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ALYSSA LAUGHTER; GRADE 6

Get Your Head in the Game

It was a crisp autumn day when I walked into the gym, with the sounds of squeaking shoes, screeching whistles, and bouncing basketballs filling my ears. For me, these were the sounds that provided more familiarity than the smell of coffee at breakfast. I sat on a bench in front of the bleachers as I watched other players warm up.

I looked at the Post-It note stuck onto my backpack and read it with a smile. *You got this!* the note encouraged in blue ink. I could do it.

“Okay, everyone! If you are here for tryouts, hustle over to the hoop on the left side!” a muscular man with a Cougars Basketball T-shirt yelled. I assumed that he was the coach. I did as he said and jogged over to the left hoop. My heart pounded in anticipation. Could I do it?

I was one of the first people to arrive at the hoop, but the coach didn’t seem to expect me there.

“Um, little miss, if you’re somebody’s sibling, go wait at one of the benches. Didn’t you hear my instructions?” the coach said patronizingly. I disliked him immediately. “I called for the people trying out.”

“I *am* a person trying out,” I replied.

“This is a *boys’* team. You’re a girl. Why are you here, exactly?” he asked.

“I said, I’m here to try out. Haven’t you ever heard of Title IX? The law that allows girls to play on boys’ teams if there’s no girls’ teams available? If it’s legal for me to play on this team, then I can play on this team,” I explained.

“Title IX, my foot. You are a girl that wants to try out for a boys’ team. I want a winning team that runs hard, works hard, and *doesn’t* cartwheel on the court. That’s why there is no girls’ team. This is *my boys’ team*. You are only a girl, and your job is to wave your pom-poms to cheer on my players!” he yelled in rage.

“Just because I’m a girl doesn’t mean that I’m a cheerleader. I’m *my own* cheerleader. Didn’t you notice that there was a whole crowd of boys who ran behind me? I can run fast. I work hard. And I didn’t cartwheel on the court. So you’ve got yourself a player. Let. Me. Try. Out,” I huffed boldly. Sometimes my mouth doesn’t pay attention to my brain, and I could tell that this was one of those times.

But at least this time, my mouth was smarter than my brain.

“My office, now. Wait until tryouts are *over*,” he sternly whispered. I knew better than to stay there, so I paced over to the door that read “Coach’s Office”.

I was furious, so full of rage that my ears were practically steaming. Just because I was a girl didn’t mean that I would cartwheel on the court instead of working my butt off, running to shoot a basket for my team. Not only was I unable to play basketball, but my friends back home would be shooting hoops and sweating and ordering sodas after games. I knew that it was a bad decision to move, but I had to do more than let the coach’s orders take me away from playing the sport I love. No matter what the costs were, I would make things right.

I watched with jealousy as the boys ran laps back and forth across the court, already sweating and panting like crazy.

You’re only ten minutes into tryouts, and tryouts are a half an hour. You need to hustle and grit your teeth if you want to make it any farther, I wanted to tell them. After playing basketball since I was four, I knew

that if you want to be great at any sport, you have to have a ridiculously sick work ethic. These boys looked like they knew nothing about this concept as they tiredly jogged across the court.

As I watched the hopeful players (if you can even call them that) trot, shoot, and dribble, I fantasized that I was the coach. I would give constructive criticism, unlike the stern looks and calls from the current coach. The players would leave the season inspired and hard-working, and I would let *anyone* play. Before I knew it, the boys ran to their water bottles, red-faced and dripping in sweat. The coach stomped over to the office, upset and annoyed. Not only were his candidates terrible, but he had a stubborn *girl* to deal with.

“What is the meaning of your shenanigans?” the coach exasperatedly groaned.

“I just want to play basketball like everyone else. I had to move halfway across the country without even being asked, all because my dad was *recommended* to take an interview for some dumb job, and basketball is my favorite sport. It’s my passion, and I am so passionate about it that I am willing to sacrifice anything to get on the team!” I yelled.

“You’re a tough little cookie to crack, huh? Well, if you want to play, than make yourself a stupid girls’ team, with other tough little cookies who want to play with the big boys,” he said in a patronizing voice, just as he had before tryouts. It must’ve taken years to master that one.

“Appointment dismissed. I will be informing your mother about this.” he continued sternly.

I walked out of that door calmly, never wanting to see that coach again, though I knew that if I wanted to play basketball, I would need to see him plenty more times.

And as soon as I left the office, I heard him talking to the principal:

“Um, I’m calling in concerns of a girl named Nicole Brooks. I need to know her mother’s phone number...”

When I got home, I threw my bag down in frustration. I wouldn’t stop to talk to my mom. I wouldn’t stop to talk to my two brothers. I wouldn’t even talk to my dog, Chamberlain. I would just contact whoever would care about this situation. My hands ached to hold a basketball in my hands on a shiny wood floor, listening to the swish of a ball going through a net.

After several searches through the school website, looking for teachers that would care, I finally found one that would work:

I’m Tiana Jamie, otherwise known as Miss Jamie or Coach Jamie. I’m a seventh grade PE coach who broke barriers in middle school to participate on the boys’ wrestling team.

I barely paid any attention to the rest of that description, because it was hand-tailored to my condition. I didn’t need to read on.

I sent Miss Jamie an email saying the following:

Miss Jamie:

I’m Nick, a seventh-grade girl with a passion for basketball and no team to play on. Why, you ask? Well, I tried playing on the boys’ team, but the coach is stuck in old times and refuses to think that girls can do nothing more than shake pom-poms and yell ‘Go team!’ I would like to have a way to stand up to him that does more than words can. Would you be kind enough to help me in my journey to make things right?

Thanks for your time!

Nick Brooks

I thought that this sounded professional enough, so I hit the send button and went through with it. It felt like forever that I waited for a response, but a few minutes later, a *ping!* came from my iPhone.

Hello Nick,

I am so sorry for your conditions! I myself have gone through similar things. I assume that you have reminded him of the Title IX law and have provided him some strength and sarcasm. This is what I did, but I knew that it wouldn’t be enough. Coach Wellington -

Coach Wellington?! The coach’s name was Coach Wellington? This was hilarious! I read on:

Coach Wellington is a tough shell to crack, but we can do this together. I know that you would like to play basketball just as much as the boys, so we will meet with him tomorrow during the second tryout session. Mr. Yale will watch the tryouts and keep the players disciplined.

Whatever happens, thank you for contacting me to help you through this.

- Miss Jamie

This went better than I thought! But Coach Wellington (oof!) *was* a tough shell to crack. I didn't know if even Miss Jamie and I could defeat him.

Chamberlain jumped up onto my bed, covering me with slobber. Chamberlain was a Great Dane named after the basketball star Will Chamberlain. While he licked my face, I planned my attack. What would I say to Mr. Girls Are Cheerleaders?

"Champ, you can stay, but keep your slobber to yourself," I said gently. I petted him, thinking about the intensity that lay in front of me for the next day.

The next day, after school, was the big day. Miss Jamie was a tall, sturdy woman with yoga pants and Nikes. Her dark skin glistened with sweat, as if she had just gone on a run. I felt small and unimportant next to her, but she treated me as if I was more important than she was.

"So, you must be Nick. I'm so proud to meet you. Ready to do this? This is kinda like a court case. Principal Walter is like the judge, you're the plaintiff, Coach W is the defendant, and I'm your lawyer. Lucky for you, Coach doesn't have a lawyer, cause he's too stubborn to have another argumentative person on his side," she explained enthusiastically. She was the coolest teacher I'd ever met.

"Okay, cool. I'm really, really nervous, but whatever happens, I'm glad I tried to make things right," I said confidently. This is when I *loved* to have a smart mouth - it came in quite handy in times like this. Sometimes it actually *was* smart.

As we walked into the coach's office, Coach W was sitting at his desk, twiddling with his iPhone. The sounds of a cat video marathon echoed throughout the office.

"Excuse me, sir, but are you watching CatLady101's hour-long funny cat video series?" Miss Jamie asked politely.

"That's beside the point. Let's get to why we're here - this troublemaking girl who wants to play on a *boy* basketball team. Sports are not for girls," he huffed ashamedly.

I stifled a giggle while Miss Jamie said, "And not all girls are for cheerleading. Some girls want to play sports."

"That's not what girls are for. Girls were made to support the boys playing," he replied.

"What better way than to let her be on the team? You've seen our new candidates for the basketball team. I bet that if she's worked this hard just to be on the team, she'll be even better if she's *on* the team," Miss Jamie fired back.

Coach W was silent for awhile, but it didn't take long for him to come up with a comeback. "No matter how badly the boys may play now, they can improve. Boys are made with athletic stamina and muscle. Do girls have that? *No*. With my training, my boys will be better than any girl!" he practically screamed.

"Well, how would you be able to train your boys *without* a girl if you were fired?" Principal Walters piped up. My eyes went huge.

"I wouldn't be fired, because I will win this battle," Coach W tried.

"Not if I can help it. Get out of this office, or you really *will* be fired," Principal Walters spat. Miss Jamie smiled. I smiled back.

I grabbed my gym bag, ran out to the court, and grabbed a basketball. I dribbled as I ran across the court, making a slam dunk before any of the boys could even touch the ball.

The guys trying out looked at me with gaping eyes.

“I think we’ve got ourselves a player,” one of them said to me, leaning in for a high-five. I gladly slapped it, knowing that I would be a huge help to this team. But I knew that not all girls should go through the same journey I did just to play basketball. I had to do something about that.

A few weeks later, at the gym, a line of girls formed. They dropped their gym bags right near mine and ran to the court. I ran over right with them.

“Alright, ladies, are you ready to try out? I’m Coach Jamie, the head of the brand-new Cougars girls’ basketball team...”

Rynx: The City of Dreams

In the shining city of Rynx, a boy walks down a worn-down city street in the lower levels of the towering city where poor or homeless citizens dwell. There, the boy finds scraps of food, clothing, and warmth. Up above, the lights blind him, and majestic towers loom. In front of him, are the dark alleys of his childhood, dark and threatening, yet so familiar to him. He doesn't know his name, he has no parents. Days are spent drawing in the dirt and stealing food and plastic. Love is unknown to him. Perhaps he incapable of love, now that emotions are avoid in this world. His only love is to draw, to create.

Sssshhhhhkkk. Shek. Shsss. The boy's hands steadily fly across the dirt, his mind in the art piece. A beautiful but wounded dragon appears on the ground. The boy continues with his art piece, oblivious of the world around him, drawing toward the dragon. *Sbbb...* The stick flourishes in the ground. His mind contents at the dragon and its treasure, his body flowing with the strokes. Then all of a sudden-

Vroom! A broom sweeps across the drawing, ruining it all. The boy looks up to see a woman glaring at him. Like him, she is poor and barely affords a living place. And she doesn't appreciate the piece.

"Get out! I will not have dirty rats like you ruining my property. What a trash art piece at that too, some realistic vision would have been much better! Get off of my property!" It probably wasn't hers. Still, the boy gets up and walks away. He looks through trash, steals change. People walk by, not bothering to see him. They live without living, they see without seeing, they feel without feeling. They respectively go to their workstations, do their work, then fly on drones back to their identical apartments. As the day dawns, he finds an alley and takes out his ragged and broken blanket. Shivering, he falls asleep, gazing at the unseeable stars.

Like this, every day of the 12 years pass. Like this, the boy dreams of a different world, then wakes up to reality. He's weaker than all the rest of the population, because he hasn't enough plastic to buy any pills. Several times, he almost died. The boy learns that humans have come to depend on pills so much, that their immune system is failing without it. Then, one day, when the boy is busy finding chalk, something catches his attention. It's a flyer that says:

Art Contest: Rynx
December 15th, 3039
All Are Eligible!

Details: The beautiful city of Rynx is one of the last major 7 cities left on Earth. What do you see around you? How does this advanced city compare with the old unhygienic ones?
Show off Rynx spirit! Go Rynx!

Judging: Skill-90%, Creativity-5%, Idea-5% Remember, draw with the best skill, the most realistic! Show the world the greatness of Rynx! The art pieces will be presented on
Worldwide screen all across America!

Turn in submission by December 25th, 3040.

Turn in with form and send by drone 790A to 8892 3rd Apartment Street by December 20th.

Prize: 500,000 plastic

Good Luck!

American National Art Center (Resigning on January 1st, 3040)

Realistic Vision and Photography Replacement

Last contest! Go Rynx!

The boy picks up the flyer, and stares at it. Tears fill his eyes. So this is it. The Last Contest. The last art anyone will ever make. No one will care, not after the money and prize is taken away. He continues to stare. Maybe, just maybe he'll enter. Never has he entered any of the art contests, because he knows that art isn't about skill, it's about emotions, ideas, creativity, music. As the sun sets again, he tucks the flyer safely in his pocket and race to his alley. He hears the news drone droning on and on. But sentences catch his attention:

“And next, we will have James Smith, the leader of the American National Art Center talk!-In February, the association will be resigning. All art pieces will be replaced with photography or realistic vision! Paper, writing tools, and art tools will be banned. You can always turn to realistic vision, the real deal! Thank you all for participating in the contests. We hope you turn to some other visual art contest! Thank you! -Yes, that is the founder. No one shall make art soon enough, just like writing, which stopped, just last year. We predict that art will cease to exist by next year.

Before the boy drifts asleep, he stares at the black sky and red moon. He dreams of a time when there were shining stars and a white, pure moon. He remembers reading old books and seeing pictures, this old better world.

But in the morning, he awakes to the sight of a fake blue sky and artificial air. He forgets it all.



The day passes by quickly. The boy steals as much money which was plastic as possible. Then one day, he has enough spare change to buy one paper and a set of watercolors and a brush.

He sets the treasure down. There's a reason why he loves art so much, because he can create anything, any world he wants, and there are no limitations.

Staring at the artificial beauty of the rich humans above, the artificial nature and the black waters of the city, the cloudy and blurry gray-blue sky, he picks up his brush and starts drawing.

The boy wants music, art, writing, to be back in the world, he wants the world to go backward, when America once had schools to learn instead of pills, gyms, parks, classes, pianos, real grass and trees, paper money. So, he flourishes with his brush, making quick strokes. When he finishes, a ruined, scarred, dead world appears. The people in it walk around like possessed zombies. The artificial world is obvious. Then, on the other side of it is a past world. It's filled color and happiness. Children run around with kits, laughing. Music visibly flows. This is the background. The paper is split in half, and one side is Rynx, while the other is the happy past world. On the fake side, the art is as realistic as a photo. On the real side, it's flowing with emotion, feeling, and movement.

It all started, he thinks, when people started caring more about math and science than literature, then they found out they could just inject themselves with knowledge. Who need to learn after that?

As the red moon appears, he tucks the drawing safely under himself, pulls his blanket over himself and gazes at the non-existent stars in the distance. Finally, he falls asleep, dreaming of the

past world, the creative beautiful visual arts that used to exist. Imagines a different world from this emotion deprived, fake, and uncreative world. Children running in the park, playing tag, visiting places around the world instead of wearing glasses and seeing them, feeling the wind and joy, live blossoming.

A few more days pass. The boy finds Drone 790A and sends his submission to the National Art Center. On December 25th, the boy remembers that in the old world, there used to be something called Christmas, a holiday where families would gather and have fun, and give happiness. There are no such things called “holidays”, not now. He spends the rest of his change on chalk, where he runs around the underground world and draws swirling pictures that convey happiness. This, he decided, is his gift to the world on Christmas, though most people might have forgotten by now.

The next day, the city janitor cleans away the chalk, leaving behind the usual gray. He doesn't even bother to look up at the drawing. The boy watches in silence. Then someone announces on the big city screen-

“We have a winner for the Rynx contest!” The screen shows a realistic photo-like exact copy of the city, highlighting its beauty, putting away it's fakeness. *“By Tina Gorters! Congratulations! Now, here are the other entries!”* And the boy sees his art being blurred out on purpose.

The Last Art. Never will there be any more art supplies like paper, pastel, watercolor, color pencils, charcoal. Art will forever fade, the last form of something real, something creative.

Sports were gone. Visual Arts were gone. Writing was gone. Something called video games and videos was gone. Everything that makes a happy world was gone. Children spent their hours at home, injecting knowledge in their brains with a special shot. Everyone used special pills to feel happiness, or get fit. They used injections to have the feeling of a video game. Emotions were injected in a human's body. They didn't know the meaning of “play”.

That night, the boy watches from the top tower of the city. He sees himself, a little star in the universe, someone that can't make a difference. He watches the dead but living “beautiful city” in silence. How was the world before, a world filled with color? Was there a time when the air was sweet, and nature filled the earth? Was there a time when people played something called sports? Was there something called competitiveness before? Races? Parks?

There were only pills for a fake fit body, glasses for seeing anywhere in the world, parks that were on Web. There were only poor street boys like him who saw the real Rynx. Barely anyone was homeless, because of the strictness in Rynx. If he were caught homeless, he would be taken. Not like anyone noticed.

What was the point of living in an oblivious world? His only form to express himself was art, and he was connected to it. And it was being taken away from him, like how color was taken away from Earth a long time ago.

He spent the rest of the day watching Rynx.

As the red moon appeared, he tucked himself under his blanket, and gazed at the moon and the stars, like he did every night.

Maybe, he thought to himself, I'm being selfish. Maybe today's world is better.

So, the next morning, he automatically went looking for some chalk. Then he remembered:

It was gone.

What would he do now? What was his purpose in this world? He was so insignificant. He had no more money or plastic, and he didn't care to steal any anymore. So he walked back to his alley, pulled the blanket over him, and stared at the “sky”.

Instead of seeing the sky, he pictured how the world used to be... everything good about it. For the whole day.

At night, he shivered to sleep again.

A week later, he still lay in under his broken blanket, gazing and imagining. He hadn't eaten or drink for days. As he fell asleep, holding his only possession with him, he imagined how it used to be.

How lucky the people were back then...

He never woke up to the same old world again, like he always had. Instead, he forever lived in the dream world, a better world.

Wishes

When will the air be fresh again,
when will the liveliness come back to everyone.
When will we be able to sleep without worries in our heads,
when will we be able to walk around without fear in our minds?
How I wish that this will feel like a normal obstacle in our lives,
how I wish that peace will find us again.
Sometime this world will be in peace,
sometime we will all be fine.

What Now?

There are always new days. Those days can be good, or they can be bad.

“Run! Everyone go now!” a teacher was yelling. They were being told to evacuate the premises. Someone armed was on campus?

Everything was completely chaotic. Kids all over the place. No one knew what was going on.

As Hanna passed the school gates, something was holding her back. Tugging on her arm.

“Aghhh! Let go of me!” she screamed. Scared didn’t sum up her emotions to the least.

“Hanna, relax! It’s just me!” Alaina hadn’t meant to alarm her.

“Still, let go! We aren’t friends anymore. What do you want from me?!”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to choose Clarissa over—”

It felt as if someone had just put blankets over their heads. Nothing could be seen or heard. Somehow, they had found each other’s grasp. As they were rocking back and forth, the engine started.

But where were they being taken? Had they been... had they been kidnapped?

They didn’t know how long they had been out for. All they knew was that they were tied up in an empty room.

“Aghhh!” Screamed Hanna. The cloth in their mouths wouldn’t budge.

Click... The door swung open. Three men with hoods over their heads walked in. You could tell something was about to go down based off of their grins.

“So, I understand that your fathers work to protect the president. Correct?”

“Yes, but—” Alaina had started.

The man put his finger to her lips. “Shhh. I’ll be doing the talking from now on.” he started, “I want something that is very important to the president. And, you will help me get it.”

They didn’t bother hiding the horror on their faces as the stranger explained the plan. He wanted to use them to get their fathers to give up the item. What the item was, however, they did not know.

“Action in... Three... Two... One!” a second man said.

“Hi dad, you’re probably wondering what this video is about. You’ll find out very shortly. I just wanted to let you know that *I love you to the moon and back. Never forget that.* I need you and Chris, Alaina’s dad, to get something for me. Rumor has it that it is very important to the president. They say that you should know what that item is. Please... I’ve got to go. Hope to see you. If not—” The camera stopped.

“That stuff, about loving him to the moon and back or whatever... that was GOLDEN! Sure got his attention.” he said. Little did he know, that phrase meant danger. However, only Hanna’s family knew about it.

The Maat Mysteries

The Egyptian goddess of law and order, Maat, lounged in her throne in the heavens, watching over Egypt. She made sure that everything was in place, and nothing had gone wrong. For thousands of centuries, everything was peaceful. Everything was calm. Everything was quiet. One day, a being did something that disturbed all human living. Maat was informed of this doing, and immediately took a living form of a poisonous sea creature and placed herself in the Nile river. On its banks, she saw what she needed to see. Now she knew why she had been called. She saw a little girl with a sword through her neck. Unfortunately, Maat did not have healing powers, but she had the power to sense how someone had died. In this case, it was obvious to how the death happened. But what she needed to figure out was the why. She would need to start interviewing suspects when she went into human form. Maat jumped out of the Nile and transformed into a human from her poisonous plankton form. She scanned the body and then turned and saw a very populated village. Maat transformed into the form of a villager and began interrogating.

She knocked on a stranger's door, and said, "Someone in the town has been murdered. Her name is Saybeth, and she's seven years old. Do you know who she is?"

The woman said, "No... No! Of course, I know her, I'm her mother!"

Maat rushed the sobbing mother to the location of her daughter's murder. She cried for about two minutes more, then her face grew angry. "We will find my daughter's murderer. Together!"

Maat and the mother ran across the street to the next house. "Let me do the talking," Maat said. Maat knocked on the door and a voice spoke. "Yes?" the voice said.

"A girl by the name of Saybeth has been murdered. Do you know anything about this occurrence and anyone who could have caused this horrific tragedy?"

"Saybeth! She was my son's best friend! I think I may know who did it," she said.

"Tell me!" Saybeth's mom whispered.

The woman, whose name Maat found out was Joca, told a story of a group of girls hating on Saybeth. They sent her death threats, bullied her and spread rumors about her.

"Why didn't she tell me?" Saybeth's mom shrieked.

"She told me that she was too scared to tell you," Joca said. She also did not want to tell Saybeth's mother because Saybeth was very insistent on not telling her. Joca told a story of how she noticed something funny about Saybeth the day she was horribly beaten up and cut on her right leg. She kept looking at big sharp things. And she kept staring at the knives in the kitchen. One day, Saybeth was missing from school, and Saybeth's mom was at work. So, Joca was called to the school to be told that Saybeth was missing. Joca also noticed one of her kitchen knives were missing. The sharpest one. There apparently was a river a few blocks down the school. As soon as Joca found out the knife was missing, Joca had a horrible feeling, the feeling that Saybeth, at seven years old, had killed herself.

After Joca told the story, Maat and Saybeth's mom immediately called the authorities. They indeed confirmed that Saybeth May Helka's death was a suicide. A few days later, the whole school attended the funeral, except the group of girls who beat Saybeth up and tortured her. No one knows where they went. Rumor has it they moved away, so they did not have to be involved with Saybeth's death. But no one knows for sure. No one...

Untitled

Nutmeg. Nutmeg. *Nutmeg*. Her name rang in my head, over and over again, like the endless chimes of a bell. Empty and monotonous. My head spun as I tried to process what had just happened; it seemed too unreal to be true. But it was.

This is it. I thought. *After all these years, my worst fear has finally come true.* I sank back down into my beanbag, feeling utterly defeated. Abandoned. Alone.

Betrayed.

But how? Why? Nutmeg was the best cat anyone could ever dream of having. She was the perfect pet. She made it seem like *I* was the perfect owner. We were an inseparable pair.

Ever since kindergarten, I had been her caretaker. I had comforted her. Fed her. I had been there with her, *for* her, through thick and thin, through the good and bad.

And now, she was gone.

She's not truly gone, I told myself. *Nutmeg isn't dead yet. There's still a chance.*

But even as I spoke these words aloud, I knew I didn't believe them. The special bond that we had formed over the years that had allowed us to access each other's feelings, that remarkable unity that other pet owners could only dream of forming one day told me now that Nutmeg was dead. Gone, forever.

The connection had come so naturally to us, and now that Nutmeg had disappeared, I realized just how much I missed it, how much it had affected my life. It struck me like a crash of thunder; suddenly, the world seemed ... different, like it had become older and wiser, like me.

The cheerful, fluffy clouds hovering outside my window seemed to sag a little under the weight of the sky, turning a drearier shade of gray. Our family's fruit trees suddenly looked bare and thin; the apples Nutmeg had loved were rotting before my very eyes. I swore I could see her cat food bag and bowl in the corner gathering dust by the second.

I squeezed my eyes shut so hard tears streamed down my already-soaked face. My whole life had changed without Nutmeg. It was obvious.

As I sat there thinking about Nutmeg, a flicker of movement caught my eye. It was a bird fluttering in the backyard. At first, there seemed nothing unusual about it. After all, how many ordinary birds fly in a garden every day? But as I got a better view of it, I saw that the bird was flying lopsidedly, one wing tilted higher than the other, as if that wing was injured.

Then it slammed into the ground.

I heard myself draw in a sharp breath, then rush downstairs, instinctively skipping the creaky step, 4th from the bottom. Just like Nutmeg used to do. Before I knew what was happening, I flung open the sliding door and rushed into our patch of vegetables, where the feathered flier had crash-landed.

Squinting, I saw the unmistakable shine of its cobalt-blue feathers against the greens. The shade of its plumage, I realized, was almost the exact same shade of blue as Nutmeg's eyes. I snatched a handkerchief and a pair of winter mittens lying on the kitchen counter, then gingerly crept towards the bird. I could tell it was barely alive, with its shallow breathing and closed eyes. Very carefully, I lifted it onto the cloth with my mittens and carried it back inside.

Once in the safety of my bedroom, I did a quick search to determine what species of bird I had just rescued and what type of food it ate. Soon, I found out that it was a male indigo bunting, which eat seeds, berries, and insects.

I headed to the front yard, where there were wild raspberry bushes. I plucked a few, then poured a splash of water into a small glass. My heart stung when it reminded me of Nutmeg and her water dish. *Stop*, I told myself. *This is no time to cry about Nutmeg. There's an injured indigo bunting upstairs that needs your help.*

After nibbling a bit of raspberry, which, luckily, didn't kill him, and drinking some water, the bird's condition visibly improved. But now, there was a new problem: I had to tell my parents. Strangely, I didn't want to. I wasn't sure how they would react.

Grudgingly, like a child who has just been told to go to bed, I trudged down the hall to my father's office, gently carrying my patient in one hand.

"Um. . . Dad? I have something to show you." I forced my hand to form into a fist and rapped firmly on the door.

"Yes?"

"Well. . . I was looking out the window at the backyard earlier this morning, and I saw this cute bird that fell into the tomatoes. Turns out it had an injured wing and couldn't fly properly. So, anyway, I took it to my room and gave it raspberries and water. It's a male indigo bunting, by the way."

My father looked thoughtful as he, well, *thought* for several minutes with me standing in the doorway, apprehensive. Finally, he spoke. "What do you want to do with him, then?"

"I don't know for sure. . . I was thinking we should just take care of him until his wing is better and then set him free."

He nodded, and the bird in my hand chirped. I jumped with surprise. The sound almost sounded hopeful, pleading. "No, not yet. You'll have to wait until you're fully rested. Sorry," my dad laughed.

"So. . . That's a yes?" I confirmed hopefully.

"Definitely. But it depends on what your mother thinks. You know she's still getting over. . ." At this point, Dad got all choked up. I knew he was thinking about Nutmeg.

* * *

The good news: I could take care of the indigo bunting, which I decided to name Blueberry. The bad news: As I learned to take care of him properly, I noticed myself thinking less and less about Nutmeg. True, Blueberry was a welcome distraction, but I didn't want him to become a replacement for her. The special bond that had existed between me and Nutmeg hadn't formed with Blueberry yet.

And so life went on. The sun still rose and set over the horizon, stars still sparkled in the sky every night. Insects continued to flit about in the yard. But Nutmeg wasn't there with me at home.

Blueberry practiced fluttering in the living room, where I covered the floor with pillows and cushions. After that, Blueberry refined his flying skills in the backyard, where he slowly gained confidence.

Through all this time, I couldn't help noting the striking similarity between Blueberry's feathers and Nutmeg's eyes, the same exact shade of bright blue. I told Mom and Dad, but they said they didn't see what I was talking about. Maybe I was imagining things.

"Mom," I said. "Maybe this is one of those moments where my bond with—" I swallowed here, a lump rising in my throat "—Nutmeg really kicks in. I *swear* I can see the similarity, I'm not joking or anything."

My mother looked at me with an expression of mingled confusion, sadness, and pity. "Oh, sweetie, I miss Nutmeg too, but there's no such thing as magic in this world. I wish there was, but your bond with Nutmeg is nothing but the result of 6 years of knowing each other. And now that

she's, well, gone, I'm sorry to say that the bond has been broken. And, like I said before, no magic will bring Nutmeg back."

I looked at her, feeling a mix of anger, disappointment, disbelief, and grief. How could she not notice?

At long last, the day came when Blueberry was all healed *and* able to fly. We carried him to an open window leading into the backyard. Carefully setting him on the windowsill, I stroked his head for the last time as he took flight, gracefully soaring into the air while chirping with joy. I thought I would never see him again.

But I was wrong... in a way.

* * *

Blueberry suddenly swooped down to the ground, sweeping the long grass. I gasped with surprise.

Before I knew what was happening, he landed and changed into . . . something. It was horrible and fantastic at the same time; I couldn't turn away. Blueberry's beak turned into a nose and whiskers as his head grew in size and flattened. Triangular ears sprouted out of his head. His feathers morphed into fur, his wings and feet became paws, and his feather-covered tail changed into a long cinnamon one. When the transformation was complete, Blueberry was a tan cat with brilliant sapphire eyes, looking exactly like . . .

"Nutmeg?" I dashed into the yard, avoiding the step that creaked, just like I did the day I saw Blueberry plummet from the sky. But this time, it was with joy and disbelief.

"Nutmeg, it's really you!" I flung my arms around her as memories came rushing back. The day we adopted her from the shelter. The day she first learned not to scratch on the couch. And the day she disappeared, presumed dead. She purred and fell asleep in my lap immediately, a very Nutmeg-ish move.

I didn't see how this was possible, but I wasn't going to complain. And although the rational part of my brain knew not to get my hopes up, to prepare for disappointment, my eyes confirmed it was real.

* * *

That day was probably the strangest day of my life. I lifted up Nutmeg to my parents just like Rafiki lifted up a baby Simba to a crowd of bowing animals in one of my favorite movies, the *Lion King*. They looked confused.

"Sweetie, that's Nutmeg. What are you doing?" asked Mom.

"When we set Blueberry free, he turned into Nutmeg and landed on the grass, remember? So I carried Nutmeg inside." I told her.

"Stop for a second. Who's Blueberry?" Dad questioned bewilderedly.

I looked at him, thunderstruck. Here was the same person who brought Blueberry to his office to keep him company as he worked, now asking who that same indigo bunting was, as if he never existed. A thousand thoughts ran through my head as I tried to decide what to say or do. I finally made up my mind to pretend Blueberry never existed, because something told me that it was better this way. I felt a slight pang of guilt. *I mean, I'll still remember him. It's not like he disappeared from our memories, he's only disappeared from theirs.* I thought sadly.

Nutmeg mewed. And for the first time in my life, I couldn't tell what it meant.

* * *

Now I'm an adult, working as a biologist and part-time Audubon citizen scientist. I never found the full explanation behind what really happened that day, but at least now I know something.

My own private research has proven that it was my love for Nutmeg that caused Blueberry to exist. Well, actually, exist probably isn't the right word. Because Blueberry *was* Nutmeg. They were the same soul, just in different bodies. Now I know why no one ever saw her (despite the countless posters we splattered all over the neighborhood, which undoubtedly annoyed the neighbors more than I can imagine), why we never found her body.

And even if I haven't discovered the entire solution—maybe I'll *never* discover the entire solution, I'm certain of one thing: I will never forget Blueberry and/or Nutmeg. Ever.

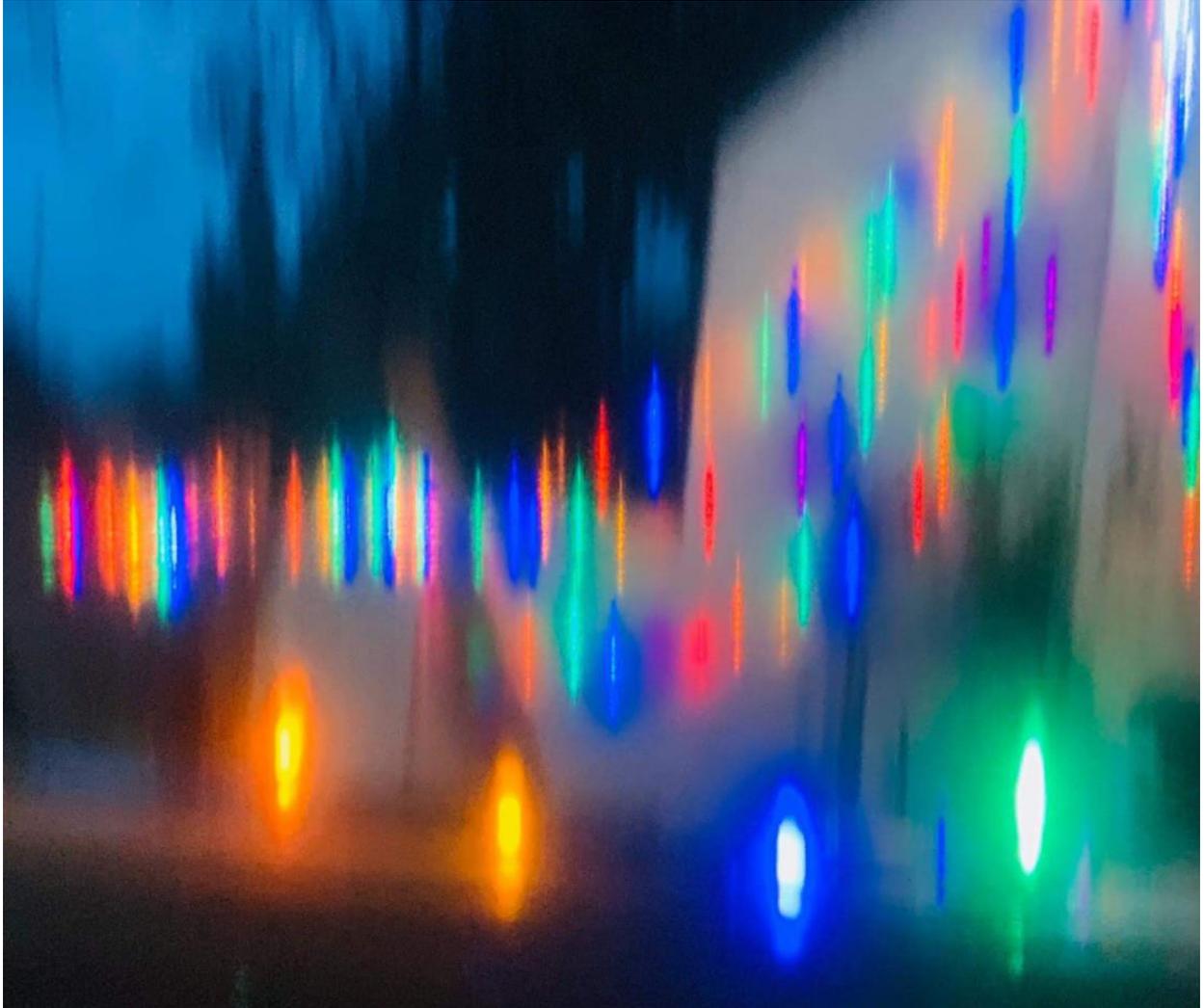
* * *

MAHATI RAMAKRISHNAN; GRADE 7

Untitled



Untitled



Untitled



MICHELLE JIANG; GRADE 8

Untitled

