StoneSoup



StoneSoup Writing and art by kids, for kids

Editor's Note

Have you ever wished you could be someone or something else? "Ivy's Return," the short story by Clara Gluzdov that opens this issue, perfectly captures this longing through the character of Ivy, the cat who yearns to become a human girl so she can play the piano. When Ivy's wish is granted, however, she realizes that becoming someone—something—else is not as simple, or wonderful, as she imagined it would be.

But in other stories in this issue, happiness comes through more subtle transformation: a street guitarist makes a friend and starts to change his life through music, a girl works up the courage to speak honestly to her friends, and a third grader proudly recounts her changes over the course of the year.

I hope you will leave this issue inspired to write about transformations, big and small, real and imagined.

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Cover: *Light on Wooden Wall* (Canon EOS Rebel T8i) Madeline Male, 14 Kansas

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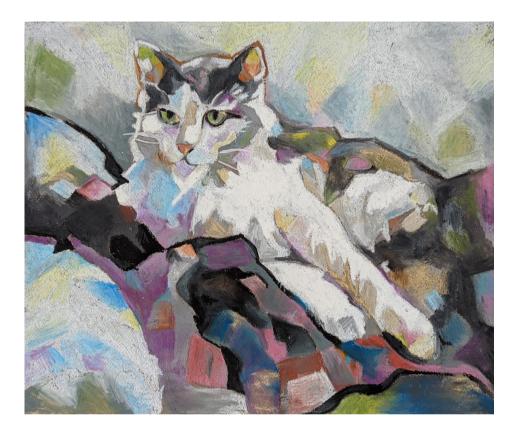
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Lazy Cat (Oil pastel) Tutu Lin, 13 Texas



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Ivy's Return

A house cat dreams of becoming a human girl so she can play the piano



By Clara Gluzdov, 13 Pennsylvania

The melody came on the beams of moonlight. Moonlight poured through a tall window, covering the room in an eerie glow. Ivy lay on the fluffy carpet, fur glowing slightly. Her ears finally stopped twitching at every noise, wishing it was music. More specifically, *piano* music. She sighed in her sleep, the comforting sound filling her dreams. Ivy dreamt of kitchens full of mice—so many! an endless source of entertainment—and swarms of birds in the air, fresh and warm, to bring inside for her beloved Dahlia. She rolled over in her sleep, and her dreams changed to the piano.

If only I was human... Ivy purred to herself in her sleep. Then I could play the piano, the wonderful piano Dahlia sits at for hours and hours ... I could be tall, tall enough to reach the piano, to sit down on the stool with my human legs touching the ground. But now it towers over me, grand and elegant, leaving me feeling small and vulnerable. If only I was human...

As she wished and wished to be human, the moonlight wrapped itself around her. It grew thicker and thicker, almost solid now. Swirls of it were bright and sounded slightly higher pitched. To most it would sound like nothing, but to the moonlight it was speaking. Should we do it? Should we do it now?

She had tried. She had tried to play the piano but was only able to make horrid, wild noise. And when she failed, it made her desire stronger.

Does she truly want this? the moonlight sang. Yes! said a shiny swirl. Are you sure? said another. A third said: We will find out soon.

It was now the sun which bathed Ivy in its light, and delicious birds' bouncy music that filled the room. They never knew it might be their last day.

Ivy stretched and let out a yawn. Something was different.

Her paws no longer felt furry, nor did her face, which was getting itchy from being pressed up against the carpet. In fact, her paws didn't feel like paws anymore. It was as if they had been pulled too much in all directions, leaving them stretched and achy. Ivy's legs were too long and smooth, and instead of claws she had stubby nails. Soft cloth covered her, a dress like Dahlia sometimes wore.

She was staring at Ivy as if she was some horrible monster. Why wasn't she happy?

Like Dahlia! What had happened?

Ivy jerked up. She was much heavier, so she had to use her arms to hold herself up. They were strange, and at the end had large palms with fleshy, furless fingers. It was a hand! Emotions bubbled up in Ivy's throat, stronger even than when she spotted a mouse, exposed, nibbling on a crumb in the kitchen. She could do anything now! She could play the piano! With Dahlia! They could read together, and have conversations about birds!

Footsteps echoed in the hallway, coming closer.

"Ivy! Where are you, you silly cat! It's time for breakfa—aaaaaah!!!" Dahlia stood in the doorway, frozen, her eyes on Ivy. Ivy looked up. Dahlia had always been so kind, giving Ivy extra cat treats, scratching her chin, petting her, and her eyes were always filled with warmth and love when she looked at her. Now all of that was gone, and she was staring at Ivy as if she was some horrible monster. Why wasn't she happy?

Ivy tried standing up, but her legs were too long and she fell down. She opened her mouth to speak, but instead of words like Dahlia's came a croaking, raspy sound: "Eh-eh-grrr! Mrr—"

Dahlia squealed and backed out of the room. "Mom! Dad!"

Ivy finally managed to stand up, and stumbled over to the piano. It wasn't so huge anymore; she was taller than it. Finally. After dreaming for so long, I can play the piano! Maybe Dahlia won't laugh at me anymore.

Ivy lay her large human hands on the keys. Then, a horrible noise! It was wild, worse than a five-year-old trying to play the piano; it sounded like nails scratching on a chalkboard.

"There!" Dahlia cried out, running into the room with her parents at her heels. "Oh, my..."

"What in the world..." They both stared at Ivy as if they were trying to find out if she was dangerous or not. Ivy tried to talk again, and this time it came out something like this:

"Mrrreeeek!" She moved her mouth into what she thought was a smile.

Dahlia and her parents looked horrified. Maybe she had smiled wrong?

"Who are you?! Where are your parents?" Dahlia's mom asked.

"Mreeeee!" Ivy stood up, holding on to the piano for balance. She tried taking a few steps, but gave up and got on her hands and feet and tried crawling like a cat.

"Aaaaaah!" Dahlia and her parents stepped back.

"Get out of my house!" Dahlia's mom yelled. "I'm calling the police."

Ivy had never heard Dahlia's mom talk to her like that.

"I said, get out!"

Ivy half-walked, half-crawled to the back door. She tried to use the cat flap but did not fit. Finally, after a few minutes of hard work, she managed to use the handle and stumbled outside. The air was warm and had a pleasant scent of summer flowers and birds. A breeze rustled Ivy's long, flowing white hair. It felt strange, yet pleasant, on her furless skin. If this were yesterday, she would have thoroughly enjoyed the nice weather, catching birds and chasing butterflies, but she could barely even walk.

Ivy stumbled down the stone path winding its way through the garden. She usually moved smoothly and gracefully, quiet and stealthy. Now her bare feet were loud, making every twig snap, and barely managed to keep her from falling down. She felt unbalanced on two feet instead of four. How did humans walk like this?

As usual, Ivy went to the fence. She tried to squeeze in between the planks of wood. Her head didn't fit, no matter how hard she tried. It was too stiff and un-moldable. *If only I was small again. Why did I ever think that being a cat wasn't awesome?* Sighing, she decided to try the other way. She crouched down and jumped.

Bam! Ivy's nose smashed into the fence. Dizzy with pain, she tottered to the gate and pushed it open. *Being a cat was definitely better! Why are humans so bad at jumping?* She stepped out onto the grassy hill. The grass felt different, so short. Compared to her paws, the blades had been large and individual, but now that she had feet, the grass merged into what felt like a cool cushion underneath. Ivy used to feel the dirt and stones much more, but now her feet were less sensitive. She took a few steps. The grass was soft, and cozy. She walked to the edge of the hill and gasped at the beauty.

Wildflower-speckled hills and valleys spread beneath her. Groves of lush trees dotted here and there, and a stream gurgled merrily. A large forest lay a few hills to the left, and mountains rose in the distance to the right. And best of all, the colors. Ivy was too busy at first to realize, with the commotion at Dahlia's, but now she did. Everything was so much more vivid, and had so many more different tones. She realized that the flowers which she had always thought were green, blue, and white were actually so many more colors. Colors she'd never seen before. Everything was sharper too, and she could see even past the forest, where a glittering ocean lay. The only downside was that her vision was a bit narrower, but that hardly mattered.

After a few minutes, Ivy tore her eyes away from the scene and walked down the hill. She wandered around aimlessly, taking in the beauty. Everything was calm and peaceful, and her legs started to get used to walking, so she did not trip as much. But Ivy found herself looking over her shoulder, expecting to see Dahlia running toward her, and perked up at every noise, thinking it was Dahlia calling her name. Eventually her legs began to ache, and she decided to rest.

Tears filled Ivy's eyes when she realized she was at the stream. The stream where she and Dahlia had spent many afternoons sitting with a picnic and a good book. She plopped down on the grass next to a big rock and curled up, letting the tears fall.

Ivy woke up to her arms, legs, and face feeling hot and tight.

"Mraaw!" She looked and saw that her skin was red and peeling. What's happening to me?! The sun was glaring into her eyes. Shade. She hobbled toward the woods.

The grass felt cool against Ivy's face. A breeze rustled the leaves of bird-filled trees above. Her stomach growled, and she realized that she had not eaten since yesterday. That delicious bowl of cat treats and wet cat food ...

Something rustled in the tree, a flurry of feathers above her, which she had not seen before. It was a new color. It was beautiful. And it looked delicious!

Ivy jumped up and winced—was it sunburn? When Dahlia was little, she would come home from playing outside from time to time, crying, and her mother would put sour cream on her face to soothe the pain. There was no one to put sour cream on Ivy's sunburn. She focused all her attention on the bird and pounced—or . . . jumped, since she was human—falling on her face. Ivy stood back up, wiped the dirt off, and reached again. The bird fluttered to a different branch. No! It cannot get away! So yummy!

She leapt, and in a few seconds her teeth sank into feathers. Only after the bird was already halfway gone had Ivy realized something felt wrong. The taste was off, and the texture . . . *Bleh!* She spit out the bird, gagging. It was rubbery and chewy and just *awful*. Feathers fluttered through the air, landing in the grass softly. Some stuck in Ivy's hair. Her mouth felt slimy and the taste still lingered. *Water*. The stream burbling ahead looked so fresh and inviting. Ivy ran to it, spitting and wiping her mouth. The water that splashed her face was too cold, but she drank and drank until the taste of bird was finally gone. Ivy's stomach still growled. *What happened?* Birds always tasted so delicious, juicy and flavorful. Now she cringed at the thought of eating another one. Instead, thoughts of those sweet-smelling pastries with apples that Dahlia made filled her mind. And cheesy baked potatoes . . . maybe Dahlia would give her just a little bit if she stared at her with wide open eyes long enough? Humans *always* fell for that kind of thing.

The sun sank low, covering everything in a warm glow as Ivy climbed up the last hill. Her legs ached from all the walking, but she pushed forward until she reached the top. The house was white with a gray, slanted roof. It had two floors, and many large windows with powder-blue shutters. Rose-dotted vines crept up the walls all the way to the roof, where they spread like cracks on ice, tumbling over the edges. A mossy cobbled path wound its way through the wild, overgrown garden. The air smelled sweet with honeysuckles, and crickets chirped along with the croaking frogs. Ivy pushed open the gate and stepped onto the path. As she reached the house, she could hear the familiar sound of Dahlia bickering with Burt, and smell the delicious cooking.

Burt ran past the front door, which was wide open, and stopped to stare at her. "Mom! That scary girl is back! And she has feathers in her hair! Ew!" he yelled.

"Not again! I'm coming!" Footsteps sounded closer and closer, and a second later Dahlia's mom appeared in the doorway. A look of disgust came to her face when she saw Ivy.

"Get away from my house!" she screamed at her. Ivy stood frozen. Then the shock wore off, and she scampered away into the garden.

Once Ivy was sure Dahlia's mom and brother had gone back inside, she inched her way out of her hiding spot and snuck to the open dining room window. Dinner conversation drifted through as Ivy curled up on the hard ground.

"I still haven't been able to find Ivy! What if something happened to her?" Dahlia's voice reached Ivy's ears.

"Maybe she hid in the laundry again?" her dad said.

"No, I already checked there," Dahlia replied. "And I checked the cabinet in the living room, and under the bed. I looked everywhere! Even outside."

"I'm sure you'll find her tomorrow morning. Everything will be fine," Dahlia's dad told her.

"I sure hope so," said her mom. "There has been enough drama already with that weird girl. How did she even get in our house? Burt, stop eating with your hands."

"But forks are too boring!"

"Burt!"

"I just want Ivy back ... "

But I'm right here, Ivy thought. I've been here all this time. Her eyes closed, and she drifted off to sleep.

"Ivy. Ivyyyy. Ivy!"

"Huh?" Ivy looked over her shoulder to see Rose standing in the doorway of the dressing room.

"Finally, I got your attention! You've been standing there staring out the window for the past ten minutes."

"Oh, sorry," Ivy said. Rose frowned and took a few steps into the room.

Rose was a staff member at the Kociątko Theater. They first met at a boarding school when they were both thirteen. There had always been something off about Ivy. For the first year she didn't talk at all, and when she finally started to, she had a strange accent. Rose could never figure out what it was since she had never heard anything like it. But worse than that, Ivy didn't seem to know how to do anything. She could barely use a fork at first, and she could not read or write at all. Over time Ivy learned, but she still was never like the other girls. Instead of chatting or giggling or reading, she would sit by the window looking longingly at birds for hours. Anytime Ivy's parents were brought up in a conversation, she would say, "They live far away. Near mr-r-rouwntains. What's for dinner?"

"Where are we going for dinner after the concert?" Ivy said.

"Is everything okay?" Rose asked.

"Yeah, just ... remembering stuff," Ivy said. "Are we still going?"

"Yes. We could go get sushi? You love sushi."

Ivy liked hanging out with Rose. She never pushed Ivy to talk about her past, and was always there for her. Rose even helped Ivy get her first performance at the Kociątko.

Rose also liked spending time with Ivy. Ivy was a good friend. She was very loyal, very nice, and . . . weird. Rose always found people who were weird more interesting than the girls that all acted and looked the same.

lvy had to swallow down a meow. Stop it. You're a human. Not a cat anymore.

"You're up next on the stage," Rose said eventually. "After this soloist . . . Steinberg, the flute person."

"Right." Ivy turned away from the window and followed Rose out of the room. Ivy walked slowly and carefully down the dimly lit, carpeted hall. Years and years had passed, and Ivy could walk perfectly fine, but she still wobbled a bit while wearing heels. At the end of the hall was a wooden door. Rose opened it quietly, and Ivy came into the small dark room behind the stage. Beyond the curtain Ivy could hear the soloist finishing up, loud clapping, then silence.

"Are you ready?" Rose asked.

"Not really, but I never am. I mean, I feel ready—I can play—I have everything memorized. But I never get used to the crowd."

"You'll do great!" Rose gave Ivy a quick hug, then gently nudged her toward the curtain. "You've already been in the newspaper. Plenty of times."

"Uh...I don't know. Well, see you in a bit." Ivy took a deep breath and pushed the curtain aside.

The bright lights blinded her.

Ivy's heart beat faster and faster with every step. Butterflies did flips in her stomach at the sight of all those people, their eyes on her, expecting something spectacular and beautiful. But at the same time she felt a sort of thrill, excitement about being the center of attention and about the object that started it all. There it was, the piano, in the center of the stage, standing huge and elegant. Ivy's arms and legs felt heavy, weighing her down as she walked. She took her bow, and the spotlight made her anxiety ten times worse. Thoughts rushed through her brain, the usual: What if I make a mistake? What if I'm not good enough?

Ivy ran her hand along the sleek cover and sat down.

She began to play. Her fingers moved across the keys, the melody surrounding her. Ivy had the whole piece memorized by heart, so instead of looking at the sheet music, she surveyed the audience. So many different faces ... Ivy faltered.

The girl's shoulder-length brown curls bounced when she moved her head. Her deep brown eyes were wide open. Ivy's breath caught in her throat. Her heart raced and her arms felt weak.

Dahlia?

Why is she here? How is she here? Does she like the piece I'm playing? Does she know it's me?

Ivy had to swallow down a meow. Stop it. You're a human. Not a cat anymore. You have to prove it to her. Prove that you have succeeded! Gotten what you wished for . . . almost.

She started again with more passion, pouring her emotions into the notes. The crescendo was magical, loud, tinged with happiness—the kind of happiness she had never experienced.

The applause was deafening. Is Dahlia one of them? Is she proud? I have to get to her!

After taking the last bow, Ivy rushed off the stage. She ran through the maze of corridors, trying to find the right door to the lobby. Finally she found it and burst through. People were bustling around, opening their umbrellas at the doors. *Where is she*? Ivy looked around the room. *There!* She spotted the curly-haired girl in a red poncho walking through the doors.

"Excuse me, excuse me, sorry!" Ivy pushed through the crowd. Ten feet from the door, five feet ...

"Wait! Dahlia!" Dahlia didn't even turn her head. "Wait for me!" Ivy ran outside into the rain. She was almost there. She stretched her arm out and grabbed the girl's shoulder. Dahlia jumped and turned around.

"Oh Dahlia, how did you find me? Have you realized who I am at last? I've missed you so much!" The words tumbled out of Ivy's mouth as her eyes started to water.

"What?" said the girl, pulling down her red hood to see better. "Who *are* you?" "It's me, Dahlia. It's me, Ivy!" The tears rolled freely down Ivy's cheeks.

"Oh, you are the pianist. Umm, I really loved your piece, but please let go of me." Dahlia tried to squirm away, but Ivy was stronger. She looked desperately over her shoulder. Her parents were out of earshot.

"You liked it, Dahlia?!" Ivy's heart swelled.

"Why do you keep calling me Dahlia? That's not my name. Let go!"

"What? No, no it is!" Ivy exclaimed, tightening her grip on the girl's shoulder. "It's not."

Of course it was Dahlia. It had to be Dahlia. But . . . her nose wasn't as turned up as this girl's, and Dahlia's face was rounder, and . . . it's been ten years. She couldn't be a young girl.

Ivy's grip slackened. "You're ... you're not Dahlia."

"I know. I told you I wasn't." The girl in the red poncho yanked her shoulder out of Ivy's hand and ran towards her parents in the distance, who had finally realized their daughter wasn't with them. *Splish! Splosh! Splosh!* Her red rain boots landed in the large puddles, getting farther and farther away, leaving Ivy all alone. Rain streamed down her face, mixing with Ivy's tears.

Dahlia hadn't come after all.

A warm, honeysuckle-scented breeze rustled the grass. The white paint on the familiar wooden gate was worn and peeling, unlike the house's freshly painted yellow walls. In the driveway, alongside the old blue family car, was a bright, shiny new red one. The trunk of the red car was wide open and filled with cardboard boxes. A couple more boxes sat on the ground next to it. On one box, FRAGILE! THIS SIDE UP! was written in bold red marker. Another one said CLOTHES.

Ivy stood there, trying to catch her breath after walking up a few hills all the way from the bus stop. Wow—who knew you would tire out this fast when you're a grown-up. Sunshine warmed her skin. She could hear laughter coming from an open window in the house. The house that she should still have been living in.

"I'll come in a second! One last box to carry!" called out a voice. A voice familiar, yet different.

"Are you sure you need all those toys? You aren't a child anymore," said another familiar voice.

"Yes, Mom, I do. Just because I'm twenty-three doesn't mean I can't have stuffed animals."

The front door opened, and a young woman stepped out holding a cardboard box overflowing with stuffed animals. Her dark brown curls fell down to her waist. She was barefoot and wore a pale yellow, checkered knee-length dress. A stuffed zebra fell out of the box and landed on the mossy stone walkway. She walked over to the red car and set the box down.

"Done." She looked up, and her eyes met Ivy's. Brown eyes. Her heart-shaped lips pulled into a smile.

"Oh, hi! I didn't see you there!"

Ivy stood frozen. It's her. It's really her.

"My name's Dahlia."

Ivy's breath caught in her throat. She had always thought that if she just had a chance to talk to Dahlia again, she could make everything go back to normal, to fix everything. But Ivy couldn't make a sound. She just stood there staring wideeyed at Dahlia. Dahlia was a couple inches taller than she used to be, and her hair was darker.

"Hello?" Dahlia asked when Ivy still hadn't answered. "Are you a new neighbor?" "I'm not new," Ivy said.

"So you live around here?" Dahlia walked down the driveway towards Ivy.

"I...I used to."

"Did you live here when you were a kid? You seem familiar. Maybe we were friends."

"I lived here ten years ago."

"Your hair . . . It's so unique. I like the orange strands in the white. You seem very familiar. Are you sure we weren't friends?" Dahlia tossed something in the air and caught it again. It was a small stuffed mouse with a few scratch marks on it. Ivy's attention snapped to it. She watched it fly up in the air and fall back down. *I need it now!* Ivy reached out and grabbed it.

Dahlia stood speechless.

Ivy turned around and fled. Her hat flew off as she ran down the hill and into the woods. She kept running, thorns scraping her legs and branches tangling with her hair.

Eventually she ran into a clearing, the pain in her sides too much, and collapsed.

Everything was still except the grass. It rustled, but there was no wind, only moonlight. It bent this way and that, sometimes to the left, sometimes to the right, and sometimes forming different shapes. A star, a cat, a dog, a tree. The moonlight shifted, fluxing between being almost solid to being no more than a glimmer in the air, to solid again. The small, more-solid swirl that was a bit separate from the main group of moonlight was the one making different shapes in the grass. Stop that! The swirl was pulled back to the rest of the moonlight. Hey! the solid swirl said.

Stop making so much noise. You'll wake her up, said another.

What are we doing here again? said a different one.

Should we turn her back? She's really suffering! a higher-pitched one said.

Let's just go, said the more solid swirl. It had returned to making shapes and patterns in the grass, but the rest paid no attention anymore.

No. Have we made a mistake? She seems truly miserable, a lower-pitched one said.

We are the ones who caused this. I suppose we must help . . . said the brightly glowing swirl.

The moonlight wrapped itself around Ivy until all you could see was a silvery, shimmering mass.

The morning light warmed Ivy. She felt soft, very soft, lying on the grass. She hadn't felt this comfortable on the ground in ten years. Ivy opened her eyes. The blades of grass rising from the ground looked much more muted, soothing to her eyes. She blinked a few times. Her vision stayed the same. She stretched out her arms and stood up but lost her balance and fell back down, landing on her hands and feet. She could feel every tiny little pebble. She could see every tiny little pebble too. She felt comfortable and relaxed on her hands and feet, unlike before. Everything was familiar.

Ivy started to purr. The grass was much taller now. Hundreds of ants scuttled over the soil, and a large, juicy beetle followed behind. Ivy chased after the beetle, trying to catch it in her paws. It crunched satisfyingly in her mouth. Then she spotted her tail. It was fluffy with orange patches, and just out of reach. *I want to bite it!* She ran in a circle for a few minutes but soon gave up. A large oak tree stood tall, its leafy branches spreading above her. Ivy crouched down and jumped easily onto one of them. She walked along it, her balance perfect. In the distance, she could see the house, though it was blurrier than before. Ivy turned her head in the other direction and saw a different house. Something was moving in the yard. *My friend!* She jumped down out of the tree, landing soundlessly. Ivy ran to the fence.

A small white kitten was playing in the grass.

"Hello?" Ivy called out. The kitten startled and looked up at her. It bounced over. "Hi! Another cat! Who are you! Where are you from?!"

Ivy backed away a bit. The kitten moved forward.

"Want to be friends?!"

"Where is Mango?" asked Ivy.

"Who? What's a mango?" The kitten ran around her, chattering quickly.

"My friend. The cat who lives here."

"I live here!"

"No, a different cat. Maybe I got the wrong house." Ivy turned to leave.

"Oh! The orange cat?" The kitten followed Ivy.

"Yes! That's Mango. Where is she?"

"There's photos of her! She's been gone for a while!"

"What? Where did she go?!"

"I don't know! My owner always gets sad when they look at her pictures. Want to be friends?!"

"But what happened to her?"

"Who knows! they got me instead! Let's play!"

"Oh . . ."

Ivy had a sinking feeling in her stomach, and her throat felt tight. She turned away from the kitten and started to slowly walk to the gate.

"Where are you going?!"

"I don't know." She squeezed through the wooden planks of the fence.

Ivy wandered around the wildflower-speckled hills for hours. She caught three sparrows, and they did taste delicious, but she didn't feel satisfied or accomplished. She remembered catching birds with Mango, how they used to have competitions on who could catch the most, and how great she felt when she won.

"Haha!" Ivy giggled. "I got more birds than you!"

"Okay, I get it, you won," Mango admitted reluctantly. "Yesterday I caught seven birds, and you only caught five today."

Ivy had thought turning back into a cat would mean going back in time. Ivy and Mango, two young cats constantly exploring and always in the present; Dahlia, a young girl, never seen without a book under her arm.

But Dahlia was all grown up now, and Mango was gone. Who knew what else would be different?

Stop thinking about this! Just be happy for once.

Ivy sighed and lay down in a patch of lush, green moss. Her eyes followed a small gray mouse making its way through the grass. A part of her wanted to snatch it up, but she didn't have the energy for it. Her eyelids drooped as she started to doze.

Soft hands grabbed Ivy, startling her. She was lifted high into the warm evening air and spun around.

"Hello! Aren't you a pretty little cat! Where do you live?" Dahlia asked. Ivy, of course, couldn't speak, so she let out a meow.

"You are so cute! You know, you remind me of my old cat I had when I was thirteen." Dahlia sat down in the grass and set Ivy in her lap. "She always sat in my lap when I read. She would rest her chin on my arm just like you are doing now."

Because I am Ivy.

"But one day she just disappeared and never came back. I spent hours and hours looking for her."

I did come back. I'm back now!

"She had a small orange spot behind her left ear. Just like you!" Dahlia lifted Ivy up again and looked her straight in the face. "Even your eyes are the same color as Ivy's!"

"You don't have a name tag or collar. I do miss having a cat. I can take you to the vet either tomorrow or the day after to check if you are chipped.

"What's wrong?" Dahlia asked. "Are you lonely?"

If not, maybe I can keep you." Brushing her skirt off, Dahlia stood up and walked away carrying Ivy.

The house was small but cozy. The living room had yellow walls, a round armchair, and a couch. English ivy, strings of hearts, and orchids hung in the large window. A majesty palm stood in a corner next to a bird of paradise plant. A vase of lilacs sat beside a stack of books on the coffee table. Tall, empty bookshelves covered the whole wall to the left of the window. Boxes overflowed with books everywhere, so it was nearly impossible to walk around.

In another corner an electric keyboard rested on a stand. It was shorter than a normal piano, and some octaves were missing. Why would Dahlia not have a real piano?

Dahlia gently set her down on the fluffy white rug and headed into the kitchen. Ivy immediately tried to run ahead of her, tangling up in Dahlia's legs, causing her to trip.

"Hey!" Dahlia exclaimed. "Don't do that!"

In the kitchen, the walls were painted powder blue and the countertops were made of pale wood. A table with one chair stood on its tall legs next to a window, which overlooked a stream winding its way down the hill and into the woods.

Dahlia added another box to the pile on the floor. More boxes sat on the counters. One, full of plates and bowls, was halfway unpacked into a cupboard. Dahlia took the rest of the plates out, and the cardboard box was empty. Ivy suddenly felt the urge to sit in the box. She jumped up onto the counter and was about to curl up in the soft, warm cardboard when Dahlia picked it up, flattened it, and put it in the recycling bin. Ivy meowed at her.

"What's wrong?" Dahlia asked. "Are you lonely?" She petted the top of Ivy's head, but Ivy kept meowing. Why would she throw away the box? She knows I love sitting in boxes!

"Maybe you're hungry? I think I have some chicken." Dahlia turned away and opened the fridge door. She pulled out some raw chicken wings and put a couple in a small bowl, then set it on the floor.

"Here you go!"

"I don't want food! I want the cardboard box!" Ivy said. But Dahlia could not understand her.

"Still not happy? I don't know what's wrong." Dahlia sighed and went to the living room.

Ivy was not sure what to do. She wanted the cardboard box, not food. But the chicken did look delicious, and she hadn't eaten all day. Ivy purred as she crunched on the bones.

Suddenly, the sound of tape ripping came from the living room. Tape that could be on a box! Ivy dropped the chicken wing from her mouth and dashed over to see. More books lay on the floor and table now, and a box was open. Ivy jumped. There were still books left inside, but that didn't matter. It was a cozy box, and she was sitting in it.

The keys on Dahlia's laptop clicked rapidly as she worked at her desk. A cup of tea, long gone cold, sat right where her elbow could knock it off of the edge. The sun had set hours ago, leaving the room dark. That didn't bother Ivy since she saw perfectly well without light.

Silently, she made her way across the room over to Dahlia, lifted her head up and meowed: "I'm bored!"

Crash! Dahlia had flinched and knocked over the cup of tea. Glass shattered against the wood floor, and cold liquid splashed all over Ivy.

"Why would you do that!" Droplets of tea flew through the air as Ivy started to dry herself.

"Stop! Why am I even talking to a cat? You can't understand me." Dahlia shook her head and tried to avoid the glass as much as possible on her way to the kitchen. She came back a few minutes later with a few towels and a dust pan for the glass. After the floor was all cleaned up, Dahlia looked over at Ivy.

"You poor thing." Dahlia wrapped her in a towel, then sat back down, holding Ivy in her lap.

Ivy purred. The sound of typing was calm and peaceful. Dahlia had yellow headphones on and streaming from them was a sad, eerie piano melody. It made Ivy feel oddly happy, with a touch of otherworldliness. After all that happened, and everything that had changed, she had returned.





Moon Tides (Pen) Selene Wong, 12 Illinois

The Fish's Song



By Sage Surra, 9 New York

It was foolish to say it could be done. The boat washing through the shimmering water, the cannons loaded and ready. The world could be a striking place to venture. And as the Earth moved in long ovals, everyone stopped. The fish stopped darting and all their thoughts were focused on the world as the boat sailed and made a street to carry. Then the fish started to twitch and swam forth and everyone stopped peering through their windows. Everything stopped watching. and so the ocean rose and the laws of gravity paused and all the fish flew and took breaths and began to sing. They sang of the life and death of the world. The sailors clutched the sides of the boat. The fish sang of longing and hope. and so the sun stopped and the city was not visible and the Earth continued to turn and the moon continued to orbit a small blue and green planet. And the scorching night darkened. And so the moon took place and sat. But the sea stood up even more. And so the fish sang of encouragement. And so they sang and the sea came to rest.

And the sailors in that boat were the only ones who knew the song the fish had sung.

continued on p. 20





Koi Fish (Colored pencil) Tutu Lin, 13 Texas As the fire was burning,

the forest loomed above the hollow of the world,

the drifting snow freezing the lake.

As the snow neared the fire it melted,

the heat blazing.

Then the roots of the trees lifted the ice from the lake.

The trunks grew into trees and the snow melted away.

The tree branches extended and the lake rose to the air.

The leaves grew to larger sizes

and the Earth stopped.

Everything went dark.

Then there was light and from the swirling water came fish.

The fish began to sing and their song whistled like the wind in the trees.

The water touched the canopy.

The fish sang like birds

and their song was about life and death.

Their song stirred the restless creatures and inspired love and compassion.

And under the lake a fire blazed and crackled to the song.

The fire was a flare of light and the campers were amazed.

The fire showed across the wood-laden forest but did not burn it.

And the fish sang louder of life and death

and the sound was strong.

But then the music ended and the water dropped and put out the fire.

In the west, far in the desert mountains,

there lay a slender oasis.

And so as two lost tourists watched the moon

low in the water lay fish.

The water glimmered

clearing a path across the planet.

And everyone on Earth could feel it.

As the planet's pace slowed,

there came a stately view.

The universe lay infinite above.

And so the water rose to the darkness above

and the fish sang like jewels.

Their song was like silver.

They sang of the thread that connects everything

and they sang of the stars.

They leaped to touch the sky above. And stardust landed and shimmered and the shimmering fish sang of the ever-growing edge. They sang further, of space, that the world would stop turning, and they sang of the outer world, and the vastness of the universe became clear. The stars spun millions of times around the world. And so the fish sang and the water dropped and the fish disappeared. And the Earth continued.

As the rain fell,

the universe would fold in two.

The measureless thing is the universe,

the falling rain being a speck of dust.

And in the field there was a woman

staring into the forest.

And from both low and high

a sense that a tower arose shining beacons of light across the Earth.

And where that tower should have been

the waters raged harder until they had formed a lake of water.

And it grew wider and began to rise to the sky

and the rain became softer

and the universe vaster.

So the fish sang with a recalling tone.

They sang of the return of everything.

They sang as if teaching

and the song was now troubled.

The fish sang of souls since lost,

the spirits ceaselessly circling.

And so the spirits began their descent to the heavens

and the fish addressed their fellow comrades with song.

The feeling was now dark and the thunder brewed.

The roots pulled up from the ground and held the water and trapped it.

And as the water soaked into the woman's pants,

the fish sang of health.

And with a sweetened song the rain dispersed and the water washed through the roots.

Sandpiper's Freedom

A determined mare makes a plan to keep her foal by her side



By Sol Smith, 13 Missouri

"Mommy?"

"What now, little one?" I shifted my hooves, looking down at my young colt standing beside me. I could hardly believe fifteen sunrises had already passed since he was born.

He gazed up at me with large brown eyes, his short tail filled with pine shavings.

"When are the humans going to feed us?" he inquired, flicking his small, fuzzy ears. "I'm tired of nursing, but I'm hungry!"

"Patience, Jay. They'll come soon, don't worry." I nuzzled his little black flank with my pale pink nose.

Jay let out a dramatic whinny-whine and flopped to the floor, his beanpole legs bending in weird angles. I snorted.

The barn door rattled. My white ears perked, and I stepped over Jay to peer out beyond the bars on the stall window. Sure enough, a human dressed in grey fabric coverings made her way into the barn and walked toward my stall holding a green bucket. I could already smell the food in the bucket, and I stomped my hoof in eagerness. But part of me was puzzled. I'd never seen this human before. What was she doing with my food, and what was the thin white paper with mysterious black markings doing in her other hand? Humans rarely brought papers to the barn—I'd most frequently seen them when my riders took me out to shows.

The human reached my stall and wove her small fingers into the latch, unlocking it and sliding the door open. I sniffed her warily.

She slapped my nose and snapped a harsh word, shoving me away from the door. Shocked, I neighed, kicking out with my front legs, but she dodged my flying hooves and stepped to Jay's side, picking him up roughly around the middle. I neighed again and shoved her away from him with a sharp thrust of my head. She dropped Jay and flew backward into the pile of shavings.

Jay's eyes were wild with fear, and he ran to cower in the corner of the stall. "Who is she?" he whinnied. "What's she doing here? Why did she try to take me?"

"I don't know, darling. I'll take care of this." I stepped forward grimly toward the human, but before I could do anything to her, three more unfamiliar humans in grey clothes swarmed in and grabbed hold of me, forcing a halter around my head.





To the Wild (Oil) Sophia Zhang, 12 Texas

Why had they made marks on the paper and attached it to my foal?

I reared, screeching in outrage, but they dragged me out the stall door and into the crossties in the aisle. I managed to bite two of them on the way, but that only earned me more slaps.

I tossed my head, my tail high in agitation as I stared helplessly through the bars. The four humans had lifted Jay up and tried to stand him on his feet. He was too terrified to support himself, so they were holding him up by his middle. His eyes pleaded with me to come save him.

"I can't! I'm sorry! I can't leave these crossties!" I tried to rear up out of the ropes restraining me by the halter, but I only succeeded in jerking my neck painfully. I whinnied again in distress. The other horses in the stalls were neighing and kicking their stall walls in panic, but there was nothing any of us could do.

The humans surrounded Jay, blocking my view, but he didn't cry out. They seemed to be inspecting him, muttering to each other and adding more black scrawls on the paper periodically. After a few minutes, they pulled out a cord with another piece of paper attached to it and scribbled four black characters on it. I watched, scandalized, as they tied the string around my little colt's pastern. I pawed the hard ground with a hoof, snorting out the unfamiliar scents that had flooded my nose.

To my surprise, the humans seemed satisfied, packing up their materials and pouring the food from the bucket into my trough in the corner. They made their way out again, and one came toward me. I pinned my ears, threatening a kick, and he shied away for a moment. But he was back again in an instant, grabbing the halter and unclipping me from the crossties, muttering anxiously. He frequently used the word that the humans called me—Sandpiper. I believe he thought it would calm me, but he was very wrong. My ears tilted backward, and my upper lip lifted in a flehmen from anger. I whipped toward him and bit his shoulder. He cried out in pain and jerked my halter towards the stall, dragging me inside. Jay got up to run to my side, but I gave him a warning look.

The human took off my halter and left the stall hurriedly.

I walked over to Jay, steadying my fast breathing. He was trembling, trying to bite off the piece of string on his pastern.

"Calm, little one. We're safe now," I told him, but my neigh was strained and quivery, and I hoped he trusted my words more than I did myself. I nuzzled him, and he stilled. I lay down on the shavings, inspecting the paper on the string. There were four symbols on it: One vertical curvy line, a spiral-like shape, and two vertical straight lines. I had never wished more that I could understand the scribbles that humans made with their strange, black-liquid stick devices. Why had they made marks on the paper and attached it to my foal?

A sudden sense of urgency followed that thought. I couldn't stay somewhere my foal might be in danger. I didn't know what the scribbles meant, but I'd seen other mares' foals get tagged similarly, and the next day they were taken away and never seen again. I couldn't bear to let that happen to Jay. I took a deep breath. "Jay, listen," I nickered quietly. "We're going to go on an adventure."

"Huh?" His ears perked, and his shaking calmed a bit. "Fun?"

I paused. "Hopefully," I conceded. I couldn't make any promises.

"What kind of adventure? Are we going to sneak out of the stall?"

"We're going to have even more fun than that. We're going to sneak out of the pasture when they let us out later." I tried to make my neigh sound lighthearted, but I couldn't hide the terrified squeak at the end. What am I doing? How are we going to live in the wild? We can't stay here, but I don't know how to be a wild horse! What am I thinking? I suddenly remembered something my mother had told me as a filly, before I was moved to this barn without her: Think, ponder, then decide, she'd said.

But there was no time to think. I'd made my decision, and I wasn't going to go back.

I fought to keep my creamy-white tail at a calm level and my ears in a relaxed position. I didn't want to alarm Jay. But I could tell he was still worried.

"Let's eat." I nosed him over to the trough, and he stuck his small dark nose in, snuffling the grain around with his upper lip.

We ate together, and he perked up a little when his belly was full. My own stomach was twisted in knots, and they tightened as I went over my plan in my head, questioning myself over and over. I could hardly eat more than a few bites, and eventually I left Jay to stuff himself and walked into the corner of the stall, resisting the urge to pace. I knew my nostrils and eyes were wide with tension, but I no longer cared. Jay couldn't see.

I let out a long sigh and stared off into space, trying to relax.

A while had passed. The sun had risen high in the sky, and its light was streaming in through the outside window. Jay had cheered up again and was gaily chasing a moth around the stall. I waited anxiously.

The barn door creaked open, and a human popped her head in. I sighed with relief seeing her familiar form: It was my usual caretaker. I'd given her the name Dove, after the gentle gray birds that occasionally perched on the barn rafters. She walked in with two halters, one for me and the other for Jay. Speaking gently and kindly, she stepped into the stall, tenderly brushing my nose with her fingers, her gray eyes sparkling. She looked at Jay, and her eyes went straight to his pastern and the paper on the string. Her face fell, and she wrapped her arms around his small neck and hugged him tightly, murmuring to him in a soft tone. Eventually she let go of him, tucked her shoulder-length dark hair behind her ears, and turned to me again, whispering quietly and stroking my neck. I heard my name again. *Sandpiper*. This time, it did not make me angry. My eyes softened when I looked at Dove. She'd cared for me for years, ever since I was brought to this stable as a filly. I knew she'd be upset when I left. A pang of longing shook me. I would miss the barn and its warm luxuries. I turned my head, my stomach squirming.

She slipped my purple halter over my head with gentle fingers, buckling it before moving on to Jay's sky-blue halter. Holding one lead rope in each hand, she

opened the wooden stall door again and led us out through the concrete, stall-lined aisle. I nickered at the other horses in the barn as I passed them. They'd calmed down since the incident, but some of them backed as far away from me as they could, worried by my presence, their scleras showing and their faces tense. *They're scared of me*, I realized. I stretched my speckled-white neck, trying to see my best friend in her stall by the door. The humans called her Feather. She was standing with her nose pressed against her window, staring at me in dismay. She always knew when something was wrong, and her blue eyes followed my every move. As we passed her, my heart wrenched. I stopped in my tracks, resisting Dove's urging. "Goodbye, Feather. I'll always love you. I'll think of you every day, I promise."

"What's going on?" the tall, fine-boned cremello whinnied, her tail high and her nostrils flaring. "You're leaving? Where are you going? Why? Explain!"

"I have to go. I don't know where. Away." Dove pulled harder, and I leaned back against her weight. "I'm sorry. I can't let them take Jay."

Her eyes shifted to my black colt and the paper on his pastern, and understanding dawned.

"I'm so sorry. I wish you could stay. I'll miss you more than anything." I heard her pale hooves shuffle. "I want you to stay—you have to stay! But you also have to go . . ." Conflict raged in her face, and she forced out the next words. "Have a good life, Sandpiper. Try to visit sometime. Oh, this is awful!" She kicked the stall door ferociously.

I noticed Dove had stopped pulling, and I glanced over to her. To my amazement, Feather's human had come in the door and was now communicating with Dove. Feather's pale pink halter rested on her shoulder. Feather's eyes widened. "Pasture time already?"

"It seems so." I stepped away so Feather's human could get to the door latch, and I stood patiently while she put the halter on my best friend. The human led Feather out into the aisle with me, and I nuzzled Feather's cream-colored flank. She nickered.

Dove and the other human led us out the door, our hooves clacking on the hard concrete. The sun shone brightly, and my eyes took a moment to adjust to the glare. It had snowed overnight, and a frosty breeze rattled the bare branches of the wiry trees. Jay squeaked, slipping on the ice, his tiny dark-brown hooves skittering. Dove stretched out a strong arm and lifted him back to his feet with a grunt. He stayed close to my side after that.

Dove took us to our normal pasture. The snow rested in half-melted patches on the wet grass, and icicles dripped from the wooden fences. Feather's human opened up the gate, and we were released inside. Jay immediately pranced to the other side of the field, tossing his half-grown coal-black mane. Feather stood elegantly with me, giving me a melancholy look.

"You have to leave now, don't you?" she neighed reluctantly when the humans had retreated back into the warmth of their buildings. Her beautiful cream mane whipped around her neck and head, and her blue eyes gave her a wild appearance. But she looked heartbroken.

I stepped back, took a deep breath, and took a flying leap over the fence, landing with a thud on the other side.

"I'm sorry. If I could stay, I would." I nosed her withers for what I feared would be the last time. "Goodbye, Feather."

"Farewell, Sandpiper." She moved away, giving me free access to the fence. Her posture clearly showed how wretched and grief-stricken she felt. I suddenly felt very sick. Why was I doing this to my best friend? Why had I decided to do such an inconsiderate thing?

Feather jerked her head toward the wooden barrier, her tail fluttering in the icy breeze. Her gaze was resolute.

In a daze of grief, I called Jay over with a whinny, and he cantered immediately to my side.

I took a shaky breath. "It's time, Jay. We're going to have our adventure." I flicked my ear at the fence. "I'm going to jump over first, okay? And then you can wiggle your way under."

"Okay!" He bounced eagerly, the paper flapping on his pastern giving me a firmer sense of resolve. The poor colt doesn't know what's happening. I can't tell him we're not going to come back. But this is the right thing for us.

I stepped back, took a deep breath, and took a flying leap over the fence, landing with a thud on the other side. The seriousness of my situation suddenly dawned on me, and I turned my attention to my small inky-black colt standing on the other side of the wooden posts. I nickered words of encouragement as he leaned down and wriggled out with some effort. He stood next to me, nostrils flared with excitement. A flash of pity came over me, but I didn't show it. I glanced back at Feather. The tall cremello stood inside the pasture, so close and yet so far. I nuzzled her nose again, then turned away, my heart breaking. I kept my eyes fixed on her beautiful, familiar form as I started walking away from my old life, Jay bouncing at my side, blissfully oblivious. Feather's face overflowed with anguish, her long forelock streaming in the cold wind. Eventually I wrenched my gaze from hers and faced toward the trees before me.

"WAIT!" A wild neigh came from behind me, and I whirled around. To my astonishment, Feather was suspended in the air above the fence, and landed elegantly on the other side—my side.

The side of freedom, I thought. A chill rippled down my back.

Feather galloped to me in an instant. "I'm coming with you!"

"What? When are we going back?" Jay asked curiously, peering up at me and Feather.

I braced myself to tell him, and I opened my mouth to spill the news.

No words came.

Feather glanced at me. "We're not going back, Jay," she told my colt gently, but her expression was hard and determined. "We're going to be free."

"Huh?" Jay's tail flicked in confusion. "What do you mean? What about Dove?" "We'd have lost Dove anyway. This is better. It'll be fun, little one." I fought to keep my neigh steady.

Once again, Feather had my back. "Let's run, Jay! We can run for ages and ages. We're not trapped by fences anymore!"

He perked up at that. Feather flashed me an encouraging look. "Let's go," she said to Jay, and we all picked up a trot. Feather came up to my side, our heads level. "We can do this. We'll figure it out. We're together, and that's all that matters."

We picked up a canter and then a gallop, and soon we were flying through the trees, our hooves hardly touching the mossy, snow-patched ground. The scent of pine trees overtook the smells of the hay and shavings from the barn. An overwhelming sense of freedom and determination poured into my heart like a flood, drowning any trace of trepidation. I put my head down and plunged headfirst into my new life, my dearest friend and my child at my side.

Fire



By Mabel Chaskes, 8 New York

It blazes Like an animal Trapped in a cage Its flames Reach up Grabbing the sky Its heart Is deep yellow Like the sun Darker fire Is uncontrollable Fire Points to freedom

My Changes Over the Third Grade Year

Ella reflects on the lessons she learned over the past school year



By Ella Fu, 8 California

While I was riding home during a car ride on the last day of school, I gave myself a question: "Do I think this school year was worth it for all the time that passed?" I thought that I should be able to have an answer, so I recalled every single moment that I experienced during the school year. I gave myself a reasonable answer for my question.

"Yes."

Right after the word left my lips, I tried to find reasons to back up my answer. I reflected on everything that happened and found out I had changed a lot over the year.

The changes in my height, my friendships, and appearance are all small. The biggest changes that I have made are to my maturity level, self-discipline, and my confidence in standing up to bullies.

At the beginning of the year I was childish, and since I wanted to be liked, I tried acting "cute," but this only showed me to be a silly and childish person. I have learned that it only makes people not take me seriously and makes me lose other people's respect. If I want to show the mature side of me, I have to be just myself—normal myself. I don't have to act silly, because silliness is different from humor.

Another problem I had was self-discipline. I was a laidback kid. Even when there lay an easiest-worksheet-in-the-world in front of me, I still took twenty minutes to finish because I was not focused and always reading a book, playing around with my hair, making some crafts, or doing anything else that distracted me from my work. During the year, I learned that if I'm always going to regret this someday when I'm bigger and it will be too late to fix my mistakes at that time, why don't I just start to have a willing-to-work attitude and become motivated now? I took that question to push myself into becoming focused, giving myself more work, and doing whatever's best for my future.

At last, I was scared to defend myself in front of bullies for a long time. My mom and I talked it over many times, but whenever the bullying started again, I always couldn't speak up and let the bullies walk over me. I also couldn't figure out why some girls at my school excluded me. I was depressed for a while. Finally I learned to say "stop it!" when the bullying happened. As for the excluding issue, I found out that my interests were different from these girls'. They liked bloody and violent things, and I enjoyed literature and nature, so I couldn't join their conversation. I learned that it wasn't worth my time to talk about zombies, monsters, and vampires. I decided that I would continue on my path and just ignore them.

As you can see, I did change a lot this year, and I hope you can learn from my experience too.





Easy Summertime (Acrylic) Serena Li, 10 New York

A Perfect Summer



By Lexie Dolliver, 11 Massachusetts

A perfect summer

- A hum and tweet whelms your ears to see the sunlight of the morning.
- A smell that makes your smile widen as you inhale the fresh morning air.
- A perfect summer morning,
- A hum, a tweet and a nest full of joy,
- The smell of flowers makes you want to smell them more.

A huff of an exhale,

- White fluff turns the sky into a masterpiece.
- A hum, a tweet of summer,
- A perfect summer.
- A ball and some fluff slips by as fast as a blink of an eye.
- A perfect summer.
- A sound of waves,
- The tide runs high.
- A perfect summer to spend with family.
- A summer with a breeze,
- A summer with bees and birds,
- A summer with the ocean and flowers,
- A summer to spend with family.

Two Poems



By Sofie Dardzinski, 12 Maryland

Observing the Night Sky on a Summer Solstice

Situated on the compact grass, grains of sand underlying the plant that wildly grows. Shamrock color coating the square piece of meadow, fading to a flaxen pigment at the tip of each miniscule stalk. My fingers comb through the separate blades, as sharp as an obsidian knife edge. The roots robust, planted in the layer of grit, standing stock still.

The sun is a bulbous globe of fiery light igniting the sky before it is called to sleep. As the sun passes on the work of the day, the glowing moon slides into the atmosphere with a golden halo, emitting rays of luminosity. Bright blue dissolving, the vault of heaven as clear as a polished prism, ready for the evening to engulf the luster of summer.

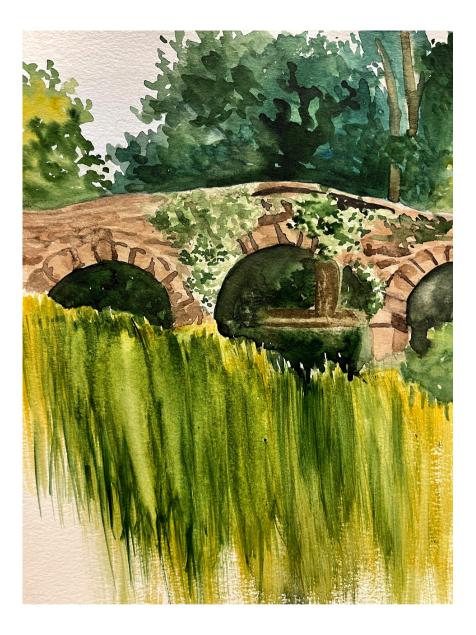
Pink streaks are painted into azure; I think of a glass of cold, refreshing strawberry lemonade. Apricot spreads evenly across the darkening sky, radiating amber highlights in rare places. Crimson red meets apricot, and they dance: moonwalking, pirouetting, spinning, twirling. After the debut of the complete sunset colors, royal periwinkle plunges with a swan dive gracing the remaining sky. I stay in my place, eyes in awe, head turned upward toward the unknown. The sun disappears from observation, leisurely obeying gravity, all sunset intensity following. Time is frozen, not passing, until the colors vanish. I wait for the superior darkness to encompass my surroundings.

Ebony black becomes the origination of night,

writing with a fountain pen across the sky, until the ebony becomes a midnight void.

In the black, blazing creatures with open wings find bliss. Riding the soft air currents that gently sway, fireflies, soaring, discovering freedom in the beauty of aviation, fearless in shining their light, prepared to reveal themselves in the velvet darkness

of the universe.

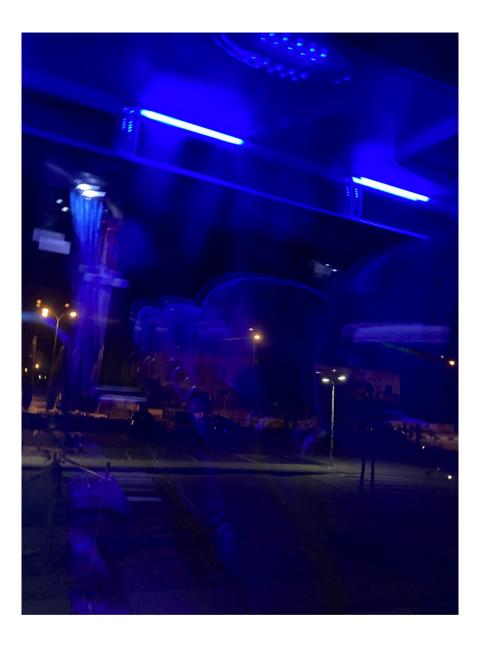




Through the Arch (Watercolor) Emma Hadzhieva, 12 Texas

Backyard

My outside workplace holds ivy, the tips of their leaves gently pointing towards the patio of brick, clustered together, the surface of the greenery shining like an emerald jewel, covering a single side of the curvature stone beneath my feet.





The Window or the Mirror (iPhone SE) Nora Giuffrida, 13 Washington, DC

A Forever Type of Thing

A musician works to build community, and a life, on the streets



By Emily Beltramo, 12 California

I lean back against the black stone pillar behind me, inhaling the smell of hot street food. My stomach growls loudly. A smoker then saunters past, leaving the suffocating smell of a cigarette behind, and I'm no longer hungry. As I see more tourists heading down the station platform, towards where a train is roaring to a stop, I pick up my guitar and begin to play a little melody. Strumming, plucking, picking, chucking. Someone drops a five in my open case, and I smile, nodding gratefully. Well, there's dinner.

This is how I spend my days. I have my little routine: Wake up, fold my scrappy blanket, pull out my guitar, put the case in front of me, and play. If I make enough for food, I'll have lunch or give some to Red, then play some more. I try to spend any money I make so it won't be stolen. I think that most pity me, but I really don't mind my lifestyle. I get along. Music is really what keeps me entertained, and sane. The beat-up guitar I found in a dumpster, case and all (lucky, I know), is by far my favorite possession (and, other than clothes, my only possession). I've been playing guitar for as long as I can remember. Red, another street musician and my best friend, taught me how to play when I was eight or so, when my mom left. I don't mean to brag or anything, but I'm pretty good. Or maybe it's just the BART station acoustics.

But one day, my little routine changed. I came up with a tune I liked, and built on that throughout the chilly morning. It turned out that I wasn't the only one that liked it, considering the mounds of green piling up in my guitar case. I was getting ready to go get myself a hot dog at the stand outside when I got the funny feeling something bad was about to happen. When you live on the street, you experience this feeling often, but know better than to ignore it. I looked around and saw a black-hooded figure behind me. However, he wasn't middle-aged, buff, and intimidating like I would have thought. Instead, he looked like a lanky teenager who hadn't yet grown into his legs, wrapped in a Goodwill coat three sizes too big.

I knew what he was going to do, so I turned around and kept playing, acting oblivious. Before I could make a plan, though, he crept in front of me, snatched two handfuls of my money, and sprinted down the platform. He was fast, but I was faster.

Most would have judged him for stealing, but most also haven't gone about their day not knowing when they would be able to eat next.

On my feet in a flash, I bolted, my arms pumping, and tackled the undersized thief. Because of the momentum, we rolled over a few times. He unsuccessfully tried to escape from my grip. I had him pinned.

When I finally got a look at his face, the sick, sinking guilt I felt made me wish I had just let him go. He looked just a year or so younger than me, maybe fourteen or fifteen. His rugged face was encrusted with dirt, blue lips cracked, and his brown eyes were wide and scared. Keeping my grip on him, just in case, I stood both of us upright.

"What's your name, man?" I asked, trying to sound sure of myself.

"Chase. Please don't hurt me!" he answered, trembling. The poor guy looked terrified.

"Nice to meet you, Chase. My name is Pick, and I'm not gonna hurt you. As long as you don't try to run, okay?" I loosened my hold on his arm slightly. His face softened.

"So, how about you give me back that money, and we can go get some hot dogs?" I suggested. He nodded quickly, so we headed up the stairs.

Chase ate as if he'd forgotten what food tasted like.

"How long has it been since you've eaten?" I questioned.

"Three days, I think," he responded quickly in between bites. I gave him a bit to finish eating, then I began again.

"I'm assuming that's why you wanted my money—for food." I gave him an inquisitive look. I could see the hesitation on his face, so I gave him a friendly nudge.

"It's okay. I know," I gestured at my few worn belongings. Most would have judged him for stealing, but most also haven't gone about their day not knowing when they would be able to eat next.

"Yeah, I was hungry," he finally answered.

"I thought so."

We both stared at the floor for a while after that. The marble that was once pristine white is now filthy, the edges of the tiles stained yellow. An idea came into my mind.

"Do you play guitar? Sing?" I asked. Chase gave me a puzzled look, then shook his head.

"You wanna stick around, learn how?" I continued. He stared at me blankly. After a moment, though, he nodded slowly.

Over the next few weeks, my routine changed yet again. I taught Chase something new every day on guitar. He was a fast learner, and he loved to play. I introduced Chase and Red too, and they got along great. Both of them love the Warriors and old rock music. And, soon enough, he was playing some pretty complicated stuff on my old guitar. We would take turns playing and singing. Although neither of us were very good at singing, we were having so much fun that we did anyway, as loudly as we could. Sometimes we would even get creative, using the guitar case like a drum. This new little duet was as much to the tourist's enjoyment as to ours. The cash piled in. For the first time in a long time, my stomach was full.

I was happier than I had been in a long time. I had Red and Chase, and I got to spend all day making music with them. I could afford better food, I was healthier. However, I still felt like something was missing. This was a foreign feeling for me, since I had, ironically, always felt secure. The street was my home, and it wasn't perfect, but I was content. Then it was different. Although the change was for the better, it still unsettled me.

"You okay, Pick?" Chase asked, looking concerned. I snapped out of my trance. Nodding, I rubbed my tired eyes. Then I looked at Chase, and I decided what we should do.

"Hey dude, no offense, but your clothes are pretty grimy."

"I live in the Civic Center BART Station. Can't afford Gucci," he said sarcastically, rolling his eyes. "Plus, I could say the same about you."

"How about we take what we made yesterday and go to the Salvation Army store?"

"Sure."

We dropped off the guitar with Red, then headed to the Salvation Army. With the \$45 we made yesterday, we each got a T-shirt, a coat, and a pair of pants. We were laughing at ourselves, two street kids walking down the road holding big shopping bags, when we both stopped. An average-looking restaurant stood in front of us. It had always been there, but what had caught our attention was the sign out front. It read LOCAL BAND/MUSICAL ACTS WANTED — NO PRIOR GIG EXPERIENCE NEEDED, IF YOU PLAY OR SING, GIVE US A RING! To anyone else, this would have been a typical American restaurant that is probably also a health code violation. But to us, it was like a fantasy, a dream. Chase and I glanced at each other, then walked into the restaurant.

The hostess at the front gave us a funny look (not surprisingly—we didn't necessarily look very professional) but brought us to a back room anyway when we asked about the gig. The manager was a very short, very plump man with kind eyes and a big grin. We talked to him for about five minutes, and I played him a little something on the guitar he had.

"You've got the job, kids," he smiled. "Can you start tomorrow night?"

"I think we can fit it in," I said.

An hour before we were supposed to be at the restaurant, we went into the station bathroom to put on our new clothes and wash our faces to the best of our abilities. When we showed up, Paul, the manager, showed us how the microphone worked. I was a little nervous that people would think that we didn't belong there, with our shabby clothes and questionable vocals. But when I began to play, and the sound of my guitar filled the room, I knew that this was exactly where we belonged. Strumming, plucking, picking, chucking, I played the intro of a song we had been working on. Chase's voice broke when he began singing, but he kept going, and I thought he had never sounded better. Everyone loved us. We kept going, and people took videos, applauded, and even sang along when they recognized a song we played. The way music connects humans will never cease to amaze me.

Two hours later, I had more money than I had ever seen at once in my hand. But that wasn't even why I couldn't stop grinning. I had just had the best day of my life, and Paul said he wanted us back again the next night.

I thought that the whole restaurant gig was going to be a one-or two-time type of thing. But now, being paid for doing what I love alongside my best friend, I think it feels more like a forever type of thing.





Tideline (OPPO Find X2 Lite) Savarna Yang, 13 New Zealand





Upon Reflection (Canon EOS Rebel XS) Enzo Moscola, 13 California

Dad's Stocks



By Mia Xu, 11 Beijing, China

Up and down and up and down, that's how stocks work. Up and down and up and down, that's how Dad works. Then stocks go that's what's happening now. So Dad's emotions go and suddenly he is silent. He is silent like the stocksafraid. And now I realize I care about stocks.



Scan this QR code to access educational material for this poem.





Tranquility (Needle and thread) Tatum Lovely Pennsylvania

Cousins (Part II)

Nicky discovers some items in Mrs. Fleming's attic that unearth upsetting memories from the past



By Emily Chang, 14 New York

This is the second of three installments of Emily Chang's novella, which received honorable mention in our 2022 Book Contest. You can read the beginning of Nicky's story in our May/June issue.

Chapter 8: Why the Second Suitcase Had Such a Weird Shape

"I've got Saturday appointments booked now," my mom told me as she gathered her things. "Sorry about that, Nicky, but I won't be home when you get back."

It was Saturday morning, and my mom was rushing around the kitchen and getting ready to go out. Since Ms. Fleming's house was on the way, she would drop me off there before going to her appointments for today. I'd walk back home as usual.

"It's fine," I said. Remembering how I still had half of Ms. Fleming's attic to go through, I added, "I might stay there a little longer too."

"As long as it's okay with Ms. Fleming," she said. "And you still have your summer homework to finish, so don't stay too long, okay?"

"Okay," I sighed. Summer homework seemed to be always haunting me. And I still had that essay to figure out. Given the choice, I'd much rather help at Ms. Fleming's house than write an entire essay. Unfortunately, I didn't have the choice.

We got to Ms. Fleming's house, and my mom drove off to her appointment.

Ms. Fleming opened the door. She was wearing a giant yellow raincoat and leaning on her cane.

"Is it going to rain?" I asked, looking up at the sky. There were only a few gray clouds in the distance.

"No, at least I don't think so. I'm just a little cold, that's all." She slipped on the hood of her jacket.

Cold? It was ninety degrees outside. But maybe she'd turned her air conditioning on too high.

When we went inside, I checked on the air conditioning. It was off.

"Laila's birthday party was beautiful, wasn't it?" Ms. Fleming said, before I could ask any more about the raincoat. "It was so wonderful to see you there, too."

"Uh... yeah," I said, suppressing my sigh. I'd tried to shove the birthday party away into a corner of my mind after it was over, but I should've known Ms. Fleming would bring it up.

"I wanted to stay a bit longer, but I was getting tired. I'm sure the rest of the party was lovely, though."

I nodded. "It was fine. There was cake." I didn't mention that I'd given Alex half my slice because there was just too much pink frosting to swallow.

"Cake is not great for my age, but I'm glad you could enjoy it," Ms. Fleming said. "Oh, and I was going to ask you—do you think you'll be able to bring the boxes down?" she asked, to my relief, changing the subject. "I didn't want you to do it last week, in case ... well, oh, there was a reason, but I can't remember what it was."

"That's okay, I can do it. And maybe—" I paused, thinking of the cluttered mess that still hadn't been sorted out up there. "What if you look through the stuff I put in the boxes last time while I finish getting the other half organized? And then I could bring the rest down."

"That is a good idea," she said, smiling.

I pulled down the attic steps, ran up, and switched on the light. There were about ten boxes from last time, and I started with the ones that held the fancy clothes.

I brought the first heavy cardboard box to the kitchen, which had the most space in Ms. Fleming's house. I figured she might want to spread things out to look at them all. Ms. Fleming must have thought so too, since she was waiting there to take the box from me and set it on the floor.

It took me ten trips up and down to get everything from the last time downstairs. The barricade of boxes lined one entire wall of the kitchen. My ankle was starting to ache after that marathon—flights of stairs probably weren't too good for it—but I headed back up to the attic anyway to finish my part of the job.

I thought this time around would be easier, since I had already finished organizing half of the stuff and probably knew more about where things were. But it turned out that last week had been the easier half.

The things that were left seemed too large to fit in boxes, like a long, wire rabbit cage I hadn't seen before. The rolled-up rug was taller than I was, and so was the mannequin. The old radio must have weighed forty pounds or more. And I didn't even try to bother with the giant bed frame.

I put the picture frames away, though, and the other things that fit into boxes an old chess set, a small typewriter (which was heavy, but I managed), a pair of purple fashion boots.

Leaving most of the larger items where they were felt sort of incomplete, but I would have to ask Ms. Fleming what to do with them. I went to the smaller cardboard boxes next, just to check and see what was inside.

The next box was filled with papers, probably from Ms. Fleming's school days. The one on the top was titled *Quarter 4 Honor Roll*, and there were many more certificates like it underneath. *Annual Science Fair Winner. Excellence in Musicianship*. Clearly, Ms. Fleming had been a much better student than I was.

In the middle of the row of boxes were the two suitcases. The first one, metallic

purple with wheels, was empty. And the second one was black with a sticker that said Phyllis Fleming on the side. But it had such a strange shape—larger and rounder at one end than the other. What could it possibly be made for?

I unclasped the buckles on the suitcase and found the answer.

It wasn't a suitcase at all. It was a case for a French horn.

The horn, sitting in the velvet lining of the case, was a beautiful shining gold that caught the faint light and tossed it around the room. The metal was smooth and clean, and only when I looked closely could I see the tiny dents and scratches that told of use. I'd seen horns in my school's band but had never heard or looked at one up close. I was almost afraid to touch the instrument, especially since I had no clue how to handle it.

I tugged open a strap on the inside of the case, and when it opened, sheet music came spilling out before I could catch it. I saw American Overture, Selections from the Wizard of Oz, The Firecracker (Xylophone Feature). Carefully, I put the music back together and tucked it into the pouch inside the case.

I closed the case slowly, making sure that the instrument was secure before I fastened the buckles. Then I glanced to my side. There were a few more small boxes left that I hadn't gone through, but I decided to just bring them downstairs and check later.

Because I needed to ask Ms. Fleming about this.

When I carried down the few boxes from my efforts at organization, Ms. Fleming was standing by the ones already in the kitchen and seemed to be almost finished looking through them all. The hood of her raincoat was off now.

"It looks like you did a wonderful job, Nicole," she said, smiling. "I might keep some of these books down here. I'm not quite sure what to do with the other things, though. I'd hate for you to have to carry them all back up again . . ."

"It's fine," I told her quickly. "I don't mind. It's ... exercise, I guess."

Ms. Fleming laughed. "Yes, I suppose so. But would you mind helping me decide?"

"Just after I get a few more things downstairs," I said. I definitely hadn't forgotten about the French horn.

It took me a while to carry it into the kitchen, especially with my aching ankle. But when I brought it, I heard Ms. Fleming gasp. "That's my—you found—it's been in the back of my mind, bu—" She stared at me in amazement.

I set the case down on the floor. I couldn't keep the grin from my face now.

"I didn't know you played the horn. That's so cool!"

"It's been so long since—I mean, I don't know why I put it away ..." Ms. Fleming walked over and unbuckled the case, slowly shaking her head.

"Can I hear you play?" I asked eagerly, sitting down on one of the kitchen chairs.

"I haven't practiced in forever," she said, a little embarrassed that I had now become her audience.

But she took out the horn anyway, drawing in a quiet breath as she picked it up and fingered the keys. She took out a silver mouthpiece from a pocket inside

Whatever song she was playing—it had a sort of melancholy feeling, which sometimes became forceful and energetic. Like someone crying.

the case, too, and put it on the horn.

She brought it to her lips and played.

The rich sounds of the notes resonated through the room. Ms. Fleming might have thought she was out of practice, but that didn't make any difference to me right now.

Now it seemed that she had started a song. A little flurry of notes ran down a scale, and then went back to long, sweet tones. The only other sound in the room was the crinkling of Ms. Fleming's raincoat as she moved.

I'd never really heard a horn before, and I closed my eyes to listen to the warm sound of it. Whatever song she was playing—it had a sort of melancholy feeling, which sometimes became forceful and energetic. Like someone crying.

She got to the end of a phrase and paused. "That's all I remember. Just the first little part."

I stared, and for a moment I didn't realize that my mouth was hanging open. I caught myself and clapped a little instead. "That was...amazing," I managed to say.

Ms. Fleming laid the horn on her lap and glanced down, smiling shyly. "Thank you," she said in a quiet voice. "I don't know why I put it away for so long. There must have been a reason, but I don't recall." She looked up at me. "I used to play in bands, though. And *that* was so much fun—"

She set the instrument back in its case and began rummaging through the velvet pocket. She pulled out the pile of music that I had accidentally dropped earlier. "Yes! This was some of what we played. Did you see any other boxes with music?"

I shook my head no, but stopped when I remembered the small boxes I hadn't bothered to look through before. Quickly, I located those boxes and brought them to the table.

The first box Ms. Fleming opened was indeed the sheet music. She leafed through the papers, her smile growing wider with each page she passed, and she was practically glowing when she reached what she'd been looking for.

Ms. Fleming pulled out some music stapled together. Horn Concerto, Op. 8 (Franz Strauss) titled the first page. "This is one of my favorites. What I played earlier." She began humming the music to herself, while I reached for another of the small boxes to see if there was more music inside it.

But when I opened that box, I found photos, not music. Looking closely, I could tell that most of them were from concerts. I picked up the one at the top, which was of a younger version of Ms. Fleming. In the photo, she was standing on a stage, dressed in a black sparkly sweater and holding her horn.

"Oh!" Ms. Fleming saw the new box in my hands. I tried to give it to her, but it turned out that she wasn't ready.

The box toppled over between us, and I had to quickly stuff the photo I was holding into my shirt pocket to catch the other ones spilling out. A bunch of the pictures scattered all over the table. "Sorry," I said, trying to get everything together. But then Ms. Fleming snatched up a photograph at the edge of the table. "This one is when we were at the gardens," she exclaimed, showing it to me. In the picture, she and three other horn players were standing together in front of a stone wall. "Our quartet was wonderful."

She picked up another photo. "And this is the one when my shoe fell off. It was two sizes too big. We were walking up the ... I didn't want to drop my horn ... and I almost fell into the water ..."

She began laughing hard and let go of the photograph, which drifted onto the table. Though I didn't know exactly why, I started laughing too.

When we both calmed down, she continued through the photos that lay all over the table, offering parts of anecdotes with each. I nodded along, since although she didn't finish every story, I could get a taste of what had happened behind each photograph. Her many friends in the music world. Her frequent mishaps during concerts—which she seemed to find funny now, though they clearly hadn't been so to her in the past.

I had never seen this side of Ms. Fleming before—this love of music and people and reminiscence. And though she sometimes would pause at some photographs, not sure of the exact events pictured, overall she seemed happier than I had ever seen her before.

So right now, I was smiling as much as she was, though for a different reason.

"Well, I really have to thank you, Nicole," Ms. Fleming said, putting down the photos she was holding. Her face was shining with happiness. "I never would have been able to go through all of these without you. And my horn too!" She sighed.

"It's no problem," I said. "And, I mean, I don't know anything about music ... but ... you're really good at the horn."

"Oh, I..." She looked away, laughing softly again. "Well, I'm happy you think so. But it was so long ago. I don't know why I haven't practiced ... but I'm not as good as I used to be." The laughs turned into coughs.

Ms. Fleming cleared her throat, pulling her raincoat close around her. She stared wistfully at the photograph she'd been holding, which showed her and a flute player sitting on a wooden platform and laughing together. "It was so long ago."

Chapter 9: Why a Raincoat Came in Handy

We had spent so much time looking through the photographs from her concerts that we'd nearly forgotten about the other things there. Only when Ms. Fleming picked up a photograph of herself in a purple sparkly dress (which I saw was the same one I'd seen in a box earlier) did she realize, "I haven't finished going through all the other things yet."

Slowly, she pushed the photos to one side of the table. "Ah, well. I can look through all those later. If you could help me decide what to keep—besides my music things, of course?"

"Sure. Which ones did you go through already?" I asked, getting off my chair.

Ms. Fleming turned around, her raincoat crinkling. "Well, the books, I think, and I do want to keep the napkin holder . . . actually, I've seen almost everything, except that box"—she pointed to a small one, which I was pretty sure held the four journals—"and the other ones you brought down just today." She reached down for the box of journals. "I'm not sure what this could be," she said as she was about to open it.

But then her eyes widened when she saw the box's contents. She didn't say anything, but lifted out the journals one at a time. She flipped open the notebook at the top, the orange one, and silently began reading from somewhere in the middle.

As she turned a page, her face crinkled in a frown. Then, without warning, she let go of the notebook and it fell onto the table with a loud thud.

"Are you okay?" I asked, a little confused.

Her sigh was strangely heavy. "Yes ... yes. You found these in the attic?" She glanced at me and then back to the journals. "Oh, yes. I remember you told me ..."

She picked up the pale green journal, riffled through it, and got to a page close to the end. There was only a small section of the page in my line of sight, but it was all blacked out with marker.

Ms. Fleming shut that one too and looked up. There was a disquieted look in her eyes that scared me. I suddenly felt how uncomfortably warm it was in the house without the air conditioning on.

"Well, you haven't looked through everything, right? Did you see ... um, this?" I rushed to fill in the space left by her strange silence and picked up a large box that sat against the wall. Realizing that it was the box full of fancy dresses, I pushed it over.

"Oh, these." Turning away from the journals on the table, she stood up to investigate the box. She tugged open the flaps of the box slowly, and her face brightened a little when she saw the item on top—the shimmery purple gown. "Yes, I have seen these. And you know I said that you could keep anything you liked, right? What about this one?" She held up the dress.

"Well ... I mean ... I'm not a huge fan of fancy clothes," I said apologetically.

She smiled slightly then. "That's all right. I should have known. I just wanted to make sure. But if we find something, really, I don't mind if you keep it. I have too much anyway."

"Okay, thanks. I'll keep my eyes peeled."

"You know—" She put the dress back into its box and looked at me. "I was just thinking of your cousin. Do you think Laila would . . . I could ask her when she comes over on Wednesday . . . Oh, I should have given the clothes to her as a birthday present!"

If Ms. Fleming thought she had too much, *Laila* had a rocket-ship load of fancy clothes. Why would she even be thinking of Laila right now?

Forgetting my concern over Ms. Fleming's uneasy look before, I said, "Laila doesn't need any more stuff." This came out a little more bitter than I'd meant it to.

Ms. Fleming frowned a little. "What makes you think so?" she asked.

"She has ... everything," I said, and this time I didn't even try to keep the scorn

I sat up in my chair, realizing that something had gone really wrong.

out of my voice, since I knew I'd fail. "And she's not afraid to show that to people too. I don't know how to explain it. She's just ..."

I stopped, seeing Ms. Fleming's expression growing more and more troubled. "What's wrong?" I asked.

"You don't have as much as she does? Is that all that bothers you?"

I shook my head, frustrated with myself. I didn't know how to say this right. I didn't know how to explain Laila's eagerness to pick a fight with me ever since we'd known each other, how she was always bragging about something or other, how the rest of her family was so nice but she somehow wasn't, because she was Laila, self-absorbed, obnoxious Laila Alicie Kenton von Luzenborg.

"I think you have just as much," Ms. Fleming said quietly, bringing me out of my angry thoughts. "Aren't you cousins? Both of you have a wonderful... family ... And the birthday party ..."

She broke off, coughing, and leaned on the table. Her coughing fit lasted for a whole minute.

I sat up in my chair, realizing that something had gone really wrong. "Sorry ..." I said. "I didn't mean to get steamed. I just don't think Laila needs your nice things, is all."

"Nicole," Ms. Fleming said, looking down at me again. "I just want to say—well, you know—things aren't forever. That—" she gestured vaguely over toward the photographs strewn all over the table—"Well, if you have nobody—you don't—" She started coughing again.

This time I got to my feet. "Do you need water?" I asked. "Why don't you sit down?"

"No," she said, and there was a haunted urgency tugging at her voice. "No. I don't, I need you to—We lose people so fast. Because we don't bother to—"

Despite her denial, I went to the sink, filled a glass of water for Ms. Fleming, and brought it over for her to drink. She clearly wasn't well. I tried to silence the worry in the back of my head, because that wouldn't help. Listening to what she was saying might help.

"—and you're a wonderful neighbor," she was saying, but her voice shook as she put on the hood of her raincoat. "And I'm so lucky to have you—and Laila but what if I didn't—what if you didn't—" She started shaking all over.

"Are you okay?" I asked, desperate, because she clearly wasn't okay. "Can you tell me what's wrong? I can . . ." I stopped. I had no idea what I could do. I could barely understand her fragments of speech.

The water glass slipped out of her hands and wobbled on the table. She said something too soft for me to catch. "What was that?"

"I think we all have enough," she breathed in a whisper so quiet I could barely hear it.

And then she leaned forward, her hands on the table, and didn't say anything more but stared straight ahead.

"Ms. Fleming?"

No answer.

"Ms. Fleming, can you—can you hear me?" I felt panic rising in my throat. What had happened to her? What should I do?

"Are you okay? Do you need me to call my mom?"

I waited, my heart pounding.

Still there was no response—Ms. Fleming only continued to stare into space.

Frantic, I flew to the telephone. My fingers were trembling as I dialed my mom's number.

"Mom? It's me, Nicky. I'm at—"

Muffled sounds came from the other end. "Nicky? Is that you? This signal is horrible. Hold on, let me—" More crackly sound.

Then, "Are you still there?" Her voice was clearer now.

"Yes!" I gasped. "I'm at Ms. Fleming's house—something happened to her." I glanced at Ms. Fleming's frozen figure at the table and held the phone tighter. "I don't know what to do—can you come over? Please?" I gripped the phone with both hands, pressing it hard to my ear.

"Oh. Oh, I'm so sorry, I'm half an hour away right now at Sandalwood County. I can get to you, but—" She was interrupted by more crackling sounds.

"I can get back, but it'll take a while. Nicky, don't worry, okay? I think Aunt Kay might be around. Try calling her, she might be able to get to you first. I'll be on my way, though. Just stay calm, okay?"

"Okay." I knew I wouldn't be able to stay calm, but I could follow her other orders. I hung up and called Aunt Kay's number as fast as I could.

It seemed an eternity before she picked up.

"Hello?" Finally my aunt's voice came on.

"Aunt Kay, it's Nicky and I'm at Ms. Fleming's house and there's something wrong with her and I need help, and my mom's too far away and she said I should call you, so can you come over?" It came out all in a rush, but I didn't care. How had things escalated so fast?

"I'll be right there." Aunt Kay didn't ask any questions.

I looked out the window, where raindrops were just starting to fall. When would she get here?

Ms. Fleming stirred then, surprising me. I spun around to see her moving.

She looked like she was about to walk to the other side of the kitchen, but didn't.

"Ms. Fleming?" I said cautiously, but she didn't answer. The look in her eyes was frighteningly blank. I felt the panic rising again.

But then, to my relief, I heard Aunt Kay at the door.

I let her into the house quickly. "What's the problem?" she asked, hurrying in, but then stopped in her tracks when she saw the situation.

It was hard to force the words out. "Ms. Fleming and I were just talking, and then she sort of got—I don't know, she sort of—well, I don't know if she's conscious right now, and I—"

"Ms. Fleming?" Aunt Kay came close to her. Ms. Fleming turned her head, but

didn't seem to see me or Aunt Kay standing there.

I stood to the side, twisting and twisting my hands together. "Do you know what's wrong?"

"I don't," Aunt Kay sighed, taking Ms. Fleming's hands in hers. "But I think we should get her to the hospital. Nicky, you did the right thing, calling me."

Somehow, Ms. Fleming could walk when Aunt Kay guided her forward slowly. I rushed to open the front door for them.

Over my shoulder, I glimpsed the piles of boxes and photographs and our unfinished day. It felt so wrong to leave it all behind, all messy and scattered. But I had to shut the door behind us.

The sky was clouding over, a darkening gray, though it was still the early afternoon. Aunt Kay's car was waiting outside in the rain. "I can drop you off at home later," she said to me as she tried to bring Ms. Fleming down the front step.

I shook my head no. I couldn't slow them down.

"I can get home by myself," I choked out. And before Aunt Kay could have a chance to argue, I turned and ran down the street.

My sandals slapped loudly on the ground, a harsh beat to accompany the distant thunder. My ankle was throbbing, but I didn't stop until I reached home. By then, the rain was beating down harder and the sidewalks were slick and wet, and so was I.

Shivering, I unlocked the door and then went through the house, closing all the windows. When that was done, I sat down in front of my desk.

What was I doing here? I stared at the papers scattered on the desk. My unfinished letter to Aunt Illy. The summer homework packet, also unfinished. I didn't bother to touch either of them. I didn't bother to push the sopping hair out of my face.

What had happened to Ms. Fleming?

My mind flipped through everything that had taken place this afternoon. It had all happened so fast.

And then I became conscious of something that was sticking to my shirt. I looked down, and realized that one of Ms. Fleming's photographs was still in my shirt pocket. The one of her standing on the stage with her horn, smiling.

I took out the photo and laid it on my desk. It was wet and wrinkled.

I sat there, numb. I couldn't bring myself to do anything. I just stayed in my room, waiting for my mom to come home. Water dripped from my wet hair and clothes. I didn't feel like getting a towel.

Outside, thunder and lightning crashed. Rain pounded against my window. And the fact that Ms. Fleming had been wearing a raincoat was cold comfort.

Chapter 10: Why There Was an Argument about the Tesla's Shade of Blue

When I woke up the next morning, all traces of last night's thunderstorm had vanished. Sunlight streamed in, and a light breeze blew through my open window.

The weather was perfect for spending a day at the lake, and I knew we'd be doing just that today. It was almost enough to let me believe that yesterday's events had just been part of a bad dream.

But I knew they weren't. My mind rushed back to the previous afternoon.

When my mom had finally come home yesterday, she had phoned Aunt Kay, who was at the hospital. They had had a long talk, discussing all the responsibilities and legal decisions and problems there would be, since they didn't know how to contact any of Ms. Fleming's relatives, or if she had any. The conversation had continued into the evening, and eventually Aunt Kay had decided to skip our outing today, since she still had to figure out things.

Now, as I lay in bed, staring at the ceiling, my worries continued to swirl. I wished that I wouldn't have to go to the lake with everyone and feign happiness, either. I wished I could stay with Aunt Kay, who was trying to sort things out for Ms. Fleming at the hospital.

But I would have to get this day over with. I dragged myself out of bed and took as long as possible to get dressed.

When I got downstairs, my mom was already packing lunches for us and all our relatives. Sometimes she could seem like a machine—always able to get things done, no matter how hard they were, no matter what other distractions were going on. I didn't understand it.

We had planned to meet up at Aunt Kay and Uncle Pierre's house. When my mom and I arrived there, their family (minus Aunt Kay) and the little cousins were already waiting and packing things into their cars. And, after looking around, I realized that Laila wasn't there either.

I slunk around to the other side of the car—the Kenton von Luzenborg Tesla, which my mom had driven back here yesterday so we could use it for the family trip—where I thought no one else would be.

But I turned out to be wrong.

Laila was already there, crouched beside the car door. She glared at me. I backed off, miffed that she would give me a dirty look like that for absolutely no reason.

And then I heard a car door slam, and a familiar voice sing out, "Hey, it's my favorite family!"

It was Aunt Illy.

I came out from behind the car. There she was, greeting everyone and holding little Rose, who was clutching a white blanket with a rabbit face on one of the corners.

"Hi, Nicky! You're here!" Aunt Illy caught sight of me and came over.

"Hi, Aunt Illy," I said, trying to be cheerful. After all, I'd been looking forward to seeing her for weeks. But I couldn't shake the anxiety from my mind, and I couldn't bring myself to do anything more except plaster a smile to my face.

Maybe she didn't know that I was faking it, but Aunt Illy seemed to notice something. "You okay?" she asked.

I shrugged. Rose reached forward, trying to grab my hair. I ducked out of the way and made a silly face at her to avoid Aunt Illy's question. Rose crossed her eyes.

"All right. Well, I've got something in my car to show you, okay?" Aunt Illy bounced Rose in her arms, who giggled.

"Oh, sure," I said, and now my curiosity distracted me just a little. I wondered what she had this time. Aunt Illy always brought the best presents. Like the time she'd gotten Rollerblades for me when they were just what I had wanted, even though I hadn't told her that at all. And before that, when she had sent a mesh bag with *Nicole Kenton (species: fish)* embroidered on it, which I'd used as my swim bag from then on.

But I doubted that even the best presents could erase any of my anxiety.

"Kenton kiddos!" Aunt Illy called. "Come on over here!"

Alex and Tilly came running. "Tilly rhymes with Illy," Tilly announced.

"That's true," Aunt Illy agreed. "You know what else rhymes? *Silly* and Tilly and Illy." She tickled Tilly, who giggled.

Adrian and Julien came over from where they were helping to pack beach chairs into their car. Julien was carrying something on his back in a patterned case—his ukulele. And Laila arrived beside us last, a stormy expression still on her face.

"I want to show y'all a few things—," Aunt Illy began, but Tilly interrupted. "Is it glue sticks?" she asked dubiously.

Aunt Illy did a double take. "What? Glue sticks?"

"Last time someone gave me glue sticks," Tilly said, her face pinching up.

"She doesn't like glue sticks," Alex explained. "Once, she got an art set from somebody and there were glue sticks in it. She doesn't like how they're like sticky worms, and she doesn't like the hole in the middle."

"Oh, I see," Aunt Illy said, nodding, as if she totally understood this irrational fear of Tilly's. But I could see my older cousins' faces twitching, as if they were trying to suppress their smiles.

"She's also scared of worms and the mailman and humidifiers," Alex continued. "And people's nostrils going like—*this*." He turned up his nose and put his face next to Tilly's.

"Stop it!" Tilly tried to kick her brother in the shin. Alex avoided the kick, and then moved as if to shove her away. But Aunt Illy intercepted them both.

"Okay, okay. Alex, we don't need you to show off your nose. And what I've got is better than glue sticks or nostrils or any of those things," she said, pulling the two of them apart. "Adrian, would you get the crate from my trunk? It says 'White Copy Paper' on the outside."

Adrian returned with the wooden crate and set it down on the driveway. "Tilly first. Not a glue stick," Aunt Illy said, lifting out a stuffed giraffe from the top.

Tilly's eyes widened. "But I love—how did you know, Aunt Illy?" She hugged the giraffe close to her chest immediately when Aunt Illy handed it to her.

Alex picked up the next item himself. It was a book titled *Knock Knock Jokes for Kids.* "As if you need any more," Adrian teased, but Alex sat down right there on the driveway and started leafing through the pages.

The notebook was nice, but—I'd never kept a journal before. And seeing it made me think back to Ms. Fleming and her piles of journals.

I wouldn't have expected the next gift to be for me—maybe for Laila, since it was pretty much what I'd gotten for her birthday. But Aunt Illy was definitely taking out a blue leather notebook that had *Nicole* stamped in gold letters on the front cover.

"You know how I was saying your writing skills are better than you think?" Aunt Illy said to me.

I recalled her letter. "Um ... I still don't know about that, though."

"Really? Well, you still might find this helpful."

I took the notebook from her hands and opened it. It was a good size. The inside pages were dotted instead of lined, and there were two ribbon markers.

"Ooh! It's pretty," Tilly said, standing on tiptoe to get a good look at it.

I managed to muster a "Thanks" to Aunt Illy. The notebook *was* nice, but—I'd never kept a journal before. And seeing it made me think back to Ms. Fleming and *her* piles of journals. The blacked-out page. Her awful episode after that, and where she was now...

I suddenly felt nauseous, and though I knew Aunt Illy had good intentions, I wanted to hide the notebook in a dark closet somewhere and never look at it again.

"Knock, knock," Alex said, interrupting my thoughts.

The rest of us did what was expected of us. "Who's there?"

"Summer."

"Summer who?"

"Summer my jokes are funny, and some aren't." Alex cracked up.

"Like summer homework," Adrian quipped.

That confused Alex. "What do you mean, summer homework?"

"Summer doing it, and some aren't," Julien chimed in.

"But what do you mean? You don't have homework during the summer, do you?" Adrian sighed. "Welcome to teenage life, buddy."

"What did you get for Laila?" Tilly, who didn't care about summer homework, was peering into the crate.

Laila's gift was a pink T-shirt that had I'M A SWIMMER. WHAT'S YOUR SUPERPOWER? on it in big black letters. Julien's was almost identical, except his read MUSICIAN instead.

"I couldn't find any that said *troublemaker*," Aunt Illy joked as she took out Adrian's present, which was a fancy brass military whistle on a silver chain.

"Knock, knock." Alex again.

"Who's there?"

"Water."

"Water who?"

"Water we waiting for? The cars are ready, I think!"

I looked up and saw that Alex was right. Aunt Carissa had just slammed the trunk of their silver minivan after her hard efforts with my mom to pack a folded tent inside. There were two kayaks on the roof rack of the minivan, and everything else seemed in place too. Julien put away Aunt Illy's crate, and the rest of us, holding our presents from her, went to get into the right cars.

I wasn't sure where my mom and I would go—we hadn't planned anything before this, except that we'd be riding with our relatives instead of driving ourselves. And, of course, that the little kids would be put in one car and the teenage boys in the other, which was what we always did for big family trips. (Aunt Kay had always said that it was how we split the noise equally, so neither driver would go too crazy.)

"I'm going with Alex and Tilly," my mom said to me. "And I think Illy's going with them"—she motioned toward the Kenton von Luzenborg Tesla—"which leaves extra seats in both cars. Where do you want to sit?"

"Maybe I'll go with Aunt Illy," I said, preferring her company over that of Alex and Tilly, who I knew from past experience often squabbled in the car. I didn't want to deal with bickering cousins right now.

But of course, Laila would be in the car with me too, and I'd be subjected to Adrian's teasing and possibly Julien's ukulele songs. But Laila seemed intent on ignoring me today, which I was totally fine with. And I could bear with her older brothers.

"Will you stop calling it 'sapphire blue,' Laila?" I heard Adrian groan as he climbed into the car after Laila and Aunt Illy got in. "It's just the plain old Tesla blue. Their only shade of blue. It's not even called 'sapphire."

So much for no bickering cousins. I took the middle seat in the second row, next to Adrian. Julien came in last and pulled down the door. Uncle Pierre was in the front.

"Um, even if they didn't mean to, it is sapphire," Laila snapped from the seat behind me. "I have an eye for color, okay? So just shush."

"Seriously, what's with you today?" Adrian muttered. To me, he said, "She's been like this all morning. Fun, am I right?"

I mumbled a slightly coherent reply. Something had just occurred to me. And the more I thought about it, the more it made sense.

Had Laila heard about what happened to Ms. Fleming? It was Aunt Kay who was absent right now, after all, and surely Laila must have received some explanation from her. And was it possible that Laila was feeling as tense as I was right now?

I glanced toward the two back seats. Laila was sitting to the left of Aunt Illy. She was staring out the tiny window in the back, muttering to herself, "I know sapphire blue when I see it."

"Ready to go?" Uncle Pierre called from the front, starting up the car. We turned out of the driveway, following the minivan.

I wasn't ready to go. I wanted to stay back, away from the sapphire blue Tesla and the lake and the sunny day and the happy people.

I looked down at the journal in my lap with my name on it. I wasn't ready to go, but they were moving on anyway.

... to be continued in the Sept/Oct 2023 issue of Stone Soup.

Lasers of the Night



By Ian Maduff, 10 Illinois

On a stormy night On Flossmoor Road Light reflecting off water Making a laser reflection.

Under the road Lasers fire up into the sky Light flows in a stream Shooting up like a fountain.

Green lights Red lights Looks like An aurora borealis.

Lasers go Up and up and up For an eternity.

Fountaining And wiggling And squiggling Into a thin rope.

Light flies everywhere Making a supernova Of green lights Red lights.

Light reflecting off Flossmoor Road Light reflecting off water.





City in Autumn (Acrylic) Tatum Lovely Pennsylvania

Three Poems



By Mary Gomes, 7 Pennsylvania

The Name

Paulina. Paulina. Paulina. It's a beautiful name. It fills my head with wonder. Does it mean something? Can people ever find a name more beautiful? Can a butterfly be named that? How many things can we know?

After the Attack

Broken homes. Sad people. A lonely town in a small valley. Can the world be worse? Who can live on an earth like this?

By the River

A beautiful river is beside me. The forest behind me. The world is a beautiful place to live. We all love our Earth. The river brings something to my mind. What could it be?





Orange Sea (Google Pixel 4a) Hannah Kail, 10 Virginia





Blue Bay (Oil) Tutu Lin, 13 Texas

Dwelling on a Memory

Alone at her family's Country House, once a gathering place for "The Cousins," the narrator reflects on summers past



By Micki Mermelstein, 11 California

I am nestled on the window seat, cocooned by the voluminous cream-colored curtains, when I look up from my book, Jennifer Nielson's *The False Prince*. I am stunned by how quiet the house is. There is no boisterous echoing noise, there is no impatient shouting, there is no raucous laughter. Lately, my visits to the Country House are solitary, quiet trips. Looking out the window, I gaze around the fertile garden teeming with wildflowers and Canadian evergreens and think about how everything has changed.

The Country House has always been the central meeting point, where The Cousins would gather each summer to play, to fight, and to just be. It was fun, it was comfortable, it was predictable. I did not know that it would not always be that way. I am the youngest of The Cousins; the oldest, Spencer, is now twenty-four. I now know about colleges, internships, and trips, and all the things that fight against the pull of the Country House. It seems that there is no one left but me. Now, I only go for a few days each year. The first summer of Covid, 2020, was the last time I went for an extended period of time, and even then, only my mom's youngest sister's children came, not the others.

As I scan the yard, perched at the window, the worn-out hammock recalls memories of seven-year-old me challenging my cousins to intense rounds of the card game Spit. I see the jungle gym Zaidie constructed by hand and reflect on how we used to play American Ninja Warrior and swing on the trapeze bars. I smile at a more recent memory of a workshop at Cirque School where we spent my birthday last year when The Cousins were in LA.

There is also Uncle Ari's motorboat and the wooden dock. I would slide off and get splinters, my feet hidden by the then-giant (size extra-small) attached water skis I have now outgrown. I can now fit into the bigger, more grown-up detached skis, but there is nobody here to drive the motorboat and nobody to cheer me on.

I take a break from my book and head down to the beach, building my first sandcastle in two years. In the distance, I can see Blueberry Island and remember the first time The Cousins dared me to jump from the rocky outcropping, eventually shoving me off the cliff, teaching me how to "fly." I unwillingly embraced my fears, and by the time I was nine I was the queen of front flips, often competing with The Cousins to see whose cannonball would make the biggest splash.

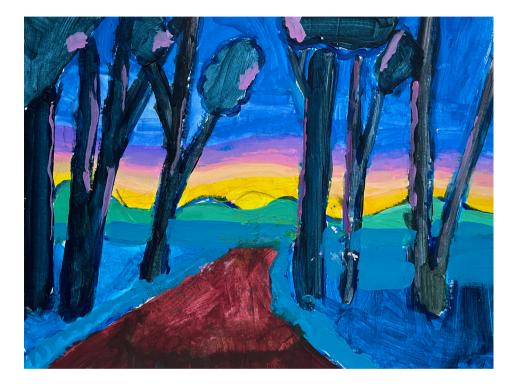
I see the red deck chairs on the dock belonging to our neighbor—my second cousin's grandmother. I catch a glimpse of the shiny new speedboat that replaced Uncle Steven's old pontoon. We used to hitch rides into town for ice cream on scorching hot days, all piling on, always careful to make sure that there were enough life jackets for the dozen of us.

After a while, I head back upstairs, shower, and start building a Lego model, the first one I have worked on in a long time. The den is cluttered with forgotten toys and half-finished projects. There is barely any room to construct, but I make do.

When Bubbie calls me down for a Shabbat dinner of chicken soup with matzo balls, brisket, and knishes, I head to the silver candelabra, recently polished and ready to light. I think of how The Cousins used to crowd around, impatiently waiting their turn, wanting to be the first one to light in order to snag the coveted center candle. When I reach for the matches, I catch a view through the window of the sun setting over the lake. I wish on the first star I see, wanting to turn back time and relive the memories of summers past.



Scan this QR code to access educational material for this memoir.





Sunset in the Shadowy Woods (Acrylic) Emma Yang, 8 California

Midfielder

Paige stumbles on an adventure that momentarily takes her mind off her friends' disagreements



By Eileen Yoo, 13 New York

Paige ran outside from the back door of her house with a soccer ball in her hand. The sun hung high in the sky, and a few wisps of clouds slowly drifted above the Earth. School was starting soon, and Paige wanted to spend every last minute of freedom basking in the August sun. Her twin brother, Luke, was already outside reading a book in a chair on the patio. Their backyard was barren except for the oak tree that their father had planted a few years ago, and a small patio. A six-foot-high fence outlined the perimeter of the backyard, and a small shed was placed near the corner.

Paige started to climb up the large oak tree, then sat down on a branch high above the ground. Her mother had always told her to stop climbing the tree in fear that she might break a bone, but Paige never listened to her. She loved how far she could see from the tree; it made her feel like she was surveying the land with a golden crown atop her head. Some days, she tried to get Luke to climb the tree with her, but he always declined.

Earlier that day, Paige had been walking home from a friend's house. She was supposed to stay there for a bit longer, but things ended abruptly when her friends got into a fight. Maria kept saying that she always did what Trey wanted to do, whereas he never did the same for her. She kept asking him if they could watch the movie she'd been waiting for all year, but he refused to. Trey kept arguing that Maria hardly even hung out with them anymore. Paige didn't say anything the entire time. She was worried that her friends would hate her if she took sides. This seemed to happen to her again and again, and it made her feel like she was suffocating or drowning underwater. Sometimes she wanted to scream at them, but she never did.

Eventually, Paige climbed back down from the treetop. She kicked her soccer ball high into the air and watched it soar above her head before it came back down. Her father was the one who got her into soccer. When she was seven, he used to teach her about the different positions, such as the goalie or the midfielder.

"The midfielder plays both offensive and defensive," her father used to tell her. "They're arguably the most important position on a soccer team."





Beyond (Oppo Find X2 Lite) Karuna Yang, 11 New Zealand Paige kicked the ball high up into the air and watched it soar past the oak tree. She started to run towards it, but tripped and fell flat on her face. After getting up, she started to head towards the ball again, but stopped when something caught her eye. She saw something shining from the rock that she had tripped on. Upon closer inspection, she saw that the rock wasn't a rock at all. It seemed like some sort of container that was buried. Paige's curiosity got the better of her, and soon enough she was heading over to the shed to grab a shovel.

"Hey, what are you doing?"

"Nothing," Paige replied. "It's none of your business."

Luke stared at her, but eventually went back to reading his book. Paige walked back to the place where she had tripped and started to dig. After several minutes, Paige bent down to take a closer look at what she had uncovered. It was a gray wooden box with golden accents. It had a silver lock and an envelope taped to the top. The box was covered in dirt and looked like it had been there for years. Paige ripped the envelope off the box and set it beside her. She thought about trying to open the lock with her hands but decided that this would be futile. Instead, she picked up the envelope and flipped it backwards. There was nothing on the back except for a stamp that looked like a cardinal.

"What's that?"

Paige jumped and turned around. She looked up and saw her brother staring at the envelope in her hand.

"It's nothing important," Paige said, as she tried to hide the envelope from him. Luke looked at her skeptically and then darted his eyes towards the box.

"Where did you find that? It was buried here, wasn't it? That's why you needed the shovel."

Before Paige could say anything, Luke ripped the envelope out of her hands. "Hey, give that back!"

"I'm not giving it to you until you tell me where you found this."

"I'll tell you if you give it back first."

"I won't give it back unless you tell me."

"Fine," Paige grumbled. "I found this box buried under the tree with the envelope taped to it. Now will you give it back?"

Luke tossed the envelope back to Paige and then bent down to look at the box. Paige tore the envelope open and took out a folded piece of paper that had *To Marcus* written on it. Paige unfolded the piece of paper, which turned out to be a letter.

"So what's in the envelope?" Luke asked as he sat down next to her.

"A letter," Paige replied. "For someone named Marcus." She looked back down at the letter and slowly read what it said:

Dear Marcus,

How have you been? It's been a while since we last saw each other. I hope that all is well.

If you are reading this, then I am dead. By the time you have found this letter, my funeral will already be over.

I trust that you have received the letter I have sent you, so you may know why I have brought you here. I will not repeat what I have said in fear that this letter has fallen into the wrong hands.

The only advice I have for you is to find the cardinal in order to gain the key.

D.C.

Paige stared at the letter for a few more moments. The word "cardinal" rang a bell, but she couldn't figure out exactly where she had seen or heard it before.

"Should we find it?" Luke asked, breaking the silence.

"Find what?"

"The key."

Paige stared at him. "Are you crazy? We wouldn't even know where to start. Besides, this box isn't for us. It's for some guy named Marcus."

"But aren't you curious? It won't hurt to open it. We'll just put it back once we know what's inside."

Paige thought about it for a moment. Her brother did have a point. She was curious to see what was inside of the box, and the thought of going on some sort of scavenger hunt excited her.

"Well, if we did want to find the key, where would we even start?"

"The forest," Luke said. "There's plenty of birds there. Maybe we can figure out what 'find the cardinal' means."

"The forest," Paige echoed. Suddenly she remembered why the word cardinal sounded so familiar.

"I found something the other week," Paige said. "When I was playing in the forest ..."

Paige led Luke over to a small clearing in the woods. In the middle of the clearing, there was a tree stump with a bird carved on it.

"Okay, now what? There's nothing else here," Luke said as he looked behind nearby bushes. Paige also started to look for some sort of clue, but found nothing.

"What if the key is buried? Like the box you found?" Luke asked. "Maybe it's underneath the stump."

Before Paige knew it, she was going back to the forest from the shed. She tossed a shovel to Luke, and they started to dig near the stump. After a few minutes, a large mound of dirt appeared next to both of them, but they found nothing.

"Maybe this isn't the right place," Paige said. "We should try to look for someplace else."

"Yeah, we probably should ... wait, I found it!" Luke suddenly exclaimed.

Paige quickly turned around and saw her brother holding a long, slender box which had a cardinal engraved on the top with gold and the year 1927 written below it.

"It was definitely made by the same person. Hurry up and open it."

Luke carefully took the lid off the elegant brown box. Inside was a fancy silver pen and another note. Luke took out the note first and read it out loud.

Paige's smile quickly turned into a frown. Her new discovery had just led them to another dead end.

Dear Marcus,

Good job on finding the first box. The second one will be much harder to find if you do not remember the place where we first met. Good luck.

D.C.

"The place where we first met..." Paige mumbled. "How are we supposed to know where that is?"

"Well, that's the whole point. This D.C. guy doesn't want anyone else finding the key except for Marcus, so obviously he'll hide it someplace that only they know."

Paige sighed. "Then what now? Should we just put the boxes back?"

"Well, we could at least try to find this place," Luke replied. "It has to be somewhere around here."

Paige thought for a while. "Are there any other clues?"

"There's nothing else in the box except for this pen."

Paige took the pen from him and carefully inspected it. It seemed like any other pen. She twisted the tip of the pen and a ray of light suddenly appeared.

"So it's a flashlight?" Suddenly, Paige had an idea. She shone the light onto the paper, and faint letters started appearing on it:

G-s-v y-j-r-w-t-v...

"... That doesn't make any sense." Paige's smile quickly turned into a frown. Her new discovery had just led them to another dead end.

Luke took the piece of paper from her and stared at it for some time. Finally, he said, "Maybe it's some sort of code. Each letter could stand for something else."

Paige tried to think of any codes she knew of. She had heard about the one that uses numbers in place of letters, and she knew Morse code, but that was about it. Then she remembered something she'd read in a mystery book once.

"Can I have that?" Luke handed the letter over to her. She turned the paper over and used the pen to write the alphabet, and then wrote the backwards alphabet below the first one.

"I got it! The answer's 'the bridge," Paige said triumphantly. "Do you know any bridges around here?"

Luke shook his head. "There is a bridge that leads to downtown, but if something was hidden there, somebody probably found it already."

"Are you sure there aren't any more?"

"Not that I know of."

Paige groaned. She didn't want to stop searching for the key after trying to

find it for so long, but they didn't have any ideas on where to look for it next.

"Maybe there's another bridge somewhere? That people just don't know about?"

"Forget it, Paige. The bridge that this guy is talking about could've been destroyed a while ago. And if what you're saying is true, how are we supposed to find a bridge no one knows about?"

"But we can't just give up now! What about the box? Maybe there's a clue we just missed."

Luke shook his head. "There's nothing else around here. You can keep searching if you want to, but I'm going home."

"Fine," Paige grumbled. "I don't need your help anyways."

As Luke headed back home, Paige walked deeper into the woods. She was lost in her own thoughts and soon realized that she had lost her way as well.

"Great. Now I'm lost and have no idea where I came from," Paige mumbled. She decided to try and retrace her steps as best she could, but when she turned around to go back, something caught her eye. As she walked closer, her suspicion was confirmed. There was a small wooden bridge on the far end of the small river. Paige ran over to it and saw another cardinal carved into one of the railings. Excitedly, Paige started to dig near the bridge. After a short amount of time, she held the second box in her hands. This one was much smaller than the first two. It was in the shape of a flat, gray square; a tattered blue ribbon held the box together.

Paige carefully untied the ribbon and opened the lid. Inside she found a golden key tied to a small paper square. Her hands shook as she untied the key and read the letter D.C. had left.

Dear Marcus,

Congratulations on finding the key. Do you remember how we used to come here every week? It seems like it's been an eternity since then.

I hope that you find the item in the box useful. I wish for you to have a happy and successful life.

D.C.

Paige quickly found her way back home and found the box in the same spot she had left it. She took out the key, carefully inserted it into the keyhole, and turned it. She heard a tiny click sound and gingerly opened the box.

Inside she found a small silver necklace with a light-blue gem in the center. It looked as if it had been there for decades. Next to it was another note.

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Dear Marcus,
Congrats! You've found the key.
I've given this necklace to you to grant you courage in times
of trouble and to remind you of our friendship.
Farewell.
D.C.
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The next thing she knew, Paige was back with Maria and Trey at Maria's house. Maria kept saying that she always did what Trey wanted to do, whereas he never did the same for her. She kept asking him if they could watch the movie she'd been waiting for all year, but he refused to. Trey kept arguing that Maria hardly even hung out with them anymore.

Paige gently touched the silver necklace she had carried in her pocket. She could feel the gem in her hand and thought back to all the letters.

Paige turned around to face Trey. "You always think about what *you* want to do! Can't we just do what someone else wants every once in a while? It won't kill you to watch a movie!"

Maria stared at Paige slack-jawed as she turned around to face her next. "And you act like you don't even want to be around us! Why don't you just watch the movie with your other friends? You're just as bad as Trey!"

Paige glared at both of them. "And *both* of you never seem to care about what *I* feel! Do you even know how sick and tiring it is to hear you bicker all the time? You act like divorced parents!" Paige stopped to take a breath before continuing. "Is it really that hard to come up with a simple compromise? We're thirteen years old! Kids younger than us can come up with better solutions than you! Just stop and think for a moment before screaming at each other."

Trey and Maria both stared at Paige after her rant, dumbfounded.

Later that day, Paige reached farther into the box. Inside was a small photo framed in gold. Paige could see the forms of two kids who looked like siblings. Both of them were grinning from ear to ear and had dirt on their clothes.

The Sun's Sister



By Katja Muckle Eizenberg, 9 Massachusetts

I am the sun So big and bold My seeds leave me When I'm old I stand and sway watching them fly away to freedom Bobbing in the breeze And finally landing in the shade beneath The trees But now it is Spring And I am blooming bright Now it is Summer and I am still a lovely sight Fall is here and I look like the moon All of my seeds will leave me soon Soon is here as they blow away Soon is here as one little one stays The moment is here The moment is sad but happy Bad but good The moment is here as the last seed blows away The moment is here as I close my eyes And enter a long winter's sleep

Highlight from Stonesoup.com

From the Stone Soup Blog



Danny, the Champion of the World

Reviewed by Philip Chen, 12 Illinois

Danny, the Champion of the World by Roald Dahl is one of the most underrated books I have read. In comparison to his other books such as *Matilda* and *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, I feel like this book doesn't get as much praise as it deserves.

Like his other famous books, *Danny, the Champion of the World* is very funny and imaginative. The story takes place around 1975 in a United Kingdom filling station (i.e., a gas station) on a country road out among empty fields and woody hills. There is a lot of traffic, and the station sees a lot of business. Behind the station is a caravan in which Danny and his father live. You would think that their life was all hard work without any fun, but you would be surprised.

Danny is a very clever, loyal, and helpful boy. He helps his father, a mechanic, fix other people's cars in the filling station. Danny's father is described as "sparky" in the book, because he always comes up with amazingly interesting ideas. Like his grandfather, his father is a master poacher of pheasants and has lots of creative ways to catch them. He also has a deep, dark secret, but I'm not telling you it!

Mr. Victor Hazell is an eccentric millionaire and is fairly well known. Every year, he holds a pheasant-shooting party, which allows people from miles around to travel to his estate to shoot pheasants. He is very conceited and loves his fame. His shooting party has drawn lots of wealthy people to shoot pheasants in trees and then keep the birds for themselves. Danny and his father are very poor and haven't eaten pheasants in a long time, so they want to eat them now. Mr. Hazell is the archenemy of Danny's father, so the father and son have to come up with a plan to stop Hazell's big shooting party.

What is Danny's master plan for catching pheasants, and most importantly, will it work? And what makes him the Champion of the World? Find out in *Danny, the Champion of the World*, a fascinating novel recommended for anyone over the age of eight that will keep you turning the pages. A master storyteller, Dahl never disappoints his readers with his vivid and hilarious detailed descriptions of events. Moreover, his characters are fun, mischievous, and touching. I was especially touched by Danny's close relationship with his father. The loving bond between them makes *Danny, the Champion of the World* a memorable book that tickles and warms your heart.

You can read the rest of Philip's piece at https://stonesoup.com/post/danny-the-champion-of-the-world/.

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: <u>https://stonesoup.com/stone-soup-blog/</u>.

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

Éowyn Clifford, 13 Finn Geisler, 13 Rhea Kumar, 12 David Kwon, 10 Avery Lee, 12 Major Santiago, 9 Cameron Schoepfer, 11 Joshua Thomas, 12 Annabelle Ward, 11

POETRY

Lilly Borchers, 11 Gracie Catone Liebmann, 8 Illaria Liedtke, 13 Phoebe Rosenberg-Shukla, 11

MEMOIR

Eila Gandhi, 11 Asahi Kubota, 11 William Ouseph, 11 Olivia Petronis, 11 Cameron Schoepfer, 11 Mila Wilson, 11

ART

Dylan Li, 10

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