosopher. Socrates was sentenced to death and made to drink poison for “corrupting the youth” with his new ideas. But what would have happened if Socrates was not killed but exiled? And what if he returned one day, years and years later, to teach others about the wonders he discovered while banished? And what if Socrates and the other Athenians were not humans but seagulls? Okay, the last question probably sounds extremely weird, but this is basically the plot of *Jonathan Livingston Seagull*, a novella written by Richard Bach and first published more than fifty years ago.

At the start of the story, a seagull named Jonathan feels incomplete. Unlike the rest of the flock, he yearns for more than food. He wants to learn more about flight. He keeps experimenting, and one day learns how to fold his wings, using only his wingtips for maximum speed. After he bursts through the flock at terminal velocity, he is called forward and banished for disrupting his community. He lives a quiet, peaceful life on the Far Cliffs for many years, and then he goes to the next stage of his existence, in which he realizes his true purpose: to return to the flock and teach them the wonders of flight.

I was apprehensive at first about this novella, because it starts off slowly and the action only gradually builds up. But once I warmed up to the story, I saw that it was written wonderfully, with many sensory details. I could feel Jonathan’s heartbreak, his fear, and also his euphoria whenever he discovered a new flying trick. Readers will also learn a lot about amazing aerial acrobatics and flight mechanics from the author, Richard Bach, a pilot who has written many fiction and nonfiction books about flying. Even though I am not a flight expert, I could still picture Jonathan’s aerial whirls and spins in my mind’s eye. I also enjoyed the black-and-white photographs of seagulls in flight, taken by Russell Munson, which illustrate my copy of the book. I would recommend *Jonathan Livingston Seagull* to eight-year-olds and up.

You can read the rest of Nova’s review at <https://stonesoup.com/stone-soup-blog>.

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, here: <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

Grace Chen, 12
Arianna Kanji, 13
Sara Kalhous, 10
Andrew Ang Wei Ken, 9
Amara G. Maddux, 8
Zoe Pazner, 11
Selvi Radia, 11
Olivia Rhee, 12
Benjamin Sanchez, 7
Gemma Schwartz, 9

POETRY

Noa, 5
Sonia Kamnitzer, 11
Marielle Miller, 11
Summer Torres, 12

MEMOIR

Graham Hettlinger, 11
Brayden Mogilinski, 10
Aden Olian, 11
Caitlin See, 11
Shreya Sharath, 13
Chanhong Yang, 11

ART

Oliver Berger, 8
Isabella Bhagwandin, 12
Claire Cui, 11
Delilah Prager, 12
Isabella Song, 11
Elodie Weinzierl, 13

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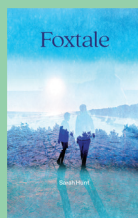
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