

Stone Soup

The Magazine by Young Writers & Artists



Illustration by Catherine Chung, age 12, for "Answers in the Sky," page 43

THE GIRL NEXT DOOR

Hazel can't see past Via's blindness

ANSWERS IN THE SKY

"The home you seek lies in what you believe is possible"

Also: What dangers lurk in Yeron Forest?

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Stone Soup

The Magazine by Young Writers & Artists

VOLUME 44, NUMBER 4
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Finn can't take it anymore, so he runs away

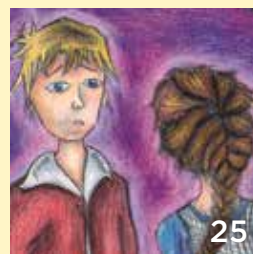
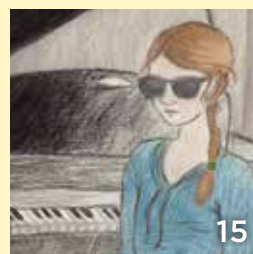
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Editor's Note

Prejudice. It comes in many forms, and it's never good. "Dislike, hostility, or unjust behavior, deriving from unfounded opinions," says the dictionary. Two stories in this issue don't just tell us prejudice is wrong, they show us. In "The Girl Next Door," Hazel is incensed when her mom arranges for her to give piano lessons to Via, a blind girl. Hazel falsely believes that Via's differences make her "alien" and "unapproachable," so she doesn't even try to become her friend. Only after she hurts Via's feelings does she realize her mistake. In "Home," a cashier tells Taja, a student from India, "Go back to your own country!" How awful! Our country is made up of immigrants from all over the world. No one has the right to talk to another person that way. Happily, a kind woman comes to Taja's defense. Think about prejudice, in yourself or others. Can you get your message across in a story?

— Gerry Mandel

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ON THE COVER Catherine Chung says, "I was born an artist, musician, and dancer. My favorite place to create my artwork is my parents' restaurant, where most of my childhood memories took place. I especially love painting realism with watercolors and acrylics! In the future, I want to be a journalist, designer, and cartoonist."



The Mailbox



I absolutely LOVE Alia Tu's illustrations for my story, "Iris in the German Garden" [January/February 2016]. They are so beautifully detailed, and exactly as I imagined them! I especially love Alia's drawing of the garden. The lion is incredible, and the cat chasing a butterfly in the background makes everything even more complete. I can't tell you how amazed I am at the illustrations. Thank you SO much, Alia, for making the story come to life.

Maisie Bilston, 11

New Haven, Connecticut

I was delighted when I first heard about *Stone Soup*—a magazine with stories only written by kids! I have always wanted to publish a story myself and dream of getting published in *Stone Soup* one day. I enjoyed all the stories I read so far, especially "Girl's Best Friend," by Catherine Chung [July/August 2015]. I could not put down the issue until I finished reading all the stories. I am already waiting for the next issue!

Haeon Lee, 8

New York, New York

Catherine Chung is also an artist. She illustrated "Answers in the Sky" on page 43 (and on the cover!) of this issue.

I admire the fact that there are kids writing for kids, because it's more engaging and relatable that way.

Asmi Mukherjee, 12

Cupertino, California

I've read Stone Soup for about two or three years now, and I enjoy looking at the creations of other authors. I also enjoy the beautiful illustrations. The book reviews are definitely my favorite, though. I find new books to read from them often!

Jake Bulkowski, 13

North Royalton, Ohio

Thank you for all you do at *Stone Soup* to inspire and encourage young writers. I know that you likely get wonderful feedback, but I just want to add my words of appreciation. I have two granddaughters, ages nine and five, who are extremely passionate about writing and illustrating their own stories. The older granddaughter, Linden, is in the process of writing a book! Like many of your writers, she is extremely talented and is inspired by each *Stone Soup* magazine that arrives at her doorstep.

Sue Shaffer, grandparent

Menlo Park, California

I would like to thank *Stone Soup* for giving kids a chance to see themselves in print, for many people believe that unless you're some kind of prodigy you can't do anything important till you have graduated college with a PhD, are married, and have four kids complete with a minivan. Thank you for crashing the dream squashers.

Sarah Lindsay, 12

Palmyra, Virginia

Stone Soup welcomes your comments. Send them to editor@stonesoup.com.



Just an hour left to go, he thought to himself...

The Way Back Home

By **Sawyer McCloskey**

Illustrated by **Katie Lew**

“**H**EY LOOK, EVERYBODY! It's the *loser*! Hey shrimp, how's your *dad* doing?”

Joey hooted and pointed a grubby finger at Finn, who stood horrified as the group of kids on the playground laughed.

Finn lowered his head and pretended not to hear them as he walked slowly off the playground and back to the classroom. Don't listen to them, he thought to himself. None of them knew what it was like not to have a father. He wished he were brave enough to fight back against Joey and the others who constantly bullied and harassed him. But this was a low blow. Why did Joey have to keep bringing up the fact that he didn't have a dad?

“Everything OK?” Mrs. Simons, his sixth-grade teacher, asked him kindly as he walked into the classroom.

“Yep,” he said with a fake smile. The last thing he needed was for Mrs. Simons to get involved in his problems. It would just make everything worse. He looked at the clock. It was two o'clock. Just an hour left to go, he thought to himself...

FINN TRUDGED up the hill to the secluded cottage he shared with his mom. It looked welcoming and warm, but there was never anyone inside to greet him. His mother worked very hard all day as a waitress, so Finn was always home alone. He knew his mother loved him, but she really wasn't able to show it much because of her long hours away trying to support the both of them.



Sawyer McCloskey, 13
Eagle, Idaho



Katie Lew, 13
Winchester, Massachusetts

Finn's father had died when he was seven. He had no memories of his dad at all. Finn plopped his satchel onto the kitchen table and looked in the refrigerator for something to eat. There wasn't much, but he pulled out a rather bruised apple and found some peanut butter in the pantry.

Finn's cottage was on the outskirts of town and was surrounded by forest that went on for hundreds of miles into the Canadian Yukon Territory. Finn loved going out and exploring the vast expanse of trees and finding cozy spots to relax and daydream. This is where Finn felt most at home. He could always find his way back, since he kept a self-drawn map that he had made a year ago. There were so many animals, streams, and rocks to play among. Finn never got tired of the woods. He was also an expert tree climber and would take his binoculars up a tree and perch himself up high to watch birds and dream about being one so he could fly away.

SHORTLY AFTER the sun had set that evening, Finn heard the distant sound of his mother calling out his name. He quickly ran back to his house, hoping his mother wasn't worrying about him. He saw her in the little clearing around the house. She waved to Finn, but he didn't wave back. He slowly walked towards his house and went inside.

"Hi, honey," Finn's mom said in a tired voice, "how was school?"

Finn didn't answer. He said a quick

good night to his mom, avoiding a kiss, and ran to his bed. He thought of his day at school and buried his face in his pillow. Finn fell asleep to his own sobs.

Crash! Finn abruptly woke to the sound of a pot falling to the ground. He climbed out of bed and walked around the half-wall, rubbing his droopy eyelids to wake himself up.

"Sorry, Finn," his mom said from a few yards away.

"Thanks a lot, *Mom!*" Finn shouted. "This was my only day to sleep in and you woke me up. I'm going out to the forest to get some peace and quiet!"

"Finn, I don't want you going out there today," his mom argued. "You were out there all day yesterday! You need to get some rest."

"You won't even be here to see if I decide to go out there or not! You're never even here with me. Go ahead and leave, Mom, it would be the same here without you!" Finn shouted. "You don't even love me! I feel better when I'm out in the forest and not cooped up here with you; *I'm leaving for good!*"

Finn bolted out the door and sprinted all the way into the trees. He didn't turn around to see his mom's face streaming with tears.

FINN WAS SO in the moment that he forgot his map, binoculars, and shoes. He knew one way he wasn't going, and that was back. It was already really late; Finn had been running and hiking for several hours. It was getting dark quickly.

He'd have to make a shelter soon. Things started to seem spooky as he collected leaves and sticks. Finn wasn't sure if he had ever ventured out this far. He could barely find anything to make a fire, let alone make a whole shelter. He decided to go up in a tree to try to find a comfortable spot to sleep. He finally found a thick branch that was sturdy and fell asleep. Finn's dreams were a jumble of voices, whispering to him about having no parents and no one to love him. He tossed and turned all night, nearly falling off the branch. He woke up with tears in his eyes and a sore back. Swinging off onto the ground, he sniffed the air. His nose shriveled in disgust. The stench was coming from his own dirty clothes, so he set off to find some fresh water.

Soon he found a gurgling creek with crystal clear water. He got in with his clothes on to wash himself and his clothes at the same time. Since he had no parents, he had no rules. As he stepped out of the creek, his stomach grumbled in protest. Finn realized he hadn't eaten in a really long time, so he decided to make a fire to cook his food on. Taking some small branches he had found, he rubbed them together really hard. In a short time there was a blazing fire in front of him. He found a larger stick under a maple tree and, using a thin, sharp rock he had retrieved from the bottom of the creek, he whittled the end of the stick to a point.

**He didn't turn around
to see his mom's face
streaming with tears.**

Now Finn had a fishing spear. He walked to the edge of the creek and waited for a fish to swim by. Finally, Finn spotted a pink salmon trying to head upstream. He slowly positioned his spear and quickly jabbed it into the water. When he pulled the spear out of the water, he had a wriggling salmon on the end of it. Normally, Finn would have never hurt an animal, but being in the wild had already begun to change him. Finn roasted the fish for a little bit, peeled the skin and scales off, and then wolfed it down, using his bare hands.

The smell of food had attracted a group of three raccoons. They approached Finn's fish, foam dripping from their mouths. Finn instantly realized that they had rabies. He dropped the rest of his fish, grabbed his spear, and sprinted away.

Finn found a clearing about a mile away from his old campsite. It had lush grass, wide-open space, a small little pond, and tall trees all around the edges. Tired from his long day, Finn curled up right in the soft, tall grass and went to sleep under the bright full moon.

The next morning, Finn went over to get a better look at the pond to see if the water was drinkable. Not looking down at his feet, Finn walked right on top of a jagged-edged rock. He cried out in pain. The sight of his own blood spilled out over the grass made him nauseous. Finn sprint-limped over to the pond and shoved his



Being in the wild had already begun to change him

foot into the water. The pain was intolerable. It stung even more in the water. Finn stayed strong though and kept his foot in the water. The water would clean the wound so the gash wouldn't get infected. While his foot was soaking, Finn tied some long strands of grass together. He put the makeshift Band-Aid around his foot so he could walk on it and then slow-

ly got his foot out of the pond. He decided to take his spear with him and leave. Who knew what else could be lurking under the grass? Finn walked carefully and entered the darkened forest once again.

Now Finn was bored. He had been walking for a long time and his feet ached with pain. He collapsed onto a rock. For the first time in his life, Finn actually

missed his house; he missed his mom. He wanted to go back, but he was hopelessly lost. If he ever got back to his regular life, he decided he would stand up to Joey and the other kids. The forest had made Finn a stronger person. Finn turned around; a sudden surge of energy filled him. He stood up off the rock and marched backwards, heading straight to where he thought home was.

Five minutes passed and Finn's surge of energy was already gone. There was a huge storm and it was pouring. He was cold, wet, and tired again. He was dripping and his clothes were heavy, which made every step a burden. The wind was screaming in his ears. His hair was like a tornado being whipped around. Thorny rose bushes scratched his legs. Hundreds of leaves and branches clawed at his body, as if trying to hold on and not get swept away by the irate vortex of wind. The force of the cyclone was so powerful that Finn felt as if he could just let go and fly along, letting the air carry him to wherever it wanted him to go. No! he thought to himself. Focus. You're getting back home and some silly little breeze isn't going to stop you.

As if on cue, the wind angled itself so it was blowing straight into Finn's face. His eyes were watering, clouding his vision. He stumbled around trying to stay on track, but his foot snagged a root and he went crashing down to the ground. His chest hit the muddy dirt, knocking the

He wanted to go
back, but he was
hopelessly lost.

wind out of his lungs. Finn rolled onto his back, gasping for air. He waited there for a while, letting the storm subside. Finn finally stood up, rubbing his sore chest. Every part of him was caked with mud. He looked around and saw that he was at his old campsite where he had met the raccoons. He leaped into the creek, rolling and swimming around. It felt so good, and he was sure he could get back home from here.

Finn froze as a shadowed figure approached suddenly from behind the bushes. Finn quickly hopped out of the water and grabbed his spear.

"Whoa there, kiddo, I don't want to hurt you," a thin, middle-aged man with a bushy beard said and stared at him with curiosity.

Finn was so surprised to see a human being that he stumbled backwards and almost fell into the water again.

"What are you doing at my campsite?" the stranger asked.

"Your campsite? This was my campsite! Some raccoons came and drove me out of it two days ago," he said, his voice rising. "I've been stuck in this forest for like... three days! How did you even get here?" Finn demanded.

"Well, if you want to know the truth, I've been stuck out in this forest for longer than you can imagine," he said. "I had a business that was just starting to boom, and life was about to change for the better. But my partner wanted everything for

himself. He had me kidnapped and transported clear up to the top of the Yukon Territory. They left me for dead, but I managed to survive for several years in the wilderness. I've been trying desperately to make my way down south back to the town I'm from, and I think I'm getting close. I haven't seen my wife or my boy, Finn, for so long." His voice broke.

"Finn?" Finn asked, dumbfounded. "Could you really be...?"

The recognition happened for both of them at the same instant. Finn ran towards his dad. They hugged each other and didn't let go. It had been so long since Finn had felt the comfort of having another parent, another person to love him and care for him. He didn't remember what it was like to feel the strong arms of his father embracing him. The moment was disrupted as they heard a low growling. Both of them whirled around. Right in front of them was a gleaming silver wolf. Finn's dad quickly snatched a small wooden stake out of his pocket, while Finn held his spear poised at the wolf. The wolf pounced on Finn's dad just as Finn's dad jumped at the wolf. The wolf got there first.

The animal clamped its teeth on his leg but got viciously punched in the snout in return. The wolf whined and retreated a few steps back. This time it decided to attack the weaker opponent, Finn. The wolf lunged and bared its teeth, but


Finn quickly dodged the attack and spun around. He then smacked the wolf with the flat end of his spear. The wolf crumpled to the ground, stunned from the blow to its head. Finn moved in for the kill, but his dad's hand grabbed his leg. Finn turned around to see his dad lying on the ground, his leg ravaged by teeth marks. Finn quickly went to help him.

"It's OK, son," said his dad calmly. "The teeth didn't get very far in. Nice job handling the wolf though. You saved our lives."

Finn blushed. He helped his dad put his leg into the water. As his leg was soaking in the creek, Finn was making another makeshift Band-Aid like the one on his foot. He tied the strands of some nearby grass together and wrapped it around his dad's leg. Finn's dad looked up at him, impressed.

"Come on, Dad, let's go back home. I'm sure Mom is waiting. I'll also probably be in big trouble, since I kind of threw a temper tantrum and ran away," Finn explained with a sheepish grin.

"Finn," his father faltered. "I've been lost out in the wilderness for so long. Do you really think we can find our way back?"

Finn felt a sudden surge of confidence and a sense of protection for the man sitting next to him. He put a reassuring arm around his father and said, "Don't worry, I'll get us back home. I promise." 

Frolic

By **Katie Thomas**

A mound of fur,
tongues, tails, clumsy paws,
and deep brown eyes,
laughing with the
ecstasy of play

The heap seems its own creature,
without distinction between
separate bodies

Teeth nip, paws bat,
tongues kiss, tails flash
from side to side,
a blur of pure happiness

With playful growls and
tackles and pounces,
with not one care or worry,
the play of puppies is
beautiful to behold

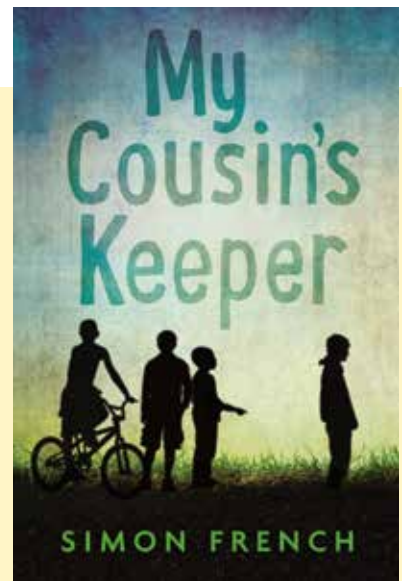


Katie Thomas, 12
Standish, Maine

Book Review

By Raiyah Patel

My Cousin's Keeper, by Simon French;
Candlewick Press: Massachusetts, 2014;
\$16.99



Raiyah Patel, 10
Gatineau, Quebec, Canada

DO YOU KNOW what it feels like to be bullied? Have you ever felt left out? These are questions that *My Cousin's Keeper* forces the reader to consider. They are questions I never thought a lot about until I read this book.

No book can be good unless it has interesting and inspiring characters. There are three important characters in the book. I was drawn into the story by the way these characters relate to each other. Their relationships made the message of the book jump off the pages and drew me into their world.


Bon is the main character. He is ten years old. Bon moves in with his cousin, Kieran, and his family and is insecure because his mother is not responsible enough to take care of him. When Bon arrives at his new school he is bullied because he is different. He has a long braid and wears old clothes, which the kids tease him about.

Bon's experiences made me think of my own, and about how children learn about kindness and empathy. We sometimes think that school is just a place where we go to learn how to read or do math. But it is more than that. School is also where kids learn how to form friendships and deal with problems. It is a difficult place for kids, and people who aren't bullied or treated

poorly sometimes forget this. This story will remind kids who have to struggle at school, or even those who have no problems, how important it is to be aware of your fellow students.

Not everyone at school bullies Bon. He has one friend who defends him. Julia is my favorite character in the book. I admired her because of her sense of justice and her strength. When you first meet Julia you would think she would want to fit in and not stand up to the bullies because she has a troubled life at home. Her mother kidnapped her from her father and she lives on the run. She is unhappy but doesn't take this out on others. I was pleased and inspired by the way she defends Bon and acts as a peacekeeper.

Bon also uses his imagination to escape the troubles in his life. He imagines himself as a brave crusader who gets help from "Kieran the brave" and "Julia the fair." He uses his imagination to write these stories and gets lost in another world. Words have the power to make Bon forget about his troubled life, and I have learned that words can give you a sense of power. This was another part of the book that I enjoyed. It reminded me how important books and words can be for those who feel alone and troubled.

Finally, when I read the book I thought of something I read when I was much younger by Henry David Thoreau: "If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer. Let him step to the music he hears, however measured or far away." These are words I have tried to live by. They have also inspired me to be different and not to follow others. So if you've never asked yourself what it feels like to be bullied, or if you've always wanted to be yourself but were afraid, I recommend this book and maybe it can give you the drumbeat to march to your own music. 



"I would have never agreed to this stupid job if you had told me that"

The Girl Next Door

By Evelyn Chen

Illustrated by Phoebe Wagoner

THERE ARE FRIENDS, and then there are arranged friends who you are friends with because of your parents, simple as that. The girl next door was next on my mom's arranged friends list, and I wouldn't have ever agreed to so-called hang out had I not needed a summer job and she needed a piano teacher.

But, there was a minor detail that my mom had forgotten to mention.

“OH! I DIDN'T MENTION it before, Hazel, but Via is blind. It might cause trouble with reading music, but I'm sure you can work around it,” Mom said, her fingers flying over her keyboard. The piano lesson was tomorrow morning and yet I hadn't thought about it since the day Mom had finally convinced me to agree.

I jerked up from the couch, tearing out my headphones. “What?”

“Via, the girl next door, is blind. She's been blind since birth, but her mother says she's still a grade ahead in school.” Mom kept typing, her eyes scanning her computer. She paused and then kept typing, pursing her lips.

“Mom!” I tossed my phone onto the couch and stood up, glaring at her. “Why don't you ever tell me this stuff?” She kept typing.

“Mom!” My voice got louder. With a resigned sigh, Mom looked up, raising an eyebrow.



Evelyn Chen, 13
Bellevue, Washington



Phoebe Wagoner, 12
Carlisle, Kentucky

"I know it might hinder your teaching a bit, but I assumed it wasn't a big deal. Via is perfectly capable of learning the piano."

"I would have never agreed to this stupid job if you had told me that." I folded my arms and scowled out the window, irritated words threatening to spill out. Outside, the blindingly bright sunshine blazed down on our front yard, the sky a dull gray despite the uncomfortable heat. I turned away from the window.

"Why not?" Mom frowned. "She's no different than any other kid."

It is different, I thought furiously. Completely. It will be awkward and weird and unnatural. On top of it being harder to teach, it will be impossible to talk about normal things.

"Whatever," I mumbled instead, dropping back onto the couch and glaring up at the ceiling. "It's fine."

THE NEXT MORNING I was awoken by a stream of light right on my face. Groaning, I shielded my eyes and sat up. The clock read half-past nine.

In record time, I yanked on fresh clothes, raked a comb through my forever straight and boring dark hair, swished around a toothbrush, and headed upstairs. I sniffed the air, hoping for the scent of toast or pancakes, but it was odorless.

The kitchen was deserted, a trail of crumbs and coffee stains the only hint of Mom and Dad passing through. Opening

a box of cereal, I dumped it into a bowl of milk and started on the crispy flakes.

"Hazel? You're going over to Via's at ten, right?" Dad poked his head in the kitchen, still in his pajamas and ratty slippers.

"Oh, great. I mean, yes." I forced a half-hearted smile.

"At least you're making good money." He winked. "Don't worry, it will be fun."

"If you say so," I said dubiously, turning back to chasing cornflakes

along the edge of the bowl. After another fifteen minutes of anxious stalling, I dumped the bowl in the sink and grabbed two books on basic piano skills before heading out the front door.

Immediately, a wave of heat crashed over me, the muggy air clinging to my skin as I hurried over next door as fast as I could. Within a few moments, sweat beaded on my back and neck as I rang the doorbell.

The door swung open, revealing a tall blond woman who smiled brightly.

"Hazel? Nice to meet you! I'm Mazarine, Via's mother." Her rich voice had a slight accent I couldn't place. Mazarine shook my hand and ushered me in. "Via is in the living room. She is eager to meet you."

We passed through a small entryway into the living room, which was a large room with bookshelves lining the wall. Light spilled in through large panes of windows, illuminating the piano in the corner.

**"Oh! I didn't mention
it before, Hazel,
but Via is blind."**

Perched on the bench was a girl. Via.

Via was practically the opposite of her mother, small and slight with brown hair pulled back in a braid. She was wearing sunglasses. I self-consciously tried to smooth down my dark hair and offered an awkward smile. Via stood up, picking up a cane, and slowly walked over. She stopped before us.

"So you're Hazel?"

I nodded, then stopped abruptly. "Yes. Nice to meet you." We shook hands.

"All right girls, go ahead and enjoy yourselves. I can bring in snacks if you want, later." Mazarine patted Via's shoulder, flashing me yet another smile.

"It's OK, Mom." Via shrugged her off. "We're fine. Thanks."

"OK, just checking." Her mom exhaled. "Make yourself at home, Hazel."

"Thanks," I murmured, staring down at my feet. Mazarine glanced at us and then walked out into the hallway. Silence descended upon the room.

"OK, so I guess you're supposed to teach me piano now?" Via headed over to the piano bench and sat down. She scooted over and I hesitantly sat down next to her, setting down the books on piano skills on the floor.

"Yeah, I guess so. Do you know anything about piano or have you ever learned how to play a little bit before?"

"No. Well, I know the piano keys are just repeating scales, sort of. I've always wanted to play Vivaldi, though."

"OK, cool. So let's just start with recognizing the notes."

OVER A GOOD part of the year, I went over to Via's house every week to teach her piano. She was a good student; she practiced everything I told her to and improved quickly.

Despite it all, we never became friends. Sure, Via was a student, an acquaintance. She was friendly and kind. But I blamed her blindness for keeping me from becoming her friend. Via's blindness made her alien, different, unapproachable. Everything felt awkward.

I was wrong for believing it was her blindness that kept us separated. It wasn't. It was my prejudices.

THE DOOR SWUNG open and Via waved. "Come on in." We headed into the living room and I sat down on the chair next to her piano bench, watching as she awkwardly set down the cane and felt around until she could properly sit down.

I averted my eyes, avoiding yet another reminder of our differences.

After half a year of lessons, Via had become fairly good. As usual, she began with her scales, her slender hands running up and down the keys. The notes plinked out one by one, music spilling from within the piano.

"Good job hitting the notes, but try to keep a more even rhythm. One and two and three and four. Remember?" I tapped my foot against the carpet. Via sighed and nodded, studiously beginning the scales again. This time her rhythm improved.

"OK, let's work on the song you've

been playing now.”

Via’s hands hovered over the keys. She spun around towards me. “Oh, I forgot! My birthday is coming up in two weeks. I’m going to have a small party. Do you want to come?”

“You’re... you’re inviting me?” I stammered. “I mean, thanks, but...”

“Why not?” Via shrugged and smiled. “We’re friends, after all.”

We’re not even real friends! I barely know you as a person, I thought.

“I’ll have to see if I can make it, I guess,” I mumbled, trying to force enthusiasm into my voice. I forced a hasty smile. “What day?”

“I’ll have my mom email you the details, but you don’t have to go if you don’t want to,” Via said, her voice cool. “No pressure or anything.”

“No, it’s not that...” My words stumbled over each other and stopped. Heat flared in my cheeks and I stared down at my hands, wishing I hadn’t said anything.

At least she can’t see the humiliation spread on my face, I thought. Instantly, I felt guilty for the thought.

“Well, what is it then?” Despite the sunglasses, I could somehow feel her eyes boring into me.

“I just don’t know you well. Nothing. It’s not a big deal.”

“It’s not like you tried to get to know me.” I expected a burst of anger, but the quiet sadness behind her words struck me. Ashamed, I stared out the window, avoiding looking at her.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered, “I really am. I

just never realized I...”

“It’s just because I’m blind, isn’t it? But that doesn’t make me not a person. I’m ordinary. I’m completely ordinary, but you’re the one who’s blind to that. You can’t see past my eyes.”

The truth, the cold and harsh truth, flooded over me like icy water. I closed my eyes, willing myself not to cry in humiliation. I had brought this upon myself.

“I think you should go. Thank you for teaching me.”

“Via...”

“Thank you for everything, but I think it’s time you go.” Despite everything, despite how I had treated her, her voice was gentle and calm. She smiled, almost wistfully.

I turned and fled.

WHEN I GOT home, I barricaded myself into my room and cried. Partly from the disgrace of it all, but mostly from complete and utter shame.

I had been so wrong. Yes, Via’s blindness was a part of her. But it did not define Via. She was an ordinary girl, just like any of my other friends. And yet I had been so blind to her true self, blinded by her disability.

THE PIANO GIG was over. My parents’ disappointment in me was clear, but they didn’t press it. They gave me a lecture and then knew that my own guilt already surpassed anything they could have forged. Mom contacted Via’s mom and I stopped going over to their house.



"I'm completely ordinary, but you're the one who's blind to that"

Every time I played the piano, I wondered if Via was practicing. Every time I heard music, I thought of the simple songs I had taught her. Every time I looked at her house, I thought I saw a blur of Via. But it was only the ghost of a lost friendship.

“HURRY, HAZEL. We only have fifteen minutes,” Mom said as she checked her watch for the fifth time. “I have to go meet up with Avery, my co-worker.”

“I know, I’m sorry.” I scanned the shelves of sheet music, past the instruments in the music shop. I had been wanting to pick up some sheet music for some new pop songs. My eyes fell on a CD of Vivaldi music.

“I’ve always wanted to play Vivaldi, though,” Via said.

Our first lesson. It was one of the few things I did know about Via and the thought saddened me. I checked the time on my phone and did a double take.

“Mom? Mom!” I ran over to her, clutching the CD. Mom looked up from her phone.

“Yes?”

“Isn’t today the day of Via’s party?”

Mom stopped, her lips pursing together. I knew she was thinking of our falling out, so to speak. “Yes, hon, but...”

“I just wanted to give her a CD of Vivaldi. She always wanted to play Vivaldi. I won’t intrude. I’ll just wish her happy birthday and leave.”

“All right, but don’t be surprised if she

doesn’t react... positively.”

We headed up to the counter as I anxiously checked the time again and again. Mom bought the CD and we headed to the car.

“Can you drop me at Via’s before you meet up with Avery?”

Mom sighed. “All right. The party’s already over, you know.”

“I know.”

AS SOON AS I hopped out of the car, Mom pulled away, waving. It occurred to me that I had no card and the CD wasn’t even wrapped. Oh well, it was a little late for those thoughts.

I shuffled towards her front door, uncomfortable flutterings of anxiety dancing through my stomach. A list of terrible scenarios that could happen as a result of this ran through my mind.

I wiped my palms on my pants, ringing the doorbell and cringing. This was the worst idea I had ever had.

“H-Hazel?” Mazarine answered the door, gaping at me.

I swallowed hard. “Um, yes.” My voice squeaked. “I have a, er, gift for Via.” My eyes fell to my sneakers.

“Oh, all right. We just weren’t... expecting you. I’ll get Via.”

I waited, forcing myself to breathe evenly. If Via did yell at me or refuse the gift, I deserved it.

Via appeared, wearing a dark blue sweater and leggings. She looked taken aback but smiled as usual. “Hazel! I wasn’t... wasn’t... expecting you.”

"Happy birthday, Via," I rushed out. "You said you always wanted to learn Vivaldi. I- I saw a CD of Vivaldi music and thought of you. Sorry it's not wrapped." I handed it to her as quickly as possible and started away from the house.

"Wait! Where are you going?" Via called out, clutching the CD.

"Home..."

"Come on in. I want to play a song for you." She smiled encouragingly as I headed back towards her door again. "Thank you so much for the gift."

We walked into the living room. Via placed the CD on top of the piano and opened it up. She hesitated, turning in my direction, and then started to play.

It was the song we had been learning the past few weeks. While at first it had been choppy and sometimes off tune, the music now spilled naturally from the keys. Via's hands danced over the piano, beautiful notes laying out the pattern of the simple yet mellifluous song.

When she finished, I clapped.

"It's excellent. You've been practicing." For a second, I almost wanted to critique her like I had when I had been her teach-

er, but I stopped. "I'm impressed."

"Thanks." Her voice was soft.

"I guess I should head home. Happy birthday." I started to rise, a lump in my throat.

"You don't have to leave, Hazel. I'm not angry."

"But... I thought..." I sat back down.

"You have every right to be angry. I was rude towards you."

"I forgave you a long time ago. We all make mistakes. I just wanted to teach you, to open your eyes, not hurt you. But you never came back to my house..."

I blinked, silenced by her words. "Thank you." The words were a whisper. "For everything. For opening my eyes, for forgiving me, for being my friend even when I wasn't yours."

She simply smiled.

THERE ARE FRIENDS, and then there are arranged friends who you are friends with because of your parents, simple at that. And the girl next door was a true friend. She always had been, but I had not been able to see it.

She had opened my eyes.



"I'm sorry," I whispered,
"I really am. I just
never realized I..."

Orange to Black

By Kyle Lotke



Kyle Lotke, 10
New York, New York

Come on
Come on
Come on

I bolt to the window
Quick as lightning,
with a gasp,
my mouth drops open

the sun is swiftly sliding into the water,
an orange marble sinking into the horizon
infusing the river with orange dye

I think
where does it go?
does it sink into the river with a swoosh and a swish?
does it dissipate into good dreams for the night?
I drift to my bed

I realize
I am a sun
sinking into my bed

but I feel nocturnal,
my eyes are glued to the ceiling
I stare
and stare some more
into the darkness

that darkness
that is feared and loved
that darkness coating you in black
that darkness
like the bottom of the ocean
that darkness
wishing you good dreams
that darkness
regenerating you
until the sun seeps in
shining in with a warm hello
transforming the darkness to light
giving hope for a new day



"I've heard there are more terrible monsters, ones that can take the form of any human"

The Shape Stealers

By **Emory MacLaughlin**

Illustrated by **Amelia Jiang**

ZED AND I STOOD, facing the forest. “Are you sure, Zed?” I asked, turning to him.

His blue eyes flashed as he glanced back at me. “You don’t have to come with me, Reina,” he growled. “But I’m doing this. I will prove to Hans that I’m not a coward.” At that point, I knew it was best not to argue. Zed is my best friend, and he can be very stubborn, but even I didn’t know that his feelings would extend so far, far enough that we were in danger. I should have known it would come to this, when this morning Hans, the butcher’s son, made fun of Zed in front of all of our neighbors. After that Zed swore that he would prove his bravery to all.

Zed began to march toward the thick Yeron Forest. I sighed, straightened the laces on my long blue dress, and followed. “You do have your sword, don’t you?” I called. Zed nodded, distracted by trying to find a way past the wall of trees that bordered Yeron Forest.

Ever since I was little, Mama told me stories of the forest. “Don’t ever go into the Yeron Forest, Reina,” she would tell me. “Dangerous things lurk there. Remember when the baker’s boy went missing, two or three years ago? Vanished. Right into the forest. Lady Ira’s maid saw him go.”

That scared me off from the forest. Rilk, the baker’s boy, was a friend of mine, and I didn’t want the same fate as him. It had scared me off, until today at least. Much as I feared what lurked in the forest, I feared losing Zed more. Therefore, I decided to accompany him.



Emory MacLaughlin, 13
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania



Amelia Jiang, 13
Calgary, Alberta, Canada

To some it might seem a foolish choice, but to me it was the only choice. I had known Zed since we were two: I would not abandon him now.

When I reached Zed, he was hacking at the unyielding trees with his sword, a present from my father, the blacksmith of our village. The knights of the royal court often had Father make their swords.

Without a sword of my own, I began yanking at different branches, seeing if I could make a hole big enough to fit through. But at my touch, the branches parted! I gasped.

“Zed! Here’s a hole!”

I thought it wise not to mention to Zed what the branches had done. Zed hurried to me.

“I could swear I looked there,” he said.

Then he squeezed through the hole. I followed, and my dress ripped on the twigs, leaving a piece of rough dyed fabric flapping in the breeze like a flag. After checking to make sure that you could not see my petticoat peeking through, I followed after Zed.

The forest was dark inside—very dark. No light shone through the thick canopy of twisting, leafless branches. The ground was hard and cold, and very little grass grew. And it was cold, oh so cold. Immediately I drew my wool shawl tighter around my shoulders.

“Zed, do you know where we’re going?”

He shook his head. “Reina, you know we just have to stay in the forest until sun-

set. Then I’ll show Hans.”

I sighed, settled on the hard ground, and took out a lantern from my pack. I lit it, and its warm beam of light lit up the trees. Then I took out a small loaf of bread from my pack. Mama knew I would be with Zed all day, and so she packed me some food. Guilt tightened in my stomach as I thought that I hadn’t told Mama

where we were going specifically. I ripped off a chunk and held it out to Zed. “Bread?” I asked.

Zed looked at me incredulously. “What’re you doing, Reina?”

I stared back at him. “If we’re staying right here all day, we might as well get comfortable,” I replied.

Zed shook his head. “We’re not staying here. We have to get as deep in the forest as we can get. I told Marya to tell Father where we were when we were gone for an hour. It’s been about that, and father will come after us. No, we must go deeper.” Marya was Zed’s sister.

I sighed and began packing up my lunch. “Can I at least carry the lantern?” I asked. Zed nodded, and I could see, although he’d never say so, that he, too, was nervous in this forest.

I stood, brushed off my skirts, and said, “Which way?”

Zed rotated, looking at all of the possibilities. He pointed left. “That way.”

As we walked, I told Zed repeatedly how foolish we were. “You know, there are supposed to be wolves and dragons in

**We have to get
as deep in the forest
as we can get.**

these woods,” I said, “and I’ve heard that there are fairies and goblins too.”

Zed nodded and glanced around. “I’ve heard there are more terrible monsters, ones that can take the form of any human. They know a few things about the person that they’re imitating, but not everything. They are called Shape Stealers.”

I started to laugh, then realized he was serious.

“So, if we see each other after being separated while in the woods, we should each ask the other a question only we can know the answer to,” Zed continued.

“What will you ask me?” I asked.

Zed thought for a moment. “I would ask you what we did together last month.”

I chuckled. “Smearred honey on Aunt Rina’s chickens and then on the shedded fur of Olo [Olo was my dog], and Aunt Rina thought she had wild beasts instead of chickens in her coop!”

Zed grinned. “Correct. What would you ask me?”

I thought about all of the great times we’d had together. “I’d ask you what I wanted to be when I was older.”

We walked and laughed together, and for those moments, the forest’s gloomy hold on us lessened.

Suddenly, we heard noises coming from the forest all around us. We clutched each other. I held the lantern high and shone it around us in a wide arch. I saw eyes. “Zed!” I screamed. “Run! Climb a tree!” Without thinking, we ran, panicked, in opposite directions! I scrambled up a tree and sat there, breathless. I heard howls,

and a scream! “Oh, please, don’t let it be Zed!” I wailed.

I sat, shivering, against the trunk of the tree, listening. I pulled my shawl tighter to me. Suddenly, everything was quiet. Tentatively, I climbed down the branches of my tree.

“Zed?” I called softly. “Are you there?” No one answered.

“Zed! Oh, I knew it was a bad idea coming here!” Suddenly, I heard a voice behind me.

“Yes, I know that now.”

“Zed!” I turned, and flew to him. “I thought you’d been eaten!” He cringed, and I saw that he was bleeding from his leg.

I took charge. “Sit,” I said sternly, and ripped a strip from the bottom of my gown. I wrapped it around Zed’s leg and looked around for something to tie it with. There was nothing; no vine or bendy twig, my gown didn’t even have loose threads. With a sigh, I grasped Zed’s sword and sliced off my long brown braid. I unbraided it and re-braided three thin braids. I tied these around the bandage.

Zed gasped. “Reina! Your hair!”

I brushed the short brown locks behind my ear. “It’s nothing. It’ll grow back.”

I stood and said, “Come, Zed. We have to find a way out of here.”

“I don’t think we can, Reina,” Zed snapped. “As you see, I’m bleeding from my leg, and we’re completely lost. No, we’re staying here.”

I blanched. Zed had never spoken to me like that before. While he snapped

at others, he always treated me kindly. “Zed?” I whispered.

He turned his back. As he did so, a thought struck me. “Um... Zed? Can I ask you a question?”

Zed frowned. “If you must.”

“What do I want to be when I grow up?”

He turned to me. “Does it matter?”

I nodded.

“How should I know what you want to be?” Zed replied.

I stood, and backed away from him. “You’re not Zed,” I said. “I don’t know who you are, but you’re not Zed. He told me about you. You- you’re one of those creatures! A Shape Stealer! You took the form of Zed! Get away from me!”

The Zed-thing stood and walked toward me. “Reina,” he said, voice honey smooth, “I’m Zed. You know that. How could you think that I’m not?” For an instant, I believed him. I wanted to go to him. But then I turned, and ran.

I ran as fast as I could. Branches scraped my face and dress, but I ran on. Finally, I stumbled. Covered in mud, I rose. I began to cry. “Zed! Zed, where are you?” I wailed. Then I felt a hand on my shoulder. I stood up and whirled around. It was Zed. But it couldn’t be. It was another trick. “Stay away from me!” I cried.

The boy stopped. “Reina?” he said, confused.

I shook my head. “No.” The boy frowned. It came to me that I should ask him a question. “Zed, ask me my question.”

The boy smiled. “What question?”

And I ran. Back through the woods, and out of the woods, and through the gap in the trees and away. I ran to my home in our small village and buried my face in my mother’s lap. “Mama!” I wailed, “I left Zed in the forest!” Mama frowned, and lifted my face so that I looked at her.

“But Zed has been here in the village all day,” she said. ❀



If Only I Could

By Rickza Kerr

If only I could help the world.
I would like to get bad people and teach them how
to be nice.
If only I could fly and help people with their feelings,
and stop them from killing
people that are trying really hard to help us all to be good
people and nice and kind to others like us who come
from a different country.
If only I could help my family from Haiti and us too.
I would make them feel welcome to the new country
we live in now.
If only I could talk to them.
I would say welcome and how is Haiti? How is it there?
If only I could ask Mom and Dad a question in Creole.
I would ask, "Did you miss me and Ericka and Ruth, Mom and Dad?"
If only I could go back and save my best friend from the orphanage.
I would be so happy for the children because their birth families
get them back!
I would give them to their new family that was waiting for them
a long time.
If only I could help the world.
I would like to get people and teach them how to be nice.
If only I could...



Rickza Kerr, 11
Seattle, Washington

Rickza is a Haitian-American, adopted by her mom, Ruth, and living in the United States with her sister since July of 2013.



"You have no right to say no to foreign customers, you little rascal!"

Home

By **Amelia DiGiano**

Illustrated by **Prisha Samdarshi**

TAJA CLOSED HER EYES and took in the nauseating smell of smokers and mothballs. She knew this smell.

All buses smelled like this, and normally, it didn't bother Taja. But today, it reminded her of her parents. Her parents who took her on bus rides every Saturday to go to the Indian market she loved. The swirling chaos of it all, vendors sitting under tarps showing off their products, the spicy smell of chicken masala, the sweet and salty smell of chaat, filling Taja's nose. She could taste the sweet honey from her favorite dessert, gulab jamun, on her tongue. She could feel the sponginess on her teeth. She remembered it all so clearly. Taja clutched her bus seat, her nails digging into the cheap leather. She felt very small. She stared out the window, sensing the urge to get off at the next stop, 14th Street, and make her way to the barren marketplace.

It had been years since she had been to the market. The last time, she had been with her parents, holding their hands tightly. Taja sniffled. The sun was hurting her eyes, and all she wanted to do was crawl under the bus seat. The Indian vendors had left three years ago. Taja remembered reading in the newspaper about the plans to turn the marketplace into a bowling alley. When the city council had finally kicked the Indian vendors away, sending them back to their country, it became obvious that there was not enough money for the bowling alley. Deep down, Taja wished that the bowling alley had been built; it would stop her mind from returning to her parents and India.



Amelia DiGiano, 12
Boulder, Colorado



Prisha Samdarshi, 13
Saratoga, California

Of course, if the Indian market still existed, maybe life wouldn't be so melancholy either.

TAJA ARRIVED at the King Soopers fifteen minutes later. She stepped down the bus stairs and crossed the street to the big store. Shopping carts were stacked in rows in front of the two big doors. Taja found that the King Soopers was very convenient, it was right next to her university. She could do her grocery shopping, then go straight to classes where she majored in biology. Taja grabbed a shopping basket, then went into the store, directly to the frozen-food aisle, to get the most important food: naan. She reached into the cool fridge, goosebumps crawling up her arms. She pulled out her favorite brand. Over the years, she had tried them all. None of them were the same as the steaming hot, real naan that used to be sold at the market. The microwavable kind would have to do. Setting it into the basket, she made her way to the vegetable aisle to get some spinach. She would make saag paneer that night.

Taja remembered her last year of high school. The last year her parents would make her saag paneer. "We want you to get a good education, Taja," her mother had said. "We will return to India for you. We will pay for you to follow your dream. Life here is expensive. In India, we can

live for a lower cost, while you go to college. Taja, if you go to college, you could get a real job. You could make money, and one day, pay to return home to us!"

Taja had swallowed her paneer and looked down. "OK, Mama," she had said.

Taja pushed the memory to the back of her head and continued down the aisle to go buy spices. Once her basket was full, Taja headed down to the cashier. She placed her items on the dusty conveyor belt and opened her handmade wallet her mother had sent her from

India. The cashier looked up.

"Where are you from?" he asked suspiciously.

"I'm from India," Taja replied.

"India, huh?"

"Yes, what's wrong with that?" Taja asked. But the cashier didn't answer. He stood up from his stool and bent down over Taja. His height was threatening.

"I don't serve Indian customers here!" he bellowed. "You don't belong here, go back to your own country! I don't want your dirty little bodies in this store, so get out! Hand over those groceries and get out!"

Taja couldn't believe his painful words. She stepped back from the counter, holding back the hot tears. She clutched her wallet, and gulped. The cashier glared at Taja, waiting to pounce on his prey. Then a lady with light blond hair and a huge cart full of food placed her hand on

**"We will return
to India for you.**

**We will pay for you to
follow your dream."**

Taja's shoulder.

"You have no right to say no to foreign customers, you little rascal! This poor girl just needs some food!" The lady's voice was louder and sterner than Taja expected. "I expect you to give her the food for free as an apology for what you just said. Seriously."

"You think you can boss a cashier around?"

"Do I need to call the police?"

The cashier, obviously taken by surprise, swallowed, then nodded. He grabbed Taja's groceries, swiped them under the scanner, and never asked for the fifteen dollars they cost. Taja tried to thank the woman, but she never looked up from the edition of *People* she was about to purchase.

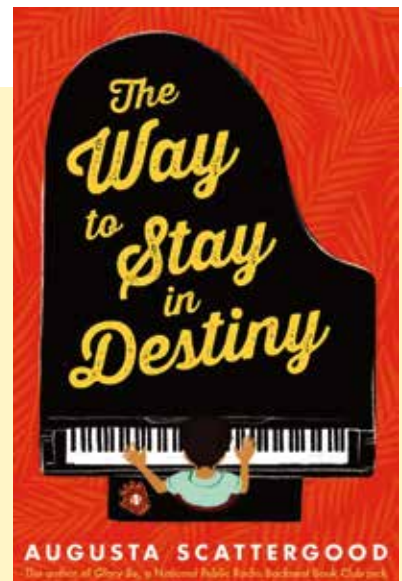
T AJA LEFT the store full of mixed feelings. Grateful, sad, mad, excited, relieved. Walking down the sidewalk towards her school, Taja looked down at her feet. Her long black hair shimmered in the sun, and all she could think about was returning to India. One more year of college, a few more years of working, then she could buy a ticket home. Home. No, Taja shook her head. This was her home. This was her home ever since she and her family had moved here in search of a better life. This was her home ever since she was a short little five-year-old, mesmerized by the tall buildings, the flushing toilets, the greasy hamburgers that didn't exist in her small Indian village. This was Taja's home, and she would have to accept it. ❀



Book Review

By Eun Bee (Lena) Park

The Way to Stay in Destiny, by Augusta Scattergood; Scholastic Press: New York, 2015; \$16.99



Eun Bee (Lena) Park, 12
East Brunswick, New Jersey


IT'S FUNNY HOW we can adapt to the way we live and call it normal, right to the point where it all changes. Theo had spent his whole life in Kentucky with his grandparents and his dog. But then, in the summer of 1974, his uncle took away everything that was important to him, including his own home. I knew how Theo felt to suddenly have nothing to look forward to, to leave everything behind and start a completely new life.

I was born in South Korea and lived with my grandmother. It wasn't the best way to live, but I had friends, family, and my life right there that I didn't want to give up. But over the years, I've learned that everything happens for a reason and that everything has a story behind it. When I was seven years old, my aunt brought me to America. It took a while for me to accept that I lost the life I knew but was given a new one; I was expected to embrace a new environment, just like Theo.

The twelve-year-old boy didn't have it easy—he had to live with his uncle who was a scarred veteran from the Vietnam War. At first, I didn't approve of their intolerable behavior towards one another. But as I kept flipping the pages, their relationship

became clear as I found a way to relate and understand. Uncle Raymond is one of those people that you have to peel back many layers one at a time in order to reach his feelings. Once you peel back the layers, you can actually understand him. During this roller coaster, Theo discovered that sometimes a change is a good thing. That maybe our early life is just to prepare us for the life that is ahead of us.

The characters spoke to me as if they had a real voice that could be heard. And in a way, they did—especially Theo. When his uncle was against the life and hobbies Theo seemed to want, but really needed, Theo stuck with his own opinions and made an entrance to the life he was supposed to live. I love how Theo managed to prove how talents and hobbies such as piano and baseball are not a waste of time. “I can’t live without music,” I answer. I open the piano and play—loud and fast.” If anyone pulls you back from something important or someone you truly love, you just can’t listen to them.

The author made the characters, story, and setting seem realistic with small details such as the big pot of flowers by the sign, the annoying green parrots, and especially the emotions I felt towards the characters. In a very short book that many of us can finish within a day, I was left thirsting for more with a sturdy connection to the characters and events; I felt sympathy and other feelings that cannot be described with words. *The Way to Stay in Destiny* taught me that there will be times when we have to try out a different road in our lives to help us become the people we were meant to be. This may be a book for children, but I believe the lesson inside can be taught to anyone in this world, no matter what age. 



As I scanned the letter, I felt numb

Drifting

By **Emma Peterson**

Illustrated by **Joanne Cai**

ANXIOUSLY I WAITED with fingers intertwined in my thick, curly hair and my foot tapping out a rhythm on my icy driveway. Puffs of air escaped from my cracked lips. I felt as if someone were slamming my heart against my chest. My eyes swept across the neighborhood. A quick glance behind my shoulder told me that Eliza was in the kitchen watching television. On my left was the mailman who was delivering letters to my neighbor. His shiny black shoes crunched against the tightly packed snow. As I watched him sorting through his mail carrier, I kept coming back to one question. *What if he has my letter?*

The crunching sound became more defined. I became more anxious as I watched him drawing nearer. For a brief moment, our eyes met and he nodded towards my direction. As much as I wanted to, I couldn't go up to him and grab the envelopes. My feet seemed glued to the ground. The mailbox made a mighty creak as he put a bundle of letters in the box. As the crunch drifted farther and farther away, my feet became unstuck and I hurried towards the mailbox that concealed my fate. In one motion, I opened the metal box and grabbed every piece of paper that I could lay my hands on. Making sure I didn't skip anything, I read each and every letter. As I got to the last letter, my heart seemed to screech and stop in its tracks. The return address was labeled *Illinois Institute of Art, Chicago, IL*. I pocketed the letter and ran. My long legs were no longer a part of my body. They seemed to be moving on their own. I had walked this



Emma Peterson, 11
Yongin-si, Gyeonggi-do,
South Korea



Joanne Cai, 13
Edmonton, Alberta, Canada

path so many times that it had become familiar to me. This time, I did not take in any of my surroundings. I just stared straight ahead and bolted.

After what seemed like miles, I reached my destination: the house of my cousin. For the next two weeks she was on her honeymoon in Thailand. While she was honeymooning, I house sat.

I stopped outside of her house and took a deep breath. I reached for the key that hung low on the end of my necklace. Reaching around my neck, I unclasped the jewelry and held the key in my trembling hands. The key jingled as I slid it in the doorknob and unlocked the mahogany door.

As I stepped into the foyer, I did a quick once-over to make sure everything was in its rightful place. My eyes seemed to linger on the framed pictures that hung above her stone fireplace. I quickened my pace and reached the bottom of her carpeted stairs. My right hand slid across the slick wooden banister.

Once I reached the top of the stairs I went to the attic. As I entered the dusty room, I made my way to the cracked window on the other side of the attic. Wiping dust out of my way, I jammed my fingers underneath the window and jerked the glass up. My legs slid over the window frame and I climbed out into the chilly air. Then I reached up and hoisted myself onto the roof. Stepping over the icy spots on the tiled roof, I sat down in my favorite spot: the window right above the attic.

I stared at the city that spread beneath

me. Since my cousin lived in Minneapolis, she was lucky to have a house. Most of her friends lived in apartments. I watched the city life for a few minutes. Women in pencil skirts and men in suits power-walked through the streets, looking for a good place to stop for lunch. As I shifted my position in order to see more, I heard the crinkling of paper. Taking deep breaths, I willed myself to take out the envelope that lay still and buried in my coat pocket. My hands trembled as I held the soft paper. I gave myself a little pep talk. *You can do this, Leslie. What's the worst that can happen? Now, you're going to open this letter.*

One, two, three.

The white paper made a satisfying rip as I tore open the envelope. I quickly scanned the letter. Words and phrases. Words and phrases were all I could see. They seemed to float off the page. *Accepted, next semester, join us, early program, lucky, scholarship.*

As I scanned the letter, I felt numb. My legs turned to jelly and my body felt as if it had been drenched in freezing water. A small knot began to form in my stomach. The more I read on, the bigger that knot grew.

I didn't know how I could tell Mama, much less Eliza. I wasn't even sure if I told them that I applied to art school. I didn't even know if I wanted to go! Not if it meant leaving Mama and Eliza.

Going to art school had been my dream since I had been five. But now that my dream was coming true, was I ready to face the challenges?

I focused on the snowflakes that were drifting down in spirals. It reminded me of the time when Eliza and I were sledging a few winters ago. Eliza was only four years old and I was nine. We were bundled up from head to toe. Eliza looked like Randy from *A Christmas Story*. She could barely put her arms down!

We waved goodbye to Mama and headed out of the house. It was one of those days that was so cold, your own breath would freeze. The streets we walked were utterly deserted. You would think that children would be playing outside in their front yards! But no, too cold for them. *Well, more room to sled!* I thought happily. The two of us walked to the end of the block until we arrived at Massive Mountain. Massive Mountain was the biggest hill in the neighborhood.

"Leslie, do we really have to do this?" Eliza mumbled.

"Oh yeah! We're going to sled down Massive Mountain!" I said. Then, in a softer voice I told Eliza, "It'll be OK. We'll go down together."

The two of us trudged over to the top of the hill. I gulped as my eyes traveled down to the bottom. The hill looked like a mass of white fluffiness. My heart seemed to slip right out of my chest.

"Well, Eliza, what are we waiting for?" I giggled nervously. I coaxed Eliza into our red plastic sled and then slipped in behind

her. Even through all of our layers, I could still feel Eliza trembling.

"Leslie, I'm scared," Eliza admitted.

"Don't be, I'm right here."

I summoned all of my courage as I started to push off of the snow. Slowly, Eliza and I inched along. Our red sled screeched as we began to approach the edge. Then we reached the end of the top.

"Here we go!" I shouted as we slid down the slope. My arms were gripped around Eliza. The wind was blowing through our hair and I could just feel my heart drop to my

stomach as the sled accelerated. The snow gathered in white puffs around the plastic. I scooted my body forward so we could pick up our speed. All of my feelings were scattered and drifting aimlessly in the wind. Even though I couldn't see Eliza's face I could hear her giggles.

We braced ourselves for the bottom of the hill, wishing that there was more snow to sled on. The trees swam into focus as our sled lost its velocity. There was a sudden lurch as we crashed at the bottom of the slope. I watched helplessly as Eliza went tumbling from the sled.

"Eliza? Are you OK?" I asked her in a panicked voice.

"Of course!" she said. "I just have one question... Can we go again?"

I COULDN'T BELIEVE that eight years had passed since the day we went sled-

**But now that my
dream was coming
true, was I ready to
face the challenges?**

ding. That was the first time Eliza had gone sledding at Massive Mountain. If I went to art school, I wouldn't get to see any other firsts that Eliza had during the school year. I wouldn't even get to see her thirteenth birthday!

My mama wouldn't be able to afford getting me to Minnesota all the way from Chicago every time I wanted to come for a visit. That was just not a possibility.

And then, that was when the tears came. I was so conflicted. I couldn't decipher whether they were tears of joy, sadness, or a little bit of both. Hastily, I began to wipe them away.

"Leslie?" I jumped in my spot as I looked down below me. There was Eliza, leaning out of the window. Of course, only Eliza would know to look for me here. After all, she's the only one I showed this spot to.

"Well, what are you standing there for? Come and sit next to your big sis." I patted the space next to me and began to fiddle with the envelope.

"Leslie, what is that?" my sister asked, indicating the letter.

"Oh, it's nothing. Just some silly acceptance letter to a silly art school."

Eliza stared at me as if I were senile. "Acceptance letter to an art school? Leslie, that's not just a silly matter!"

"It is, because I'm not going!" The air between us seemed to thicken.

"Please don't tell me that you're not

going to go!" she pleaded.

"If I go, who's going to take care of you?"

"You're going to throw away art school?" Eliza shrieked. "Art school can't wait! It's your dream! I'm not going to let you throw away your dream just because you think I can't take care of myself. If that's your excuse, then I seriously think you need to find another reason."

The chilly air bit at my face. An awkward silence seemed to settle in between us. Was my twelve-year-old sister actually

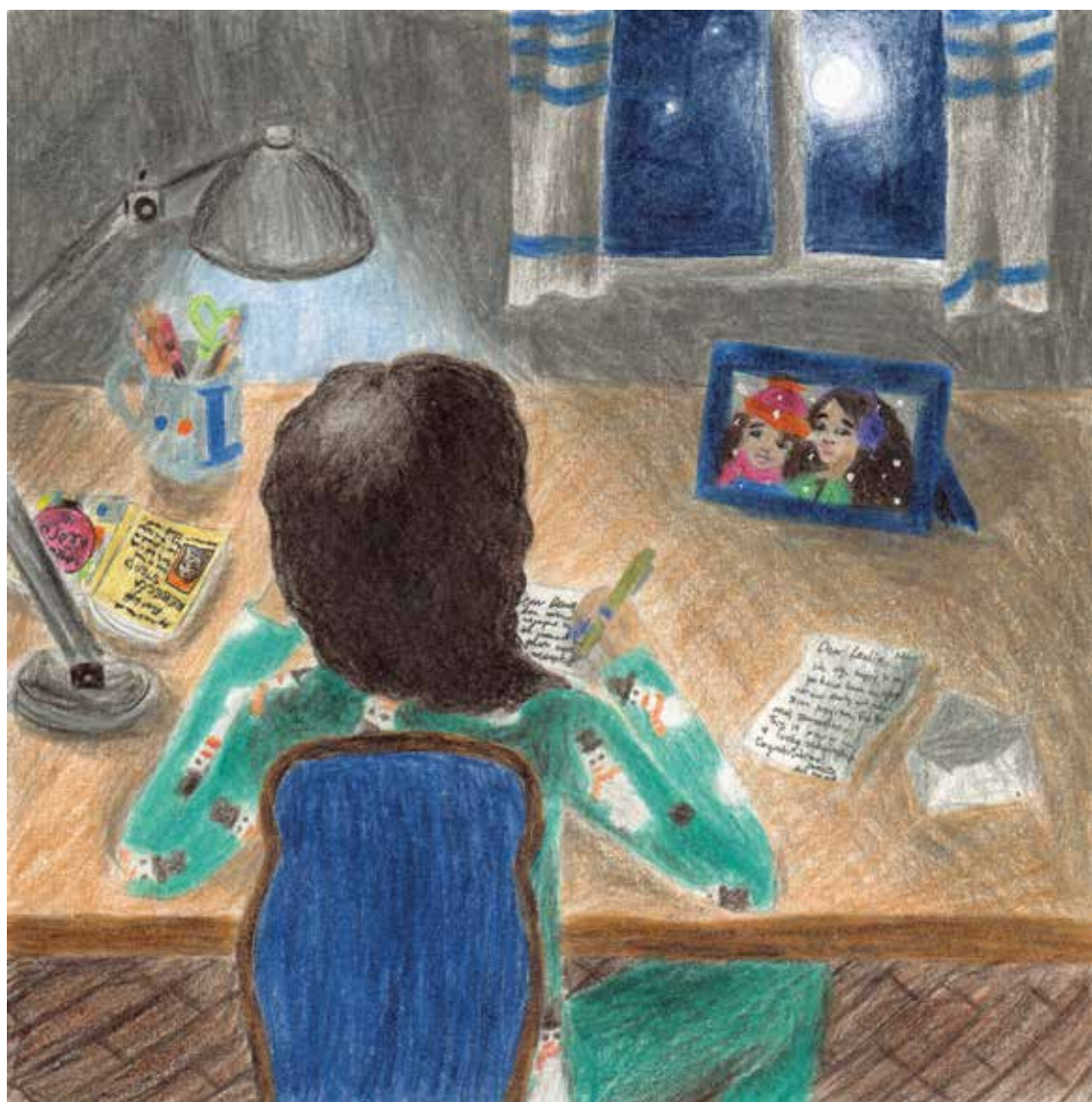
right? Was I scared of going to art school? And why was this decision so hard? It's just a matter of yes or no. But maybe I had already made up my mind. A different answer than the one I had given her earlier.

"Oh, Eliza," I sighed, "when did you get so smart?"

THAT NIGHT I lay in bed and thought long and hard. Why was it that I was so scared of leaving? Even my mind couldn't make up this answer. I couldn't stand the thought of leaving Mama and Eliza. But no matter what, I would have to leave someday.

Then, I had this urge. An incredible urge that seemed to take over my body. It tugged me out of bed and made me turn on the light. The urge inched my fingers along my royal-blue chair and pulled it out from its hiding place behind my desk.

"Leslie, I'm scared,"
Eliza admitted. "Don't
be, I'm right here."



I clutched my pen and began to write

It sat me down in my chair and made me pull myself up to my tan desk. It had me take out my acceptance letter from my coat pocket, a piece of lined paper from the left drawer, and a fountain pen. Then, the urge left me. But I seemed to know

exactly what to do. I clutched my pen and began to write. And I wrote. A letter that started just like this:

*Dear Illinois Institute of Art,
I would love to take part in your early acceptance program...* ❁



"We all miss Papa, it's so hard to move on without him..."

Answers in the Sky

By Edie Koehlert and Chloe Weber

Illustrated by Catherine Chung

MIDNIGHT WOKE at the crack of dawn. His glossy, dark pelt shone in the light of the rising sun. The tree shadows danced in the wind like fingers on a black table. Midnight looked around, watching his brother, Moonshadow, his sister, Autumn, and his mother, Silverwater. Midnight's father had left the beautiful earth shortly after the birth of his family.

"One day, I'll be strong. I'll live up to you, Papa. Even though I might be the smallest, I have power like no others," Midnight whispered, staring hopefully at the sky, his heart aching at the thought of the father he missed so very much.

As Midnight was settling back down, he saw Autumn's eyes flicker open.

"Midnight, what are you doing up so early?" she whispered, careful not to wake the others.

"Couldn't sleep. Bad dreams," Midnight meowed back.

"Like what?"

"Well, Papa was there and... we were hunting mice together... and then he just... left, and.... I couldn't find him anymore!" Midnight whimpered.

"I understand. We all miss Papa, it's so hard to move on without him... But we just have to remember that up there, high up in the beauty of the night sky, surrounded by stars, Papa is there, and he'll be watching over us always," Autumn replied.

Autumn settled back down, leaving Midnight with his thoughts about his papa. *Could he really be up there, watching me*



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right now? Midnight wondered. And with this comforting thought, he settled back to sleep.

MIDNIGHT AWOKE to the faint smell of mouse. He opened his eyes to see that Moonshadow and Autumn had already finished eating. Mama was nowhere in sight.

"Hey—where's Mama?" Midnight meowed. At this, Moonshadow and Autumn exchanged nervous glances.

"Well... Mama is... not feeling well," Moonshadow murmured at last. There was such fear in his brother's voice. At first, he thought nothing of it, but then he realized what was really happening.

"*Mama!!!*" Midnight yowled. He ran to the small clearing where Mama loved to rest and found her lying in the middle.

"Midnight..." Mama spoke, but her words were interrupted immediately by coughing. The cough sounded terrible, almost deadly.

"Mama... No... You can't... This can't be happening... You are going to be OK!" Midnight meowed, trying to convince himself.

"Don't worry, Midnight... It's all going to be OK," she croaked.

"*No!*" Midnight yowled, as his siblings appeared behind him. Their eyes widened as they saw the state their dear mother was in.

"Midnight... Go.... Find us a new home.... Don't worry about me... You must leave this place..." Mama spoke as she coughed some more.

"But... Why? How will you survive while you are like... this?" Midnight meowed in panic, trying to take in all she was saying.

"I have experience with herbs and healing. I can use catmint to heal my cough, and once the cough is cured I can hunt for myself," Mama meowed wearily.

"Mama... are you sure?" Autumn spoke for the first time.

"I most certainly am." Warmth sparkled in Mama's eyes. "Now go, my kits, go quickly..." coughed Mama.

The cats looked at each other for a moment, then nodded.

"OK, Mama... We'll go.... But remember, we are thinking of you every step of the way," Moonshadow meowed sadly.

"B-but... Wait! Why can't you come?" Midnight blurted out.

"I will not be here for long. It is best you make the journey alone. Soon, I will walk with Papa... And I will protect you in your new home," Mama said, coughing.

Taking one last look at the mother they might never see again, Midnight, Autumn, and Moonshadow turned their backs on the place they had always called home.

THE THREE young cats walked along in sorrow. As Midnight padded along, he couldn't help thinking, *I should have insisted on staying there and helping! If she dies, it's all going to be my fault...* He felt terrible about leaving Mama in the forest all alone. When Midnight was ill, Mama had always taken care of him...

"Midnight! Watch out!!!" Moonshadow yowled, but it was too late. Midnight was wrenched from his thoughts about Mama as he plunged deep into an icy-cold, swiftly moving river. Midnight frantically tried to pull himself out of the river, but it was no use. The fall had knocked the breath out of him, and he couldn't tell which way was up and which way was down.

Suddenly, Midnight felt a strong paw struggling to pull him out of the river. Then another paw reached for Midnight's head, and he broke surface. Autumn and Moonshadow were staring down at him, fear in their eyes.

Midnight could barely breathe. Water clogged his throat. He coughed up a large pool of water, gasping for breath.

"Midnight! You're OK!" breathed Autumn in relief.

"Y-yeah..." Midnight gasped. "I'm fine."

"You have to be careful next time! You could have died!" Moonshadow spoke in annoyance.

"Well, sorry," Midnight replied bitterly. "We should keep going."

Without a word, the three cats kept walking toward a thick pine forest. It was slightly cold as they neared the forest, and Midnight assumed it was because of the small frosty mountain range surrounding it.

It was getting dark, and the three cats decided to settle down for the night in a small, empty cave by the edge of the pine forest.

As Midnight slowly drifted to sleep,

he found he was not asleep at all. He was standing in a small, starry forest with the moon shining brightly over every inch. For some reason, the place seemed oddly familiar.

When Midnight looked around, he let out a gasp. He could hardly believe his eyes. For the first time in so long, Midnight's gaze rested on his very own father, just as he had seen him last.

"P-Papa... Is... is that really you?!" he stammered, barely able to speak at the sight of the starry cat he thought he would never see again.

"Yes, my dear son. In times like this, one cannot expect to know what to do on their own. I would like you to know that your mother is barely clinging to life. She will be joining me soon."

Midnight felt hot tears sting in his eyes.

"I am very proud of you, Midnight. I know it's hard leading your littermates so far away from our home."

Midnight blushed slightly at this. His father had been such an amazing cat, and it meant the world to him that he was proud of Midnight.

"But that's not why I'm here. I'm here to tell you the home you seek lies in what you believe is possible."

"Wait—Papa... What do you mean?" Midnight asked, confused.

But before he could say another word, his father had faded away.

IT WAS A chilly morning, and Midnight couldn't wait to ask his littermates about his dream. His father's words still

confused him. *What does all this mean? I just don't understand*, Midnight thought.

Midnight looked around and spotted Moonshadow and Autumn lying together in the back of the cave, trying to keep warm.

"Moonshadow! Autumn!" Midnight shouted, running up to his siblings. "Guess what—last night Papa visited me in a dream!" Midnight meowed excitedly.

"Really?" his littermates meowed, interested.

"Yeah! But I still don't understand what he said. He said, 'The home you seek lies in what you believe to be possible.' What do you think he meant?" meowed Midnight.

"I don't understand," Autumn meowed.

"Yeah, what does it mean?" Moonshadow replied.

"I don't know. But we'll find out eventually, I know we will," Midnight meowed.

THE NEXT DAY the cats were starving, and Moonshadow decided to go out hunting. All he brought back was a thin mouse, which they struggled to split evenly between all of them. They were so weak and tired they could barely move, so they spent the day in the cave.

Midnight settled down once again to go to sleep after the second day of traveling, and as he was drifting off to sleep, he looked up at the sky and whispered, "Oh, Papa... I remember what you said... I'm trying my hardest, but... it's starting to feel as if we will never find the place we are looking for."

THREE MORE DAYS had passed, and still no sign of a place to live. Hunting was not going very well, as none of them were used to hunting without the help of Mama.

As Midnight, Autumn, and Moonshadow were walking along in silence once more and the sun was setting over the horizon, Midnight spotted something. Out of the corner of his eye he could see a large grassy hill on the right of him.

His common sense was telling him it was just a regular hill, but his instinct told him there had to be something behind that unexplored hill.

"Moonshadow! Autumn! Look! I think we should go see what is behind that hill," Midnight meowed to his littermates.

"Why? What is the point? I bet it's just a whole lot of grass!" Autumn snapped at her brother.

"Actually, I think Midnight is right. What we are looking for could most certainly be just behind that hill," Moonshadow meowed thoughtfully.

"Oh c'mon, Moonshadow, that's nonsense. It's just a dumb, ordinary hill! Even a mouse could see that!" Autumn argued.

"Of course there is nothing behind that hill, if that's what you think. But the truth is that the home we seek truly lies in... in what we believe to be possible," Midnight said, surprised by his own words.

That's it... This is what Papa meant! Midnight realized. Midnight ran towards the hill at top speed. His littermates, confused, followed, though Autumn reluc-



It seemed as if this place had the light of the sun itself

tantly. He sprinted up towards the top of the grassy, tall slope.

As Midnight reached the top of the hill, he was greeted by a truly amazing sight. As he stood at the top of what seemed to be an ordinary hill, he looked down at the most beautiful landscape in the universe.

There was a long, calm, clean, flowing turquoise stream cutting in through a beautiful green forest filled with prey and life, and the forest was filled with such

beauty and amazingness that it simply took your breath away.

The forest offered great shelter, and in the distance Midnight spotted a wide, open prairie, growing with grass and wildflowers. There were so many different colors, and everything was so bright that it seemed as if this place had the light of the sun itself.

And as Midnight looked down at this wonderful place, he thought, *We have found our true home at last.* ❀



Bonus Materials

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Welcome to the *Stone Soup* Honor Roll! We receive hundreds of submissions every month by 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.

— *The Editors*

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