

The Blue Guitar **Jr.**

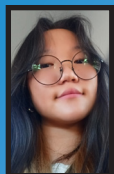
*Featuring
literature
and art
for youth*

The 2025 edition



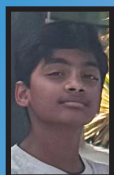
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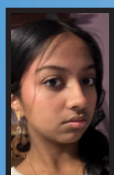


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www.theblueguitarmagazine.org and www.artizona.org.

“Things as they are are changed upon the blue guitar.”
— Excerpt from Wallace Stevens’ 1937 poem “The Man With the Blue Guitar.”
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Stressed

By Bellis Nieh

Haiku:

One thought on my mind,
But can't seem to pinpoint it.
Can't go with the flow.

Freeverse Poem:

One topic on my mind,
I can't grasp it though.
A swirl of emotions inside of me,
just can't go with the flow.
No room for patience,
or playing around.
It's getting harder to keep my ground.
This constant nagging,
this constant thought,
my brain and emotions all tied up in a knot.
Fear of what and what not to say,
it could go either way.
This feeling building up inside of me,
all a mess.
As it comes out, I realize...
I'm stressed.



Bellis Nieh is 11 years old, and is in 6th grade. She loves to write, play piano, and do Taekwondo. She has also been published in Scribbler and Young Writers Showcase.

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How to Survive a Meeting That Could've Been an Email

By Shreya Bansal



Shreya is an 8th grader. She enjoys playing with her dog, swimming, and doing volunteer work. She has also been published in Hutch Magazine, Scribbler, and Young Writers USA.

- 1. Give eye contact and a small nod when someone looks at you**
(Those wannabe leaders need some recognition. That one, David, in the corner of the screen, is probably sleeping, but you need to lock in and pretend to pay attention. They decided to call a Zoom meeting after 6 p.m., not you.)
- 2. Aggressively slam your fingers onto the keyboard**
(They don't know you're just typing "This is useless." over and over again. Let's keep it that way. Taking useless notes=keeping your useless job that you get paid minimum wage to do.)
- 3. MUTE YOURSELF**
(Nobody needs to hear your voice. Muting is the one way to escape the reality of work, and you can eat your emotional support potato chips. It also lets you nod instead of speaking. No one will notice a thing.)
- 4. Ask at least one question about anything at all**
(The question doesn't have to be useful as long as you say it with a confused tone. The question should always start with something about a stupid problem at work, something along the lines of "Does the coffee machine still work?"
- 5. Have your dog in the room—his barking will help the cause**
(The dog is an asset. You are probably immune to the barking, they don't know that. They will get fed up and tell you to mute. Another very important step. If needed, use this as an excuse to leave the meeting. Always works.)
- 6. Take violent notes...on the back of a receipt**
(In a normal meeting, you should take notes, because you have to remember to email Amy later. But online...that's a different story. Grab a random scrap and something that writes and scribble away on the torn paper. You can always draw stars everywhere if necessary.)

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7. Use the stare—it works

(We've all heard of the infamous Gen-Z stare. The only thing is, you don't have to be a Gen-Z to do it. Stare into the soul of the camera in your computer; your colleagues will be creeped out and will hopefully ignore you. That's the goal.)

8. Keep drinking that coffee

(Coffee is life. Now if you don't like coffee like a weirdo, this one may not be for you. Coffee keeps you awake, just in case anyone says anything kind of important. There is no guarantee that you will remember what Robert said in five minutes, but at least you were awake to hear it. Somewhat.)

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That Grumpy Grandma: Part 1

By Shreya Bansal

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I sat in my creaky rocking chair while each new day went by. I never did anything. I just sat there staring at the dysfunctional family that lived with me. I never did anything about it. I mostly tuned out my family, especially my daughter, Andrea, who has kids of her own. She always blabbers and complains about how I need to move into a retirement home with other people my age. She always makes a face at me when I tell her to worry about herself but it doesn't bother me. Her kids aren't any better. They stay at home all day on their tablets, but I still don't understand the reason why. They have a whole pool and huge bedrooms, and their parents spend way too much money on them anyway. I love them or whatever, but I've always wondered what would've happened to my life if I never had my daughter, Andrea. I bet it would be more peaceful, but there's no going back."

My daughter walked into the room, her feet stomping on the tile. I really hate that sound.

I hated it when she was a kid, and I still hate it now.

"What do you want, Andrea?" I asked with a sigh.

"I was going to ask you what you wanted for dinner," she said. "I have to tell the cook before six."

"The only reason you have a cook is because of me. When I was a kid, I actually helped out in the house. All you do is get somebody else to do it for you," I scowled.

"We're so grateful you did what you did," she said sarcastically.

"Mom, I think you should move to a retirement home. It would be nice for you to be with people your

age, rather than sitting in your rocking chair all day."

"Why would I need to move in with a bunch of old hags that are on the brink of dying?" I said. "It's a complete waste of my time."

"Everybody in the house thinks you could get a move on. No offense or anything," Andrea muttered.

"You think I want to be here? I could've lived in my own house, by myself. Just to be away from all of you," I said.

"No offense or anything," a sarcastic tone in my voice.

"Well, guess what. I already packed your bags. Now you have no excuses not to leave this house. We are leaving in the morning, so be ready to leave," she said with a sharp tone.

I was fuming, my face redder than a fire truck. I really wanted to scream at her, but I couldn't; it would just make the situation worse. I have to accept my fate of dying in a retirement home with dysfunctional seniors to get away from my dysfunctional family.

The next day, we had a silent drive to the retirement home. When I stomped in, it smelled like antiseptic and mothballs. I saw more than five people in hospital chairs with broken hips, all miserably failing to play shuffleboard correctly. I unpacked my bags upstairs in my empty room and said farewell to Andrea. The stench of feet and sweat was coming through my closed door, filling the room with an almost fatal smell.

Since Andrea was gone, I was avoiding going downstairs to interact with people. I had nothing to say

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to them; they wouldn't have listened anyway. I lay in my uncomfortably firm mattress while staring at the ceiling. An overly eager volunteer knocked on my door to come downstairs to eat. I took my sweet time getting to the elevator, even though *I* didn't have any broken hips. The elevator door slowly opened, and I was met by a combination of deep and squeaky voices, which blended into heavy chatter. I sat at an empty gray table and, unfortunately, a rather tired volunteer approached me.

"Can I help you?" she asked.

"I'm waiting for my food to be served," I said, annoyed.

"It's a buffet every night. Everybody chooses what they like from the theme."

"What's the theme today?"

"Spicy tacos," she said, grinning.

"Eugh. I can't believe people eat that stuff."

"Have you even tried it?" She looked offended, surprisingly.

"No. But it looks crunchy. I hate crunchy tacos. I don't need to taste it, I can just tell." I scowled.

A new volunteer wearing a blue sweater brought me a plate of crunchy tacos.

"Try it. If you don't like it, I can throw it away."

I stared at her like a hawk, but she wasn't scared of me. All she did was smile. I looked at the tacos. I held up my shaky hand and took hold of the dry shell. I paused for a moment and let the thought of eating it sink in. My hand moved closer, and I took a bite, my mouth crunching down on the food. The flavors burst into my mouth, the crunchy goodness swishing around, filling the gaps in my taste buds. My eyes peeked open to look at the volunteer, and she was ecstatic. It was probably the first time she actually did something right.

I kept on crunching through the tacos until all that was left was my greasy fingers over my mouth.

A little spark, perhaps even a voice, went off. *Maybe that taco wasn't that bad. Maybe it's just me. Maybe I'm just a hater, though unlikely.* For the first time in my stagnant life, I liked something without any complaints. For the first time, I said something nice to someone that wasn't brutally honest. *I should do that more often. You know, be a nice person for once.* I got up, nodded to the happy volunteer, and went to grab another delicious taco. I even said "Hi!" to Doris, who keeps her text size on her tablet wider than the actual tablet. I went upstairs and settled in my forever home for the rest of my life.

Two days later, I woke up to the sound of the TV static type music Larry was playing next door. He reminded me of one of my grandsons, who used to play Roblox every single day, even though he was only eight years old with the latest iPhone.

"Larry! Turn off that nasty washing machine music! You have horrible taste in music and my ears hurt!" I yelled, my throat scratchy.

"It's good music! It wouldn't kill you to stop complaining all the time!" Larry shouted across his room. Just then, I had a realization. If I keep complaining about my nasty life, I will keep holding myself back. That buffet dinner night, I sat with Agnes, the one surprisingly happy woman in the building. Even though she's the happiest, when I sat down, her face dropped and turned away.

"Agnes, how do I stop complaining about my life?"

"The audacity you have to sit here with me is crazy. Everybody knows that you hate everything. You can stop complaining about your life once you get away from me." Agnes got up with her minions and sat down

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at the nearest table. I was praying for her to break her hip again. I then walked over to Doris' table.

"Hello, Doris. I have a question for you. How do I stop hating my life?"

"Oh ew. Get away from me." Doris' vocal fry made it unable to understand her sentences. Her vocal fry was in the way, but her message was not: I am not liked, and complaining about life and people will get me nowhere. All I needed to do was find a way to stop.

A volunteer asked for my plate, and I asked her where the computers were. I immediately leaped out of my seat and ran to the right side of the first floor. I sat down on one of the comfy chairs, and sitting in front of my eyes was a folded metal book, without any pages. There was also a round figure with a flat bottom sitting next to the book. I did not remember

computers being like this. I opened the computer, but it didn't open like a book, it opened like a box. I picked up the round figure and placed it on top of the keypad, and it sort of worked. My fingers took some time to type in the search bar. Slowly, I pressed the enter button, and the results to the prompt, "How do I stop complaining about my life?" popped up. The first line I read was "Take a nap." Obviously, that wouldn't help considering how much I already sleep. But it was worth a shot, who would it hurt? I shut off the computer and strutted to my bed upstairs. I nestled myself inside the sheets and dozed off.

In my dreams, I walked past the Palace of Electronics and the Land of the Butterflies. Instead, I stopped right in front of the gates to the Sock Kingdom. The gates opened, and the future was ahead of me. All I had to do was walk through the gates. Maybe, just maybe, my question could be answered.

The Last Month of My Summer Break

By Minzi Kim

1. Hitting golf at 11 am and ending at 4 pm during the hottest day of July during summer break.

(I always wondered what it would feel like to be a fried egg. Would I be crispy? Or maybe soft with a juicy egg yolk? Turns out all you are is an oily lump of heat. By 2 PM, I felt fully boiled and wanted to jump into the next cooler for water I saw. Only 40 more degrees and I would've been "syonaraing" this big round blue and green sphere.)

2. Meeting one person 4 times in one week, but they have good sushi, so I'm fine.

(As for someone having a mom who maybe lets you see your friend once a year, let me see my friend for 4 days in a row, like, "WOW." By the 2nd time, I knew god had already praised me at his peak, but then zoomed by the 3rd day, and on the 4th, I knew I could fly without having a single issue.)

3. Listening to the same rules for 5 years just so you can go to a 'smart kids' school.

(At least the first year isn't too bad, I guess, so is the 2nd, at least I "feel" the brain cells growing in size and number. The 3rd was slightly different because I had "MIDDLE SCHOOL" in my face. Last year wasn't too bad because I feel like I got a little stupid and was just excited to meet my friends, and those 14 hours were light work, but oh no, not this year.)

4. Leaving your house for 2 months, and every technology does not work.

(I go to Korea for vacation with no worries, and I come back and check my computer: Yay, it doesn't work! That's when I knew I had a computer engineer living with me, AKA FATHER, so I asked him to fix it. I trusted him, and he said it was fixed, and again, with no worries, I went back to binge-watching a show. 5 minutes before starting my tutor, I figured out that nothing worked, but thanks to genetics, I could figure out how to turn on my computer.)

5. Everyone else is going to Disney Land and going to Japan, and I'm a couch potato.

(Everyone asked me "what you did for summer break," but I could only say "nothing."

I wasn't embarrassed, though, because becoming a couch potato is the peak.

"Unproductive"? Well, I've watched a total of 7 K-dramas during my adventure of turning into a potato :D Now try saying unproductive?)



I am Minzi Kim. I am 13 years old. My favorite hobbies are crocheting, drawing, eating, and, of course, sleeping.

Where's Mr. Kidensky

By Minzi Kim

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It was already the third time this week, so I had to make an excuse, but what excuse? Should I say my dog **ACTUALLY** ate it? Wait, I don't have a dog. Should I say I've never received one? No, he checked my folder so that I would make sure I had one. Oh snap, five more people then it's me! I'm screwed this way or that, so I decided to tell him the truth and accept my faith.

"Ragen, do you have your homework?" said Mr. Balumpabug.

"No, sorry, I forgot to do it..." I said, trying not to look him straight in the eyes.

Hi, I'm Ragen. I'm 9 years old and have no issue in telling the truth, love horror movies, and **HATE, ABSOLUTELY HATE** homework. I have strict parents, but I don't care because when I grow up, I want to be a movie producer, and you don't need math for that, at least I'm pretty sure. As I go to detention, you probably know why, I'll explain why I love horror movies. Horror movies give shivers down my back, and I love that feeling. It also makes the character denser than me, which is pretty hard, so it's really funny, too.

I'm here!

"Hello, Mr. Kide... Where are you, Mr. Kidensky?"

"Hello? Anyone here? There's no way I'm the only one in detention. I know for a **FACT** that Jason didn't turn in his homework for three days, too, and I feel like two kids in my class are always talking while Mr. Balumpabug is giving instructions and teaching."

I came into my detention room, and no one was there. Or was there?

"Help! I'm stuck and I can't go out! **HELP!**" Someone said as the cabinet door, with something written on it, was rapidly

shaking.

Well, I think I should open the door and help this homo sapien get out cause they need "help." Psych! I watched too many horror movies for that, and when I looked closely the cabinet literally said, "**DO NOT OPEN ME OR ELSE**"! That did give shivers down my back though ;). That was my cue to turn around and go back to history. (Ugh, history)

As I entered the room, Ms. Farkwood turned to me and said, "What are you doing not in detention?"

"OH! Um, Mr. Kidensky wasn't there, so I came back!" I responded with a huge line, ear to ear, on my face as I fluttered my eyes like a butterfly trying to fly away from a bug catching net, hoping she'd let me stay and not go to detention because I sit right next to Isabell, my B.F.F., in history.

"Well, let me go check. Class, stay quiet until I come back. Ragen, you stay here while I go check on the room."

Ms.Farkwood never came back. Ooooo Aaaaah. **NO MORE TEACHER~!!!@!!!** Best day of my life, and it was time to go back home too, woohoo!

The next day, I overheard these nosy people talking about this rumor about two teachers disappearing, but like I care?! I went to the MPR for lunch and heard the girls again telling this other nosy group of girls, and it turns out the teacher who was locked up was Mr. Kidensky, and Ms.Farkwood didn't come back to the classroom because she was helping him go back home due to his legs losing the ability to move after being in such a small area for thirty minutes. Now, we have to remember that Mr. Kidensky is 67 years old. That's when I realized and took a good minute to say "**OOOOOOOOOOH.**" Then sat down next to Isabell and thought, "Maybe I should've just opened the cabinet door." Horror movies are such a good educational movie to watch for a perfectly normal 4th grader.

The Siege of a Dream

By Akshaj Neil Atluri

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“Attack!” shouts a cavalry officer in his native language.

A historic city, filled with a thriving community, had now been through 46 years of war. Four kingdoms spent 46 years fighting over, not just a city, but a monument, a central trade center. The last remaining army from the invading kingdom began at the ancient, almost antediluvian stone that formed the city’s “impenetrable” walls.

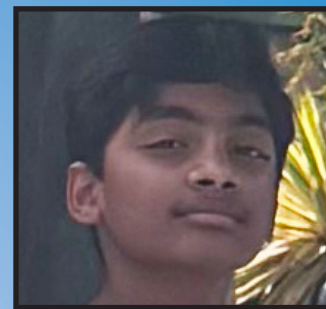
Battering rams all started their rhythmic pounding near the North gate, eagerly waiting for the “Bang!” that would finish their job. The city’s people joined the fight against the invaders, raining arrows on the soldiers like heavy hail on a day condemned to break a windshield. The invaders on the sidelines, their armor gleaming in the sun, held a modified phalanx around the battering rams. As their shields clanged together, the defense deployed their own army to pursue the enemy, and the people of the city were now overconfident that their walls would hold up. This time, however, the invaders’ plans were different. Their magnificent palace had stood in the shadow of the

massive trading plaza, and the glory of the palace, they thought, should outlive the “City of Dreams” being invaded. As the action on the North Wall drew to a close, the South Wall experienced a different story.

At the southeast end of the city was a port facing a river, only miles from the ocean. The port now saw a massive fleet of ships, inspired by the same maxim, rushing through the entrance, raining cannon fire from above. One by one, the city’s defenses sought their inevitable end. It was going to happen someday anyway. The cannonballs were run-of-the-mill, nothing special. Their entire purpose was to cause destruction, being hurled at 450 miles an hour. The last round of ammunition wasn’t a cannonball; it was a round of flaming red arrows, designed to bring the city to the ground.

The city, which was primarily made of wood, happened to be a perfect target for these fiery arrows. As the hundreds of arrows rained down on the city, the city was immediately set ablaze.

The only structure made of stone that wasn’t destroyed was the royal residence,



Akshaj Neil Atluri is in 8th grade. He likes to play chess, basketball, and read. He also likes to travel, code, and play video games. When he grows up, he wants to study business or cardiology.

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which the invaders laid siege to. Since air conditioning didn't exist, and a ravaging fire was causing more destruction by the second, the king and his family were forced out. They were immediately surrounded on all sides, with nowhere to run. The king was trapped, forced to meet his end.

Centuries later, in a lecture hall, professors and their students had just finished a game of chess. The same feelings arose from the midst of the battle, and ended with the king being surrounded on all sides, with nowhere to run. The white king was trapped, forced to meet his end.

Turbulence

By Jasintha Saravanan

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It starts with a scream. Then her arms flail, and she throws a fit. I lift my eyes up and see the girl wailing for her teddy bear, probably buried in her suitcase a row in front of me. My eye twitches. I left to escape the noise, and now I have this child right in front of me screaming for a fake bear. The lady next to me is focused on her book. Small cat eye glasses, sharp black nails, and liner. Honestly, I respect it. If you can ignore a child screaming for a toy over 5,000 feet in the air, you have talent. I unlock my phone and open the camera. Holy chopped. That was a mistake. My eye bags are heavier than my carry-on luggage. I sigh and go back to Instagram. Doomscrolling might be my favorite hobby.

I glance back at the lady next to me. She's still laser-focused on her book. I sigh again and shift in my seat. I look out the window and see clouds. It looks like someone poured shaving cream over the sky and called it a view. I roll my head back in pain. I tap through stories on Instagram. Beach vacations. College visits. SAT scores. It's 3:02 p.m. right now. There are two more hours until I get to my sister's lake house.

The captain's voice crackles overhead. Something about turbulence.

The plane jolts. Just once. Like someone kicked the bottom of it. The girl starts crying again. Not the bear this time. Just crying. Raw tears. The kind that makes your spine feel like it's being rung out, and a brick is getting smashed

to your head.

The lady next to me finally looks up. Her eyes flick to the ceiling, then to me. She doesn't say anything. Another jolt. This one is harder. My phone slips from my hand and hits the floor with a thud. I struggle to reach for it. The overhead bins rattle.

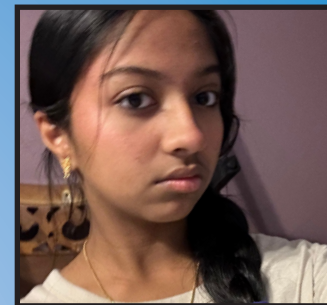
A baby screams. Someone gasps.

The captain's voice again. This time it's faster. Sharper. "Please remain seated and fasten your seatbelts," he announces.

I do. My hands are shaking. I've flown a few times before, I don't know why I'm worried. But this feels different. The air feels thinner. Like the plane is waiting for something. The clouds outside aren't soft anymore. They're thick and dark.

The plane drops. Just for a second. But it's enough to make my stomach lurch into my throat. Someone yells. A man, I think. I can't tell. The lights flicker. The girl is screaming again. Gut-wrenching screams. The lady next to me grips her armrest. Her sharp nails dig into the leather.

I close my eyes. I think of my sister. Her lake house. The dock. The way the water looks at sunset. Another drop. This one is longer. Harder. I hear metal scraping. Like the plane is trying to hold itself together. I look out my window again. The clouds are gone. It's just blue now. Endless and dark.



I am Jasintha Saravanan and I am 14 years old. I have been published in Blue Guitar before, and a few of my hobbies are writing and reading. I enjoy thrillers and action plots. I also love to dance.

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I try searching for a flight attendant and twist my head just to be met with more passengers. The plane drops again and the metal screeches. I lock my jaw and close my eyes bracing myself for impact. “Passengers please buckle your seat bel—” The pilot cuts off.

Screams erupt from around me and I look out the window again. The clouds look like bruises. I shove my phone into my jeans and look over to the woman next to me. Her book is now on the floor and she is looking around frantically. The overhead bins open and a suitcase falls out. The lights go out and the screams get higher. Then the emergency button glows and it feels like we’re all floating. My ears hurt. The gravity returns and gets thrown to the seat in front of me.

I close my eyes shut and clench my teeth tight. My sense seemed to have heightened. I want to scream but my voice feels chained. I hear people praying and my head hurts from the air pressure.

The metal then collides with the ground, and bodies are thrown. I slam forward clutching my chair. I smell thick fuel and I taste blood. I’m dazed and I turn around. I open my eyes. It’s dusty and a couple of the windows are cracked.

No one seems to be moving. I cough up blood and try to stand up. My leg is scratched and even more blood is dripping. The cuts are deep. I scramble for my back pack to wrap my leg in extra cloth when I hear a voice behind. I look over and my breath hitches.

It’s exactly who I was running from.

Packing List

By Leonardo Encinas

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1. Clothes

Bring clothes according to the temperature and weather. If you're traveling to Alaska in the winter, be sure to bring warm clothing. If you're traveling to Mexico in the summer, pack lighter clothing. Just bring clothes. Walking around naked is frowned upon in most places.

2. Phone

In a foreign place, your phone is everything: your GPS, translator, flashlight, camera, weather forecaster, and the thing you look at to avoid small talk. It helps you find your hotel, book last-minute reservations, translate menus, navigate throughout the city, and help you if things go sideways.

3. Plane ticket (Boarding pass)

Getting on a plane without a ticket is like trying to enter a party you weren't invited to. It is both awkward and unsuccessful, and possibly ends up with security getting involved. Whether it's a printed or digital ticket (or both if you want to be super careful), make sure it is easily accessible once you get up to your gate.

4. Charger

Without it, your phone is just a fancy piece of metal in your pocket. Don't just bring any regular charger; bring one of those chargers that charge really fast. Also, a portable charger (a charged one) is a must for a long day of sightseeing or getting lost.

5. Money

To buy food, hotels, transportation, and souvenirs that you will never look at again when you get home. Bring a mix of payment options, credit and debit for most transactions, and some local currency for places that don't take plastic.

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Leonardo Encinas is a ninth grader. His hobbies include playing basketball, playing video games, hiking, and hanging out with his friends. Leonardo has also been published in Scribbler and Young Writers.

Band Class (feat. Alto Clarinet)

By Mingyu Kim

1. Neck strap

Fourteen mini carabiners in every color of the rainbow jangling with my every movement at the end of an overly thick padded strap, perfect for insulating my neck and trapping sweat during 105 degree weather in Arizona!

2. Two reeds

One too old and flimsy, the other too new and stiff; a senior and an infant, if you will, and both of which are the reason I'm gonna fail my playing test.

3. Curved, slightly rusted bell

Not sure who plopped what into this bell when or why, but I think the green patch at the bottom of the curve can scientifically be classified as a microbiome, most likely with the next variant of COVID chilling down there.

4. Elongated black body with shiny silver keys

And pads that stick only sixty percent of the time, although it's one hundred percent of the time during concerts, playing tests, solos, and basically every other time it's important for me to sound good.

5. Crusty, faded neckpiece

The connecting valves of my school's toilets probably shine better than this creaky old macaroni of metal that slides around while I'm playing, but refuses to squeak out of the body when I'm disassembling.

6. Scratched mouthpiece with chewy rubber

Does the rubber taste good? Possibly. Should I be eating it? Probably not. Will I end up doing it anyways? Most likely.

7. Slightly creased sheet music

Faithfully printed from the school library in pristine condition, then sacrilegiously yeeted into the dark caverns known as my backpack.

8. Brand new neon yellow folder

Lovely and crisp... at least for the next few months until it gets crumpled and I have to buy a new one. (You win again, Target!)



Mingyu Kim is in 11th grade. He is the vice president of his school's debate team, leads a Scouts BSA troop, and plays the Bb and alto Eb clarinet in his school's band. Mingyu has been published in Ink & Feather Journal, Scribbler Magazine, Write the World, Young Writers, and Blue Guitar Jr.

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Sidewalk Cracks

By Mingyu Kim

I walked down the shade
Under the trees, my hands made
Magic spells and fireballs
Skipping home from the stop
Sometime during the fall

One, two, three, four
Steps on the concrete floor
To reach the next crack
A lightning bolt I traced around
Puppy-themed bag strapped to my back

I greeted imaginary friends along
Slanted paths where I belonged
Waving hi and asking to play
Fighting a dragon with stick swords
A time when naptime highlighted my day

I still walk home from the bus stop
Longer legs and different hair on top
No more enchantment in the plain
Just a blank, bland wondering
Maybe this afternoon it'll rain

One, two
I get past sidewalk spaces in only a few
Swivel my head to look around
Not for knights or dragons
But worry I dropped on the ground

I don't see friends I once met
Worse, the imaginary, I've begun to forget
A time I once spent bouncing and floating
Hitting the ground in a brave new world
That lacks precious sugarcoating

I guess I'll just need to keep waiting
For sidewalk crack memories to finally stop fading.

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All For One

By Curt Robinson

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They're called the "Three Musketeers," and for freshmen that's not a good thing.

First there is James, who earns the infamous nickname: 'Nostradamus.'

It is the biggest game of the year between Cochise High School and their archrivals, Desert Vista High. With 12 seconds left, the Cochise Warriors are attempting a 2 point conversion to put them ahead by 1, and win the game. As the Star Quarterback, freshman phenom Brett Neuheisel, lines up behind the center, the crowd goes silent in anticipation. Suddenly, James' eyes squint, then shut, and he begins shaking and trembling. He stands up all 6'2" tall of him, and wipes his long, black Goth hair off his face. He points at Jessica Cantwell, the head cheerleader. It's a cold night, so his breath is clearly seen as he makes the proclamation:

"Her...Her top is coming off!"

No one is sure whether James' proclamation precedes the event, or if it's only a case of him seeing 'The Incident' before anyone else in the stadium. What's not in question is what actually happens: Jessica suffers the embarrassing wardrobe malfunction at the exact moment, spilling

right out of her tight, crimson bodice. Psychic prediction or quick sighting, it doesn't matter, because what happens next brings more problems for James. The ensuing commotion distracts Brett Neuheisel, the freshman Star Quarterback, and boyfriend of Jessica. He misses the snap, and Cochise High loses the game. James' outburst is to blame.

"Freakin' Nostradamus! He blew the game for us," a student says as they silently file out of the stadium in defeat. The name sticks.

Brett Neuheisel, the freshman phenom quarterback, blames James too. So now he gives poor Nostradamus an extra helping of scorn and ridicule whenever the opportunity presents itself. This torment of James by Brett is ironic due to the fact that back in grade school, Brett was close friends with James before fame and athletic talent winged Brett off to the land of the popular.

Next, there's Dominic, a continually angry kid, made that way by the belittling stepfather who inhabits his home with his detached mother.

"Dominic, when are you going to grow



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up?” Big, fat stepfather asks little Dominic.

“Dominic, why don’t you play a man’s sport like football?” “Dominic, why don’t you go get me a beer?” Fat stepdad is constantly belittling him.

To make up for his small size, and no power at home, little Dominic has adopted a psycho angry persona to scare away any potential detractors at school. He dresses the part of an angry punk, complete with leather jacket, and spiky black hair. Back in middle school, this proved effective, with people giving him a wide berth, and treating him carefully when he shouted “I’ll kill you!” at any perceived disrespect. In time though, the local bullies figured out that little Dominic’s bark was not backed up with any bite, and today he pays a far greater price for his faux psycho anger.

“Kill me, Dominic!” The big guys taunt as they tease him, trip him, or throw some food item at him at the cafeteria. There are several times when the tough guy Dominic has had to hustle out of the cafeteria with his tough guy leather jacket so no one could see the tears.

The last of the three is Alan, who would look perfectly normal if the year was 1950. Who in this millennia has a blonde flattop? Or wears thick, horn rimmed glasses? Alan is a bland throwback from some bygone era. He walks down the halls of Cochise High a busy blur of skinny arms and legs with a plaid shirt and a pen protector, bearing some of the same ridicule as James and Dominic. He stumbles down the halls on the way to the computer lab, muttering under his breath about the next lines of code he needs to compose.

The attacks, the insults of the bullies don’t appear to faze Alan. This is a point of contention between him, and his good friends. Alan doesn’t believe that they have it so bad, as his strange world is idyllic. Those kids who pick

on him are just “cutting up,” and it’s really not that big of a deal.

If Dominic’s family life is difficult, then Alan’s is the exact opposite. When he gets home, Dad puts down his newspaper, and Mom is wearing a flowered apron. They shower praise and hugs and kisses on Alan when he gets home. One glance from them shows where he gets the 1950s vibe. Both parents look like they’re from a Norman Rockwell painting.

Together, the three boys make up what the cool kids call the ‘Three Musketeers.’ It’s meant to be an insult, but to them, the name is a point of pride. The three even adopt the familiar Musketeers’ cheer (done in secret of course):

“All For One, and One For All.”

When the last bell rings, and the Three Musketeers have run their daily course of survival, it doesn’t matter what their day is like at home or school. The beauty of their type of friendship is it smooths over the jagged edges of pain, it fills in the holes that insults and injustice leave. They see a smile from one another and all the bull is forgotten.

After school also means Star Wars.

All three boys watch the clock at school, and when the bell for freedom rings, they endure the bus ride home. Next, they quickly get their outfits ready and ride their bikes on the highway out of Grayson, Arizona, into the desert. The southeastern Arizona desert makes a perfect filming location for Tatooine, and Skeleton Canyon, with its washes, and high sandstone cliffs, is an ideal location for their next round of filming their version of a Star Wars movie.

The boys take turns writing the scripts, and texting each other for the needed props. When they get home,

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they pack up their backpacks, and pedal out into the rolling hills that sit before the distant mountains. Currently, Dominic plays a short Darth Vader while Alan plays a tall and gangly Luke Skywalker. James does most of the video work with his phone or video recorder. The project they're working on is a full length sequel titled: "Tatooine, the Source of the Force."

On this particular cool desert early spring day, James is filming the action while Dominic (Vader) battles Alan (Luke). Finding the perfect location takes time though, so they follow the afternoon west into the canyons until they get to a suitable place.

"Give it up, Vader. The force flows in my veins." Luke issues a bold challenge to Vader as his light saber extends.

Vader is unmoved: "You don't know the power that I possess, my son," Dominic replies as his light saber extends for battle.

The battle begins with Luke and Darth trading grand declarations, and sweeping light saber maneuvers. They dance over the rocks and amongst the creosote bushes and ocotillo stalks. The boys wind themselves deeper down the wash that leads into the heart of Skeleton Canyon.

As James follows the two famous warriors, his hand holding the camera begins to shake. Soon, James drops the camera into the sand. He begins to tremble, and falls to one knee. Dominic and Alan both drop their light sabers, and rush to help their friend..

"James!" They shout, but they give him room for his seizure to run its course. James points to the mountains that rise up over the canyon.

"I.I.Ignacio Peralta. Compa. M..Ma..Massacre."

Nostradamus strikes again.

James crumples to the ground, with the spittle running

out of his mouth turning into mud when it mixes with the dust. Dominic and Alan reach down and grab him under the arms, picking him up.

"James. Are you alright?" Dominic asks.

Alan grabs a water bottle from his backpack and offers it to James.

"What happened?" Alan shakes James.

"I saw something," James whispers.

"What?" Dominic and Alan ask together.

James pauses, takes a sip from his water bottle, wipes the tears and mud off his face and exhales.

"There was a Mexican man. He was Ignacio Peralta. He worked around here with some other men. They were working on something, minding their own business, when these Apaches came. The Mexicans called the Apache leader Compa. The Apaches surprised the Mexicans, and shot them full of arrows and spears." James grimaces. "They, they, they the Apaches wrecked whatever their work was. It was a cave, and the Indians threw their bodies in that cave, and then they caved the whole thing in. They were buried. Some were alive." James' lip quivers. "I heard the screams. I.I.I...felt the anger and pain." Being Nostradamus can be challenging at times.

"What did the Apaches do after they buried the cave?" Dominic asks.

James looks down, with his brow knitted in sadness. "They, they celebrated. They yelled and celebrated."

"And you think this happened right out here?" Alan is skeptical.

"Yeah." James gasps.

"When did this happen?" Dominic asks.

"I don't know, Dominic. A long time ago." James' agitation signals it's time to stop the conversation.

The strike of Nostradamus brings an end to the filming

for the day. The boys let Nostradamus rest for a little time, then they quietly return to their bikes where the wash meets the highway leading to town. They silently pedal back towards home and reality.

“I got the scripts tonight — see you guys at school.” Alan promises.

“Later, Alan. Later, James,” Dominic adds. James only nods.

Alan returns home, to the traditional kisses from Mom and hug from Dad. He eats his dinner of meatloaf and mashed potatoes in silence, which draws concern from the perfect parents.

“Alan, honey, are you alright?” Mom coos.

“I’m fine.” Alan gets up from the table quickly, drawing quizzical looks from his parents. Alan rushes into his room to find some answers.

Alan is skeptical of James’ abilities. He thinks it’s just some kind of seizure, not really some kind of psychic precognition. Maybe James saw that Jessica’s top was about to burst? He decides to do some research to see if that can shed a little light on this so-called canyon massacre.

After typing up the script for the next Star Wars scenes, he starts with a basic Google search, typing in the Apache name Compa. Then, he types in the Mexican’s name: Ignacio Peralta. Finally, he types in Skeleton Canyon, the place where they film.

Alan sips his Coke, and rubs his blonde flattop. As his search continues, his eyes widen, and his mouth hangs open as he looks at the screen. He stares transfixed and goes to set his can on the end of his desk. But, he misjudges the edge, and the Coke falls, puddling on the shag carpet. Alan doesn’t notice, though; he keeps reading, then frantically prints off pages of information, which he packs in his backpack along with tomorrow’s

script for the Star Wars movie.

The next morning, Alan sits impatiently on the bus with the other underclassmen, waiting for the great day when he will be able to drive to school in his own car. He sits in the first seat in order to be the first off the bus. When he arrives at Cochise High, he bolts as soon as the door opens, hoping to see James or Dom before class starts. They’re nowhere to be found, so Alan goes to class, and tries to contain himself until lunch.

Before lunch comes, the first bell rings and it’s time for Alan to run ‘The Gauntlet’ as the Musketeers call it. It’s the passing time between 1st and 2nd Class: AP English and Calc (Calculus). ‘The Gauntlet’ is the hall at Cochise High that runs between the Math and Language buildings. It’s long and narrow, lined from floor to ceiling with beige student lockers. The fearsome hallway fills up with students in between classes, but the problem is the jocks like to hang out here, and Alan, along with James and Dominic, are targets of opportunity.

For the Three Musketeers, the worst of the jocks is Star Quarterback Brett Neuheisel, their former friend. Although Brett pretends to forget that he was friends with the Three Musketeers, he never forgets the loss to Desert Valley, when Nostradamus interrupted the game. He pushes aside the old friendships, and takes satisfaction on getting revenge on his old friends, including Alan.

Alan walks through the Gauntlet with his eyes down, hoping to remain anonymous. He makes a quick, furtive glance to see Neuheisel and the other jocks manning their stations as usual. They lean casually, arrogantly against the lockers with their letterman’s jackets on like knight’s armor. Alan tries to get by them quickly, hoping they won’t notice, but out of the corner of his eye, he sees Brett coming to intercept him. Brett walks with a

smirk on his face as he closes in on his target.

Alan tries to get by him, but the 6'4", 215-pound quarterback delivers a body check that sends Alan into the lockers; he crashes and falls with his arms and legs splayed out on the concrete floor, dazed. In his rush to get up, Alan forgets to zip up his backpack, and it flies open. His papers — the Tatooine script, and his printouts on James' vision — scatter in the hallway. Alan is momentarily paralyzed with fear. *If somebody reads any of my papers, I'm doomed.* He frantically grabs for them.

The spectator jocks laugh and cheer at the fallen victim. Brett smiles triumphantly over his power move, but when he looks down on his victim, the smile vanishes, and suddenly he's not so proud. Brett hears the derisive laughter of his friends in the background. He looks down at the papers strewn on the floor and something catches his eye. He picks up the paper, and starts to read it! Alan's eyes bug out, and his mouth begins opening and shutting like a fish that's been caught. Brett takes several seconds to read, then his eyes wrinkle in sorrow and understanding. He says nothing.

Brett reaches out a hand to the dazed Alan. "Sorry, man, let me help you."

The laughing jocks go silent. Brett hoists Alan back up to his feet. Then he bends down and helps Alan gather the rest of his papers, arranging them in a neat pile.

"Here you go. Sorry again, man." Brett hands over the papers.

"Thanks. No problem." Of course, Alan feels obligated to thank the guy who just decked him.

Brett helps Alan get his backpack on. *Is that a knowing look in his eyes? Alan wonders. Did he see my script? Does he know about Skeleton Canyon?* Alan is fearful one or both of his secrets are out. He quickly marches off to Calc, alarmed at the thought that Brett Neuheisel may

be able to figure out one secret or the other.

After a nervous hour of Calculus comes lunchtime. Alan quickly gathers his notes and book, and makes for the cafeteria. He already knows where to find his friends. They eat at the first table in the front near the cashiers. That's the safest place for them. Alan rushes in, interrupting James and Dominic.

"Guys! I've got something you gotta see! C'mon, right now!" Alan insists. "What? I'm eating here!" Dominic protests with a mouthful of pizza.

Alan grabs Dominic by the arm, and pulls him up by his leather jacket. "Get it to go, Dom! You aren't going to believe this!"

Dominic hates being manhandled, even by his friends. "Hey! Watch it, jerk." He hisses.

"C'mon." Alan repeats urgently. James nods and stands up.

Alan hustles them into the computer lab. "You aren't going to believe this." Alan looks out of the door to the lab to be sure no one is nearby. Then he shuts the door, and tosses his backpack into one of the lab chairs. He takes out his printed pages.

"You won't believe this, James, I didn't believe your episode yesterday, and I never quite believed the whole Jessica Cantwell and the exploding top thing either. That seemed like just a coincidence or something. I'm sorry about not believing you. But, I wanted to prove you wrong somehow, so I looked up the names Campo, Ignacio Peralta, and I looked up Skeleton Canyon on the computer. You won't believe what I found."

Dominic and James gather around the computer while Alan pulls up the websites.

"Look here. It says Ignacio Peralta was from a well-to-do Mexican family that got their start after Cortez took

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out the Aztecs and conquered what is now Mexico for Spain. The Peralta family was given mineral rights to what is now the whole state of Arizona, and they were hugely wealthy.”

“Great. He was a rich guy.” Dominic adds some sarcasm.

Alan pulls up another website. “Look, Ignacio Peralta disappeared in 1832. They believe he was slaughtered by Apaches while he was mining here in Arizona.”

“Whoa.” Dominic exhales. “What did he mine?” Alan looks at Dominic and grins.

“He mined gold primarily,” Alan says.

“Aahhh, man. Righteous!” Dominic pumps his fist.

Alan gets into another website that gives information on Apache chiefs and warriors. “Campo was an Apache chief who made war with the Mexicans. He led attacks on mines and ranches right here in Southern Arizona, as well as further south into the Mexican states of Sonora and Chihuahua.”

“James, these people were real. And it looks quite likely that there was a massacre here. This warrior and this miner both roamed this area. But there is one more thing.” Alan types excitedly. “Look at what happens when I Google Skeleton Canyon.”

Alan points at the monitor. “Look at this.” He whispers. “The Lost Gold Mine of Skeleton Canyon.”

James looks over Alan’s shoulder to read. “Legend says that a Mexican miner was working on a gold claim in the Skeleton Canyon area of Southeastern Arizona. A gold mine. The ore was smelted into gold bars at the mine site, and then packed on mules and taken down into Mexico. According to legend, one day the Apaches showed up and they didn’t like the Mexicans on their land, especially if they were working it, ranching,

mining. So, they killed the Mexicans, threw their bodies down the mine shaft, and buried the mine so that no one could find it again.”

Tears well up in James’ eyes. “That’s exactly what I saw.” He sits down at the next computer desk and lays his head down.

Alan lays a hand on his friend’s shoulder: “I’m sorry I didn’t believe you, James.”

Dominic jumps up, pumping his fist into the air. “Somewhere in Skeleton Canyon there’s a gold mine, dudes. Can you imagine if we find it? We’d be RICH.”

Dom turns to James, who is still face down. “James, where is it?”

James raises his head, and stares at Dominic. “I don’t know! I don’t even know if I ever want to go looking for it either. The pain, the death, their souls ... They’re lost souls.” James wipes the long, black hair out of his eyes. You don’t know what it’s like to see that. To feel their despair.”

Dominic is unfazed by such talk. “Spirits. Ghosts. So what! Think about it, man. We’ve got to try. They made the gold into bars right there. That means that there could be bars of gold just sitting there. GOLD!”

Dominic shakes James arm, causing his head to bonk on the desk. “Think about it. We could be rich. RICH! We could blow freakin’ Cochise High. Be rich big shots. Who would be laughing at us then? Not the clowns around here. We can go to Beverly Hills, get hot chicks, the whole thing. What have we got to lose?”

“You’re not listening, Dom.” James moans on the desk. “Their pain, anger, hatred. I feel it all. Like I’m there. It’s hard to get exposed to that. I don’t want to do it again.”

Dominic looks to Alan. In that quick glance, they both

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know what to do. They turn to James and each one of them grips one of his broad shoulders.

“We could make history, James,” Alan says lowly.

“We could be famous.” Dominic whispers. “No one would mess with us.” He urges James.

James sighs, lifting his head. “Let me think about it.”

Dominic looks over at Alan and grins. They both know that ‘let me think about it’ really means ‘O.K.’

The Three Musketeers raise their hands, they give their imaginary sword crossing in the air, and chant the famous words together.

“All for one, and one for all,” they say.

It’s their victory chant. They have few victories here at Cochise High, so they celebrate each one that comes their way.

The last bell rings, and on this rare occasion, Alan walks towards the buses feeling triumphant, with his head filled with hopes and dreams of vast wealth. This feeling quickly vanishes when he spies Brett Neuheisel patrolling the parking lot.

Alan instantly drops his eyes to be non-confrontational; his pace quickens and he veers off on a path that increases his distance from the star quarterback. But Brett recognizes him, and casually moves on a course to intercept Alan. *Is he coming over for more harassment? Does he know my secrets?* Alan wishes he could sprint out of there; that would only invite more of whatever Brett’s coming at him for.

“Hey, Alan. Come here,” Brett commands.

Brett makes a half jog towards Alan. Alan scans Brett’s pretty boy face for a hint of malice, but there’s nothing to see.

Alan still tries to be elusive as he hurries along. “I gotta go, Brett.”

He keeps walking, talking over his shoulder at his

potential nemesis. “I don’t have much time, I got somewhere I gotta to be.”

“Wait a sec,” Brett pleads, his strong hand grabbing Alan’s skinny arm.

Uh-oh. Physical contact. This is going to get bad. Alan’s heart starts pounding, and he wrenches free from Brett’s grasp.

“I..I’m sorry,” Brett confesses. “For what I did. But I saw your papers too. I know what you’re doing, and I want in.”

Alan sees the regret and sincerity in his eyes; the relief of not being attacked is replaced by the fear of one of his secrets getting out. *Did he read about the treasure, or is he going to hassle me about the Star Wars movie?*

Quickly, Alan thinks about a dodge that covers either possibility.

“It’s for a report I’m doing in AP History,” he blurts out.

Brett chuckles. “C’mon, Alan. A history report on Tatooine?”

Inside, Alan is relieved that there’s no suspicion about the mine, but he wonders how bad he’s going to get skewered for doing a Star Wars movie. That may be way harder to live down.

Are they going to call me Luke Skywalker for the rest of high school? Alan wonders.

Brett nervously scans the parking lot, to be sure that no one is nearby, then moves in closer to speak to Alan in a low voice. “I still like Star Wars! I remember back when we played together.”

“You do?” Alan’s eyes are filled with shock and surprise.

“Yeah, man!” Brett confesses.

“I want to be in your movie. Will you let me in? Please.” Brett pleads.

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Alan reaches out to lean against a neighboring parked car. Of all the possible scenarios for this encounter with his old friend, this is the most impossible.

“What?” Alan asks incredulously.

“You still like Star Wars? C’mon, Brett, you’re the cool quarterback now. You’re too cool for us. Are you jerking me around or what?”

“SSSHHH.” Brett puts his index finger over his lips. “Do you know what they’d do to me if they found out?”

Brett looks around again to make sure he’s not being watched, then smiles a golden smile. “I STILL LOVE Star Wars, man! In ‘Revenge of the Sith,’ when they put the mask down on Anakin and he becomes Darth Vader! That’s so awesome!”

Brett nervously scans around the parking lot again, to be sure there are no fellow jocks about. “I have an authentic replica light saber, and a blaster that was actually on the set of ‘Attack of the Clones!’ ”

Alan nearly jumps from the shock of this development. “Let me in your movie. Please.” Begging is unbecoming for the star quarterback. “I saw your script! It’s cool!” Brett continues.

“Give me something. Something like Obi Wan, or Qui Gan Jin, or anything — whatever era it’s from. I’ll do anything. It’ll be blast doing a Star Wars movie. We just got to keep it a secret. O.K.?”

Alan starts thinking, considering Brett’s proposal.

“But what if you tell on us?” Alan asks.

Brett’s muscle-bound arms reach for Alan’s shoulders.

“You think I’d let anyone know? They’d kill me!”

Brett makes a good point.

Alan is clearly blown away, but he’s relieved his secret about the mine isn’t discovered. He also isn’t sure about bringing Brett into the movie, especially when he thinks how his two friends would react. He asks one more

question to further probe Brett’s intentions. “So that’s really why you’re actually talking to me? You want in our movie?”

Brett’s excitement is clear. “Yeah, I want in!”

Alan pauses for a moment, sizing up Brett’s body language, checking his eyes to see if they’re shifty, but he looks sincere.

“O.K., man. You can come.” Alan concedes. “But you’re going to have to be cool to James.”

“Do you think Dom or James would tell?” Brett worriedly asks.

“I think none of us could live this down. You’re safe, Brett.” Alan states the obvious.

Brett bounds off. “See you tomorrow. And thanks. It will be our secret.”

Alan walks over to the buses, for the usual tortuous ride home.

Out in the desert, lazy puffy clouds float by in a clear blue spring sky. Down in the canyon below, the three boys are joined by Brett Neuheisel, Star Quarterback, for another day of filming. When Alan told James and Dominic that he had a surprise guest, neither of them pictured Brett. They stare at him in disbelief and disgust. Brett stands further down the canyon, dressed the part as Obi Wan Kenobi with sandals, a cloak, and a light saber at the ready.

“O.K., I’m ready! Here I come!” Brett shouts.

“What the heck is he doing here?” James demands.

“It’s cool. Don’t worry.” Alan speaks low, so Brett won’t hear. “Besides, he’ll keep the goons off our backs at school.”

Alan points at the excited quarterback as he lights up his light saber. “Look at him! He’s having a blast out here.”

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"I'm coming for you, Vader!" Brett's shouts echo off the canyon as he runs towards the boys.

"He's one of us," Alan continues. Dominic and James look doubtfully at each other, then they share the look with Alan. All three look down the canyon at Brett who is running at them with his saber lit up. They see the infectious smile across Brett's face.

"O.K. You're right." Dominic admits.

Brett is begrudgingly accepted by the other boys. When you don't have any friends, and even fewer who are into Star Wars, you have to take what you can get. After a week of filming, Brett is fully assimilated into the cast, even going so far as contributing to the script-writing duties, and filming as well so that James can also be included in some scenes as the ghost of Qui Gon Jin. James is the last to drop his resistance to Brett, which makes sense due to the fact that he bore the worst of Brett's attacks following 'The Incident.'

After a week together, the boys finish a particularly successful day of filming. They walk back to the highway through the sandy bottom of Skeleton Canyon, laughing together, joking about the events of the day.

"Man, James, you looked hilarious with your ghostly makeup on today." Dominic teases.

"Yeah, maybe," James counters. "But you look more like a mini Darth when you stand next to Brett. You're TOO short."

Always the peacemaker, Alan moves to smooth any potential ruffled feathers from Dominic. "We all look goofy sometimes. I know my arms are so skinny that it's hard to tell them from my light saber!"

They all chuckle at Alan's self-deprecation. Brett stops walking for a moment. "Guys, I don't think I ever thanked you for letting me come out here. Yeah, it's cool being a quarterback. But, I gotta be honest.

Almost everywhere I go, it's like I have to set some kind of example. It's like everyone's looking to see if I'm cool enough. I have to play the part of the big shot quarterback ... It can get old sometimes." He kicks at the sand beneath his feet. "Out here, with you guys ... This is the only place where I can be myself. It feels good."

The other three boys all smile, and give Brett varying pats on the back. James is the first to break the awkward silence.

"You're D'Artagnan, Brett."

Brett looks confused. "What're you talking about?" he asks.

Alan breaks in: "You ever read 'The Three Musketeers'? D'Artagnan is the fourth Musketeer. He's the newbie. He comes in later."

Brett doesn't get the reference. "Oh. But he still gets to be a Musketeer right?" "Oh yeah," Alan confirms.

Dominic raises his light saber to the center of the group. "All for one ..." Dominic and Alan both raise their light sabers as well, pointing them into the center. "And one for all." They finish the chant, and look over to Brett.

Brett pauses, then raises his light saber too. "And one for all," he adds.

After lunch, Dominic starts his trek to Science class. He strides in his leather jacket on this warm spring day donning the face of a tough guy, inwardly fearing that he'll get called on it. Across the main, two football jocks see him coming. They're big, offensive lineman.

One likes to be called Terminator. He turns to his friend Dougie:

"Target Acquired." The Terminator says.

Dougie grins, and the two boys start walking towards Dominic.

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Dominic isn't aware how close he is to getting into yet another painful situation — a body check or humiliation is seconds away. But Brett sees what's happening, and he makes a beeline towards his teammates. He slaps them both on the backs of their letterman's jackets.

"Hey, guys! How's it hanging?" Brett asks.

The startled jocks spin around to Brett. Dominic's eyes grow wide in startled fear.

Dougie points at little Dominic. "This little punk has been scoping my girlfriend. Haven't you, punk?"

Dominic doesn't back down, but growls back. "No, creep, I don't scope out cattle. That's your thing." He points back at Dougie.

The big jock smiles; now he's got his excuse to level the diminutive tough guy. "Wrong answer."

He reaches out to grab Dominic. Brett intercepts his arm. "Come here, Dougie; you too, Terminator." He grabs them both by their letterman's jackets and drags them away from Dominic, who stands his ground in mock bravado.

"You two are going to leave that kid and the other Musketeers the frick alone!" Brett jams a pointed index finger into Dougie for effect.

"They don't deserve it, and I'm stopping it right now!" Brett is bristling with anger.

Both of the football players take a step back in surprise.

"Whoa, Brett! What's your deal, man? We're just having a little fun," Terminator says.

"Yeah, and you rag on the Three Musketeers as much as any of us." Dougie jams his own pointed finger back at Brett.

"You're right, Dougie. Yeah, I've hassled them, probably worse than you. But I'm stopping, and you are too," Brett declares.

Brett grabs Dougie's finger, and bends it back at the wrist, causing Dougie to writhe.

"Okay, Okay! Jerk!" Dougie protests.

The two linemen grumble at the quarterback, and give him the finger, but they slink away without another word.

Brett gives the stunned Dominic a knowing wink.

"See you at Tatooine," he says quietly.

Dominic nods. "Thanks, D'Artagnan."

They part ways quickly, without exchanging any other words, so no one figures out they're actually friends.

After school brings another day of filming in Skeleton Canyon. Today, they move deeper into the canyon, looking for a site resembling Obi Wan's cave dwelling on Tatooine. After over a mile of trudging through deep sand, and uneven river rock, there are no places suitable. The boys are close to giving up.

"Let's get out of here." Dominic protests. "I'm sick of trudging through this damn sand."

"Just one more bend, there could be something," James figures.

"C'mon, man! We've been waiting for what's around the next bend for the last hour." Dominic exaggerates.

"I'm going with Dominic here," Alan agrees.

They trudge on, until James stops. He pushes his long, black hair out of his eyes, sizing up the shot with his fingers. There's a cliff with a cave.

"Perfect," James declares.

Here, at the bottom of the wash, a cavern is carved out by roiling floodwaters — whenever floodwaters do occur in the desert.

"Yeah!" Brett shouts, bounding up into the cave.

"Look! We can shoot from inside the cave for some close-up scenes."

Brett hurries to change into his Obi Wan outfit. Alan

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and Dominic start changing too while James gets the video recorder ready. Soon, the filming begins, and after an hour they are finished with the cave scenes. Next, it's time to film another battle scene with Obi Wan, and Luke versus Darth.

"Hey, James, if you get up on that ledge over the cave, you could film an overhead shot, and get all of the action at once," Alan suggests.

"Yeah, and when Obi Wan runs, you can keep him in the frame. That would be cool!" Brett agrees.

"Alright, I'll get up there," James says. "Give me a minute and I'll shout when I'm ready to start filming."

Luke, Darth, and Obi Wan get to their spots and wait for James' signal. Then they wait a little more, but James isn't heard. Alan leaves his spot and moves to the middle of the canyon.

"James! What's up?!" He shouts. His words echo off the sides of the canyon. There is no answer.

"James!" They all shout. Again there is no answer. All three of the boys hurriedly run to the game trail that leads up over the cave. When they reach the top, they see how the little ridge is actually the top of the canyon. The landscape opens up, and it's dominated by a small mountain whose base sits right at the canyon's edge.

"James!"

Dominic shouts as they scan different directions until Alan sees James curled up on the ground at the base of the mountain. Alan yells, and they rush over to their friend, who is gently rocking, pulling his knees into his chest. James' eyes are shut tight.

Nostradamus strikes again.

Brett, of course, has never seen James up close in the midst of an episode. He reaches out, grabs James and starts to shake him. But, Dominic and Alan both pull his arms back knowingly.

"Let him work through it," Dominic commands. "We've seen this before."

In time, James' shaking and crying stop, and his eyes open. He's ready to talk. "It's Peralta and the Apaches," he says. "This is the place. Right over there." James exhales and points. "Right over there is the Peralta mine."

The boys see an eroded area, where it looks as if a rockslide happened years ago.

"So that's it." Alan shudders.

"Yeah, I see it." Dominic points at the spot where dirt and gravel have slid down the slope of the little mountain.

"What the heck are you guys talking about?" Brett interrupts.

James, Alan, and Dominic look at each other guardedly. After a moment of awkward silence, Dominic speaks up. "James picked up something out here a month or so ago. You know what I mean — a Nostradamus moment. Like when Jessica Cantwell lost her top at the football game."

"Oh yeah. I'll never forget that one." Brett looks over at James and laughs.

Alan picks up the explanation. "James called out some names when he freaked out the last time. Ignacio Peralta, and Campo. Peralta was a Mexican miner, and Campo was an Apache chief. Peralta was mining gold in this canyon, and the Apaches came here, killed him, and threw the Mexicans into the mine, and buried the mine. The legend of the Lost Mine of Skeleton Canyon says the Mexicans smelted their ore into gold bars at the mine. So there supposedly are bars of gold right under that rubble, maybe."

"That's if you believe the legend," Dominic adds.

Brett looks at the three boys like they're insane, and

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laughs. "Okay! This is some kind of joke? Right?"

Dominic points over at James who is still on the ground, shaking off the effects of his last episode. "Does he look like he's joking? This is real."

"Well." Brett pauses, and rubs his blonde hair. "Let's go get the gold!"

"They won't let us take the gold," James says quietly.

"Who won't?" Brett asks. Alan and Dominic both sigh.

"Here we go again," Dominic adds.

"The spirits of the miners, the spirits of the Apaches. They, they, all died here, fighting for what was theirs. We're trespassing here. I.I..can feel them. They DO NOT want us here." James' face is white.

Dominic ignores James' warning. "We've got to try!"

James looks up at Dominic. "You're going to regret this."

"We're talking about gold. A real lost gold mine right here!" Dominic counters.

"Lost Gold Mine. There's no such thing." Brett interrupts.

"How do you know?" Dominic argues.

Alan pushes his way into the center of his arguing friends. "Guys! Stop for a minute. James, we all want to see if this mine is for real. It has to be done. What if we go in, and you just stay outside? Can that work?"

James looks up at his three friends, and pauses. "If you're going in, I'll be there to look out for you. But, you've been warned."

On the way back to the highway for their bikes, the plans are made. "We're going to need shovels," Brett says.

Dominic adds, "I've got a pickaxe."

Alan adds, "I'll bring flashlights."

They wait for Saturday morning to return to the place. The trip back in the wash takes longer this time as they

have shovels and a pick to tote there instead of a video recorder. James reluctantly follows behind the group, disappointed in them for not listening, but unwilling to let them go alone. There is little talk among them as they march deep into Skeleton Canyon.

When they reach the top of the canyon just before the mountain, James hangs back. "I'm just going to sit back here and watch you guys. You know it's a mistake, don't you?" He has to warn them one more time.

"Don't worry," Brett says, and grabs Alan and Dominic in a double bear hug. "I've got their backs."

Dominic, Brett, and Alan survey the side of the little mountain to find the likely spot to start digging. They start to shovel furiously, all three of them throwing dirt and gravel behind them, rolling the larger rocks out of the way in a constant stream. In time, the rocks and gravel melt away. Then, there is a thudding sound as their shovels hit something solid, something wooden. They stop at the sound and smile knowingly.

"James! You were right!" Brett shouts.

Gradually, the remaining dirt that covered the door is scooped away with eager hands, added to the pile of debris that grows behind the entrance. They work tirelessly, sweating as blisters form. They don't even notice the pain as they work feverishly on.

Their pace turns frantic. They find the edges of the doors and start to dig with their hands, pushing aside dirt clods and gravel. At last, a tall door is cleared free from the dirt. It's covered with iron sheets that are corroded from years underground. Around the two door handles a rusted-out chain is wrapped.

"That chain isn't stopping us!" Dominic proclaims. He raises the pickaxe high over his shoulder. "Hiyah!" He gives his best karate shout as he brings the pick down onto the chains, which fall away.

"Gentlemen." Alan motions like a bellman to the door

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Blue Guitar Jr. 2025

of the mine.

Brett and Dominic move in with Alan, and they all begin pushing with all their strength. Soon, they fall into a rhythm of shoves, with each shove moving the door an inch or two.

James continues to cower behind a group of boulders in the distance. He peeks out from time to time to check their progress. If the other three could see James, they would see that he's paralyzed again, lost in his special seizure. They would see that the spirits of the miners and Apaches are giving James another warning.

He chokes out one word. "No."

Alan speaks in between pants for air. "This is it. Let's finish this."

They all make one more mighty push: the tall and strong Brett, the skinny Alan, and the short Dominic. The doors part far enough for them to enter.

For a moment they all look at each other, then stare into the dark maw of the mine shaft. They silently reach into their backpacks, grab their flashlights, and enter the mine. Anticipation runs electric through their thoughts.

Even though it is a warm spring day, they can feel the cold air kiss their cheeks when they walk in. Anticipation and excitement quickly turn to fear and aversion when they feel that ghostly, dank, cold air. Then their flashlights stumble upon the skeletons. Sticking out in the light like accusing fingers are ribs and skulls of Ignacio Peralta and his six workers. Their open jaws and teeth seem to still let out silent screams. The clothes that they wore when Apaches killed them still hang in decomposing patches like spider webs.

"They were all thrown in right here." Dominic points.

"C'mon, guys. Be strong. We knew that we'd probably be seeing something like this," Brett says while he scans with the flashlight around the room-like cavern.

His light falls on one body that isn't sprawled out arms and legs with the others. It's stretched out beside the door, the skull still facing the door itself ...

Brett coughs and heaves and holds back the vomit he feels welling up in his throat. "Look, he's at the door. He wasn't dead when they sealed up the cave. He...He crawled to here." Alan and Dominic shudder.

"This poor guy was still alive when they... geez!" Dominic backs away from the bodies.

"Let's get out of here," Alan whispers.

"Wait! The gold, you wimps!" Brett protests. "We're here! We have to see."

Dominic gulps and pushes deeper into the dark mine shaft. As they move further in, they look carefully on the ground for holes, or other mine shafts. They slowly walk, no one speaking; the only sounds are that of their nervous, shallow breaths, and the gravel that crunches under their shoes.

They look up at the supporting beams as they pass under them, and their lights illuminate the cracks and breaks from the weight and years that these beams have endured holding up the rocky roof.

"Holy ...!" Brett whispers, and his light shines on beams that are bowed close to buckling from the rock. Their confident steps turn into timid tiptoes, but they press even further, holding their breath.

Around a corner of the shaft another room opens up. There in the middle of the room sits a mound of some sort covered by an ancient canvas tarp that's barely intact. The boys freeze, and Alan is first to lift the tarp, which falls away in dust and pieces. Through the dust there is a brilliant glow, and when the dust settles they see stacks of beautiful gold bars.

"Yee-hah!" Dominic yells and tears the remaining tarp off in a flourish.

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There are bars and more bars of solid, shining gold. They simultaneously grab three bricks and heft them in their hands.

“These things weigh like twenty pounds each!” Brett lifts one over his head like he’s doing a barbell workout on his tricep.

Alan counts the stacks and does some quick math. “There are about 200 bars here at 20 pounds each. 16 ounces in a pound. \$1,000 an ounce. That means...” Alan pauses.

“That means what?” Dominic asks. He knows Alan’s pause isn’t because he’s stumped crunching the numbers.

“Guys. There’s about 64 million dollars in gold right here,” Alan gasps. All three of them let out a triumphant shout.

What follows is an intense debate about what to do with the treasure. “Let’s get this out right NOW!” Dominic insists.

“We can’t do that Dom.” Alan disagrees. “We should leave it here for now. We’re the only ones who know about this! We need some time to get it out, hide it, and sell it. It’s safer that way.”

Dominic’s voice gets shrill. “LEAVE IT!? Are you nuts!? It goes now!”

Alan’s usually sunny demeanor grows angry. “Where are we going to hide 200 bars of gold? This is something like 4,000 pounds of gold! How are we even going to get it out of here to a safe place? Keep it here — that’s the way to do it!”

But they are interrupted before they get the chance to settle their argument.

James runs into the mine looking wild. He’s panting; eyes darting, gesturing frantically. He’s gulping air, gasping, trying to speak.

“What is it?” Brett asks, trying to get James centered.

“They...They aren’t going to let us take it!” James stammers.

Brett sets the bar down on the stack. “What do you mean? Is there somebody out there?” Brett peppers James with questions while he still hefts the gold bar. Alan and Dominic watch on.

“It’s the miners in here. The Apaches. They don’t want us here. It’s their gold.” When Nostradamus is talking, the boys have learned it’s good to listen. The conversation about what to do with the gold is temporarily tabled.

But stubborn little Dominic isn’t so sure. “C’mon! You gotta be joking, James! I don’t care if they’re angry. This gold is ours!”

James doesn’t wait to try to reason with Dominic; he just grabs him around the chest, and lifts him off the ground. Dominic helplessly waves his arms and kicks his legs as he tries to slow James from dragging him out of the mine. Dominic grabs at rocks, kicks James shins, but he’s unable to stop the suddenly powerful James.

Alan turns to Brett. “Do you remember the football game?”

Brett pauses to think, and both of them start to turn toward the direction of the doors. They’ve only taken a few steps when they hear a strange sound: a deep rumbling.

Next comes a high pitched, sharp crack as a support beam behind them splits in two and crumbles. Rocks come tumbling down, smashing into the floor of the mine.

“RUN!” Alan screams.

There is no time to watch for pitfalls now. Alan and

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Brett run full speed for the distant light that marks the doors out. They run as boulders crash behind them. Gold means nothing now — the light, safety, that's what matters.

They make the door, and keep on going, sprinting out into the desert. Behind them a plume of dust flows out of the rumbling tunnel. Above the mine, boulders and slabs of volcanic basalt come sliding down the mountain. In seconds, the mine shaft is collapsed, and the opening lies buried under countless rocks.

The boys tumble into the soft gravel of the wash and watch in horror as the final rocks slide down the mountainside. The rumbling subsides, the dust settles, and the usual quiet returns to the desert.

The Musketeers sit silently, bewildered as they try to make some sense, try to sort through all of the questions they ask themselves.

Brett looks at his friends and asks the obvious question. "So what do we do now?"

The other three just look at each other in dumbfounded silence. Finally, Alan speaks. "We have to leave it...for now."

"WHAT!?" Dominic and Brett shout in indignation.

"Think it through." Alan goes into his lecturing, analytical voice. "There is no way right now that we can dig through all that. We would need bulldozers to clear that out. If we tell someone, they'll either think we're crazy, or they could take it themselves. Who can we trust with this?" Alan traces his fingers in the sand. "We have to figure out a way to do this ourselves, and that is going to take time."

"Besides, their spirits are at rest now," James adds.

"That's not good enough!" Dominic pounds his fist in the sand. "The gold is right there. Right there! We had it in our hands! Brett, you were holding a friggin' twenty-pound bar of gold! In your hands!" Dominic

looks skyward, and shouts pleadingly to the air. "I can't believe this!"

Brett stares off into the distance. "No one knows about this but us. This is OUR secret. Nobody's going to be digging out here. It's safe in there. Then, one day we'll be able to figure it out, and we'll come get what's ours."

Brett's voice trails off. He stands up. He dusts himself off and raises his arm into the air. "All for one."

James is next to stand. He raises his hand, grabbing Brett's. "All for one." He repeats.

Alan jumps up, and grabs their hands too. "All for one."

All three of them look down at the simmering Dominic. They all are smiling. Dominic looks up. "Oh...Screw it!" He stands up too, and raises his hand as well. "All for one." All four of them follow with: "And one for all."

"Let's start home," James says.

As they walk back to the highway, they start to realize how sore and tired all of that hard work and excitement made them. The walk back is going to take a while.

"Hey! Tomorrow we can film the Moss Easley battle scene," James adds.

"I guess that'll work," Dom says reluctantly.

At the road, they find their bikes. But before the journey back begins, James the psychic, Alan the geek, Dominic the little angry guy, and Brett the star quarterback all take one last look at the rolling desert. The setting sun makes the cactus shadows long, and the rocky hills of Skeleton Canyon take a purplish hue. White clouds turn pink and orange as they get on their bikes.

The hills of Skeleton Canyon continue to hold their secret. The Musketeers secretly hunger and dream about the gold from the Lost Gold Mine of Skeleton Canyon. Now they know that lost gold mines really do exist.

Coming Home To Chiricahua

By Curt Robinson

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N'Goya's problems start when Geronimo comes sauntering into their Apache camp with his warriors and their families. N'Goya's father, Taza, a warrior himself, is drawn to the great man's words. He listens:

"We are leaving that reservation and the soldiers' rules. We're going raiding down in Mexico. Who will come with us?"

Taza doesn't take long to say yes. He steps next to Geronimo, and the living legend nods in appreciation. A few men follow Taza. It's customary for Apache families to stick together, and since N'Goya is not a full warrior himself, he follows too. But, there are others who aren't interested:

"There is enough fighting! At least we're alive, at least we're here in our mountains. We choose to stay." So says Martine, whose daughter is Jania. N'Goya looks over at her. Her soft cheeks, her kind black eyes. Saying goodbye won't be easy.

He takes her by the hand, and they walk for maybe the last time together down the trails, past the spires of yellow and red rock that stand like stovepipes reaching into the sky. He uses his finger to brush her hair behind her ear, and wipe the tears off her cheeks.

"Don't cry, I will see you again when we get back from Mexico," N'Goya promises.

Jania looks up and smiles. "I will be waiting for you at the spring by the pass."

The spring. They have been gathering water there for generations, and the pass provides for easy travel

through the mountains.

"I'll see you there. Don't worry, Jania. I promise we will be together again."

They pack their things, and after dark they march all night, sneaking past the patrols of U.S. cavalry. By morning they see the familiar mountains of the Sierra Madres rising up sharply from the harsh desert.

There, in the steep canyons where few dare to travel, Geronimo and his followers gather the long branches and grass to make shelters. Then, they climb to the top of the mountains to search the neighboring plains for targets to raid. There are plenty of ranches, farms, and travelers on nearby roads to choose from.

N'Goya is not old enough to go on raids with his father, so he stays with the horses and looks to see if a quick getaway is needed.

At night, they target a Mexican rancheria, and Geronimo motions for the warriors to go in. They all move silently, without a sound. Usually, they return with the goods from the raid: horses, cattle, food. But tonight is different. The silence is pierced with the screams and cries of women, and children. N'Goya jumps up, and readies the horses for a quick retreat. Then ominous silence falls again. It's a long time before the warriors start to appear out of the darkness, and they aren't standing tall and proud. They shamble in bent over; none of them carrying any goods. Taza looks the same way and N'Goya runs to him, only to see his father is covered in blood.

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“What happened?” N’Goya asks. Taza doesn’t respond, so N’Goya grabs his arm. “What went wrong?” He pleads.

“That was no raid,” Taza says, ashamed. “It was revenge.” The Mexicans killed Geronimo’s wife and kids.

For the next few months, the Apaches flee the U.S. cavalry, or the Mexican soldiers. N’Goya watches as women, children, and friends get ambushed, shot at, killed. Then, his father is done in. Their numbers dwindle.

It’s morning and U.S. soldier Lieutenant Gatewood comes climbing up the cliffs of their last refuge:

“Surrender, and you can go home to the Chiricahuas, and as long as you stay on the reservation there you can live in peace.” Gatewood promises.

Geronimo listens to his peace offer, he trusts Gatewood, and he looks over what is left of his band. He sees the looks on their faces, the weariness, the deep fear. He sighs, and pokes a stick in the sand:

“I’ll surrender, Gatewood.”

The Apaches are promised life in the Chiricahuas. But that promise is a lie. When they get to Fort Bowie, they are shipped off for ‘relocation.’ The Army even sends their own Chiricahua scouts, who helped them track Geronimo, off on the trains.

From behind the walls of Fort Bowie, N’Goya looks out on his mountains where his people have lived for hundreds of years. He feels the warm sun, he looks at the faraway pines and junipers, the rocks and boulders. He soaks it all in, because he knows it may be the last time he’ll see them.

They’re herded onto the railcars, and begin the trek to their unknown home in a place called Florida. As the train moves East, N’Goya makes note of every detail.

He remembers every turn they take. At night in his new home, he makes a picture of the mountains in his mind. If the day leaves him frustrated or angry, he imagines the way back to his Chiricahuas.

In the wet, swampy land called Florida, the Apaches are always under guard, behind big, white, thick walls. There’s no bullet or Apache lance that can pierce one of these walls — no way.

N’Goya goes to a ‘school.’ They teach him to talk like the settlers, they cut his black hair short. He goes to church. He learns to read: books, maps. He learns English. He learns numbers too, like a million. That’s how far he feels from home.

Geronimo and his great warriors are sent to a different place to be prisoners. But N’Goya is still a child in the eyes of the soldiers, so he’s sent to this place with the other children, and the women too. His chance to be named as a full warrior may be gone forever now.

N’Goya smiles to his captors, and he tries to fit into this new world, but he and the other Apaches are slowly dying inside. Their spirits wane, their easy smiles fade as they meekly follow the soldiers’ orders.

And then there is the shaking sickness.

N’Goya remembers back in the Chiricahuas, when they had rainy seasons, some of them would come down with the shaking sickness. First came tiredness, then vomiting, then they got worse. In the mountains, only a few caught this sickness, but now in Florida, every day more get it. They take these sick people to the old, white building that they call ‘Infirmity.’ No one wants to go there.

Taiche, a friend of N’Goya, approaches. He doesn’t have the friendly smile that usually can be seen from a long ways away.

“The guards came to our barracks looking for you.

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Your Mom's in Infirmary," he says.

He pretended not to notice how she was so tired, or when she got sick; he thought maybe it was the food, which is not good. He doesn't want to believe that she is in that place where many Apaches go in, but few come out.

He takes slow, deliberate steps to Infirmary, and the kind-looking men in white coats lead him down the hallways into a room with a door that says MALARIA on it. He can smell the damp, and the sickness. The clean air of home is so far away. The walls in this dark room used to be white, but now they're faded, and the paint is peeling off. It's a long room where beds for the sick are lined up in two rows, one row on each side. On nearly every bed lie Apache women and children.

The doctor points N'Goya to one of the beds on the left where his mother lies shivering under a wool blanket. It's a warm day today.

"N'Goya!" she grimaces while she tries to sit up.

She puts on a cheerful look, but in her eyes is the regret and despair that can be seen in many Apache eyes in this place. She is speaking softly, N'Goya leans over to hear:

"Leave this place. Leave, N'Goya." She whispers. "Go home to our mountains. Find our families who stayed behind. Someone here in this place has to make it back — we can't all be prisoners. Go back where we belong."

He says nothing, but just sits and holds her hand for a little while. The only sounds are a few moans, and the coughs of those who are retching. She wanted to go with Geronimo too.

That night, N'Goya lies in his bunk bed in the room with 25 other Apache boys of various ages. He thinks about the way back to the Chiricahuas, he thinks about the roads, and the rails that lead West. He decides to

follow his Mother's wishes.

First comes finding a way out of this place. The walls, the guards make escape feel impossible. There is always a way, and it comes to N'Goya one night as he watches the moon peek through the bars in the bunk room. The back wall of the room is also the back wall of the fort. There are four windows that line that wall. The windows are covered with iron grates to hamper escape. But this fort is old and so are the iron grates and the air is salty.

N'Goya examines the windows until he finds the right one. The bolts that attach the iron grates to the wall are rusted through. He pushes quietly, trying not to grunt too hard. He repeats this several times, and the bolts start to crack, then crack some more. The grate loosens, but now is not the time, so he stops before the grate completely falls off. No one can see N'Goya smiling in the dark.

It takes a couple of days to gather the things he needs. He snatches a can of beans here and there, and stashes them in the hollow of an old, dead tree. Matches, now there is one thing that is a credit to the settlers. These take a little more time to find. He takes an old blanket from the stables, saves some rolls from the dinnertime meals too. For the last item, he stops in one of the classrooms in 'school,' and tears a map page out of a big book.

The map is something easy to hide, and he takes it out at night, and looks it over by candlelight when no one is around. He studies the names of the states, the towns. He draws a line that follows the railroads; they will get him home quicker. He thinks back to his trip, and matches the names with the landmarks and towns he passed through. He replays the way in his mind over and over until it's ingrained in his memory. Now the plan is ready.

N'Goya waits patiently for the last class of school. They take attendance in every class, but after school, they don't check off the names again until lights out. He

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waits and hopes.

After the last class, he grips the tattered school bag. It looks full, but there is only one book in it. The rest of the contents are: matches, one blanket, a canteen, some rolls, and a couple of cans of beans. Enough to keep him going for a few days.

All of the students walk out of the school together at the end of classes. N’Goya hasn’t told anyone his plan. That way, no one can tell where he’s headed. Taiche walks up beside, heading towards dinner. *Think fast.*

“Goodbye, Taiche,” N’Goya says.

He stops confused. “What do you mean? It’s time for supper.”

“I know.” N’Goya backtracks. “I’ll see you in there. I have to go back to the barracks first and get something. I’ll meet you.” It’s not good lying to a friend. The Apaches aren’t as good at it as the whites are. But, Taiche will understand, he’ll figure it out.

N’Goya hangs back behind the other boys, just far enough, and he enters the barracks. He rushes over to the grate, and it gives at the first push. Quietly, he slides the grate down on the ground outside, then climbs out. He sets the grate back on the window. It will take a while for someone to notice that.

A running Apache in these parts would cause panic and draw an armed response from the soldiers, so he just walks casually. After the fences and walls of the fort are out of sight, then he starts flying. He used to run day and night when some murderous group of soldiers or Mexicans were in pursuit, so the 8-mile trip to the railroad station should be an easy one.

He stays off the road, and moves between trees and bushes as he nears the railroad station. Now, he can see the smoke billowing from the smokestacks of the engines. He walks the way he was taught: avoiding stepping on sticks, making as little noise as possible.

The edge of the trees is in sight, and across a clearing the trains are belching their smoke, clanging and chugging.

“Noisy trains,” N’Goya whispers.

Running around these noisy trains are a few noisy men. They work like ants, scurrying from one train to another, prying with metal tools, squirting nasty oil from their squirt cans. They shout and curse at one another. They must get angry from working around such dirty, nasty trains. But at least they’re busy, and may not notice one Apache boy making a run for it.

He hides behind some trees and waits for the sunset. N’Goya knows a train pointing toward the setting sun will take him West. Straight into the setting sun to get back to his mountains — they’re far away, but they’re waiting for him.

There is just a sliver of sun hanging over the steamy land, and darkness begins to creep in. The noisy train men have stopped their shouting, so they must be getting ready to move off. N’Goya crouches behind a tree trunk and waits. His chance comes and he dashes full speed across the open ground between the forest and the train. Then he leaps through the open door of a rail car, and quickly crawls behind the crates and cargo into a dark corner, waiting. There are no shouts from the train men, so he peeks out of the door. There are no lanterns swinging in the smoky dusk. It is another bit of good luck. His ancestors must be looking out for him. No one can see his smile as he crawls back into the darkness of the railcar.

Suddenly, there are footsteps and voices, and they’re getting closer. He gets as small as he can in the back corner of the car. Fear grips him: It reminds him of the terror he felt with Geronimo in the Sierra Madres.

“Shut that one too,” a noisy man says.

The door shuts, and the men start laughing as they move off. Then the next rail car door slams shut. They’re

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just closing the doors of the open cars. Soon, there is a whistle, a chug and a lurch as the train starts to move. The trek home has started for real. With luck, he'll make it back to the Chiricahuas, and find the families who stayed behind. He's heading west, and if his luck holds, this train will get N'Goya hundreds of miles closer.

N'Goya marvels at his good luck, and imagines the soldiers in the fort are probably searching the grounds, wondering where he got to. They'll never be able to figure this one out. And he dreams somewhere out on the mountains his maiden and her family are standing proud and defiant. They're still free, he knows it, and when he gets back they'll welcome him, and be amazed at his bravery. They'll call him warrior, and instead of tending horses on the next raid, he'll be riding alongside his brothers. Life at home will be everything his mother dreamed of: getting married, raising a family, teaching his own son how to hunt the deer and the other animals of the Chiricahuas. All of the troubles will fade as he lives in their home. He's bolstered by all of these triumphant thoughts.

The train rumbles on through the night past small towns and more swampy places. In the darkness behind the crates, N'Goya sits jostling along as the train rolls down the rails. He doesn't know how much time there is before the next stop, and the railroad men come to unload their stuff. That's a worry for another time. Right now, he's safe, and he can dare to hope that he'll see the beautiful Jania once again.

"We'll meet at the Springs. I'll check there every day," she promised.

At some point, thoughts and worries ebb as the rocking of the rail car lulls him to sleep. The excitement, the running leaves him exhausted. Sleep comes in and washes away the weariness. He's leaving behind the confinement of Fort Marion, and being carried away to

freedom.

Then the train lurches to a stop, jolting him out of sleep.

It feels like only a few hours have passed by, but N'Goya can see the sky lightening through the slats of the railcar. His heart starts beating faster with fear. This is where he can get caught. He quickly slides behind the crates, and inches closer just behind and beside the door. He can jump out immediately if necessary and keep anyone from getting a hand on him. He listens, and waits.

It seems like an hour, but it's probably just a few minutes when the railroad men can be heard in the distance. They're getting closer, and they're opening each railcar door, getting ready for unloading. Their voices get louder still. N'Goya's fingers grip the bar that runs along the inside of the car. He tenses up, ready to spring. N'Goya feels like he did in the Sierra Madres; hiding behind some rocks or trees while the U.S. cavalry soldiers searched for him, or the Mexican soldiers — it's a familiar position. Soon, the door opens and he holds his breath.

The railroad men seem to be on their regular routine. They laugh and joke as they move down the line. If they're unloading, there are sure to be more of them at some point, and the train will move to a depot to unload, where the chances of getting caught increase. He pokes his head out, and there is nobody in sight. He jumps out and makes a dash for the bushes that line the edge of the roadbed. Out of sight again.

He waits under the bushes for a while, crawling a few yards at a time. Then he hears the railroad men shouting. "Hey! You there! Stop"

This is the time to run. They're off in the distance, pointing and running towards N'Goya. He runs west, not worrying about hiding now. The railroad men aren't used

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to running. Their breath comes heavier, and they begin to slow. He's free again.

Not quite free, because out from behind the railcars jumps another man. He's big, and he's in N'Goya's path. His strong fingers dig into the boy's shoulders, and he begins to wheel N'Goya around, throwing him to the ground.

"I've got him!" The big man shouts.

Sometimes fear can paralyze you, freeze you in your tracks, but not Apache warriors. Fear gives them the advantage of strength and speed. N'Goya catches himself before going down to the ground. The big man is right on top of him, grabbing again, but he runs right into the boy's elbow on his way in. There is a muffled crunching sound, and blood begins to pour out of his nose.

"Aawww." He groans, and the young Apache runs for the bushes and continues due west. It's cloudy and cold tonight in this new place; he's not even sure where he is, but when the moon peeks out from behind the clouds, he gets his bearings.

Outside of the train depot, N'Goya gets back on the road to cover a greater distance. Then he smiles when a saloon comes into view — exactly what he's looking for. It's a horse tied up to a hitching post. He's a good-looking horse: a white and tan spotted appaloosa. He's the answer. Inch closer, keep quiet, untie the reins, and walk the horse away from the saloon. No one will notice. A little down the road, he jumps in the saddle, and gently kick the horse in the sides. They're off.

It's good to feel the horse spring up when he's spurred on. It's good to feel the wind on his face as the horse rears up, running in earnest. He turns to see no trail of dust, which means no one is chasing. A quick search of the saddlebags reveals some beef jerky, a bedroll, and more provisions. His ancestors would be proud of a

successful raid.

"Yeeeaooooowww!" he shouts to the winds.

This is freedom on the back of a horse. His father is looking down at him right now, and he's proud of this victory. He keeps westward with the cold night air blowing through his hair. The huffs of the horse breath and his galloping hooves make a cadence that brings them closer to home in the Chiricahuas. His promise to his mother is being kept. He slows down the pace and rides on through the night — he's tired again.

The sun begins to rise, and there's a quiet, secluded pond on the plains. The horse needs water, and there is plenty of grass for grazing. N'Goya stretches under the shade of a strange leafy tree to catch some rest. It's a lazy day, and he sleeps.

As the sun sets, he saddles up for some more night riding west, always west.

Finally, there is a sign for a town: Fort Lee, Oklahoma. He recognizes Oklahoma from his map, where the plains seem to roll on endlessly. When the first morning light breaks, he repeats the same routine as the day before. Find a pond, stop, water, let the horse graze, and rest. But, today there are some clouds to watch. At first they are a harmless white. He imagines the shapes in the clouds as bears, or mountain lions, or mountains. He dozes off to sleep.

Later, a blowing wind wakes him, and he sees now that clouds are a darker shade of gray. It's not long before they begin to turn that menacing blackish-bluish color. The weather is going to turn, and it's going to get wet today. While he contemplates the next move, things suddenly get worse.

There are men on horses who show up a good distance away on the rolling plains, and they have those blue coats on: U.S. cavalry riders. There is no hiding out here. N'Goya hopes that they either don't notice him, or don't

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care. The soldiers stop in a circle, and one of them is using a looking glass to scan the plains. Of course, the glasses stop in his direction. Now, the cavalry men and their horses are moving towards the young Apache.

He knows when there are soldiers riding, you don't wait around to see what they want. He jumps up and grabs what he can and stuffs it into his saddlebags. He leaves at a gallop, and at the same time the first cold drops of rain begin to fall. The bluecoats show their murderous intentions as their guns pop, and the bullets come whizzing by. It's hard to draw a good aim on someone from horseback, though, so they miss.

In a few minutes more, the sky opens up, and the rain comes down in sheets. The triumphant Apache warrior who stole a horse is now the hunted Apache, riding for his life trying to get away from the cavalry. How many times has an Apache fled from the bluecoats? How big is that number? Dread and fear replace victory and triumph. The men are still several miles away, but the problem is there's no hiding out on the plains.

Through the rain a road appears, and it leads to a little railroad depot, or maybe a stopping place for stagecoaches. This is his chance. He heads straight for the building, and sees it's a little railroad stop that sits at a crossroads. The cavalry are down at the bottom of a rolling hill, so they can't see. N'Goya dreads doing so, but he jumps off his horse onto the wooden loading dock, then slaps the horse on the rear and watches him tear off into the rain. There go his ride and supplies. But the hope is that the soldiers will keep following the horse's tracks, unaware that its rider is gone. He slides behind some wooden barrels that are stacked up on the platform and waits in silent terror.

The hooves pound the muddy ground, getting closer. The cavalry men shout and circle around the front of

the depot and the officer has his revolver out. Officers always do that.

"Which dang way?" One man shouts hoarsely.

Again and again N'Goya is hiding from U.S. cavalry or Mexican soldiers. The old memories come roaring back. The screams of terror from the women and children haunt his thoughts. The blood, the death of his people is his burden; a burden of all Apaches. He cringes behind the barrels and tries to beat back the terror of the cavalry men. Those blue coats and their horses, swift death. He curls up into a ball behind the barrels and forgets that he's supposed to be a warrior now.

"I should stand and fight the soldiers," he tells himself. "I'm a warrior, I rode with Geronimo." It's all false bravado. He's ashamed, afraid, weak.

"Where are his tracks?" A soldier shouts.

"I can't tell. Goldarn rain!" Shouts another.

They may be fearsome, but they can't track anything in this rainstorm. Maybe he can make it out of here. He's soaking wet behind the barrels, watching the confused men.

"He must be heading west! C'mon!" One of them finally commands. N'Goya peeks out, and watches them go tearing off towards the horse's trail.

"What idiots." He chuckles.

The rain is pouring, and N'Goya's breath comes streaming out. He's shivering sitting under the roof of the depot. He needs to get out of this rain to get dry; it's dangerous to be out in this for much longer.

The rain lightens up, and N'Goya starts down the road to put some distance between him and the soldiers. Cold, it's very cold. He's lost and can't turn west like the soldiers did. The rain comes and goes, but at this point there's no way to get more soaked. He scrambles on the side of the road leading south, staying out of the mud.

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The shivering won't stop. He is desperately in need of a place to get warm, and soon. Finally, there is what he's been looking for.

"Here it is."

It's a farmhouse on a hill, and there's a barn too. The plan is to get into the barn and find some hay to crawl into, maybe even find a horse blanket too. He'll be hard to find, and he can dry his clothes, get warmed up.

N'Goya gets closer and slows, trying not to rush even though the shivering is uncontrollable. There is a gravel driveway that leads up to the house, which has smoke coming out of the chimney. He can't just walk over to the barn and be discovered. There isn't much time; the cold is slowing him down, it's getting hard to concentrate.

There are tall, old trees lining the road to the main house, so he dashes from tree to tree, staying behind them as the house gets closer. By doing this, he gets close enough that he could throw a rock and hit the front door. The next 100 yards to the barn is wide open though. There is no other choice, so he gulps and sprints to the barn. The door is partly open and he slides right in.

Inside, there are two horses who give a start, and one cow who seems indifferent. It's already warmer inside, but there's no time to waste. He strips down out of wet clothes and lays them behind the cow pen, out of sight.

"Yes," N'Goya whispers.

There is a horse blanket lying next to the saddle. It wraps up scratchy over his shivering body, but the warmth starts to generate from within. Next, he climbs the rickety wooden ladder into the hayloft and dives in. Yeah, the hay is scratchy, but it's warm. He burrows like a snake into the folds of the hay. Warmth.

All this running and cold have left N'Goya exhausted again. But, before falling away into sleep, he's amazed at how far he's come. Still, how many Apaches survive

all this being hunted? Everyone is gunning for them. They've been chased, shot, starved, sickened.

"We're all little miracles really," he says, but the horses don't understand.

The only sound in the barn is the occasional snort or movement of the animals and the peaceful pattering of the rain on the tin roof. The rain drips into puddles outside.

"It's much better to be hearing the rainfall from inside here."

It's going to be cold climbing down from the hayloft.

The morning sun is up, and the rain is gone, leaving puddles and the odd raindrops falling from the eaves of the barn. He reaches for the clothes, but they're still wet.

"Oh no." He curses when he puts them back on, but running around naked is not an option. The shivering starts again, but he knows moving will warm him up. That's when he hear footsteps coming closer, and the barn door creaks open. There isn't time to find a good place to hide, so he gets behind the saddle hanging off the wall. He prays to escape.

"Who's in there?" It's the gravelly voice of an old woman.

The old lady creeps in brandishing a pitchfork, trying to look menacing. N'Goya sees she has the fighting spirit of an Apache grandmother. He stifles a smile when it occurs to him that one poke from the pitchfork is not something to smile about. She has deep lines running down her leathery skin, and her eyes stand out blue and striking. Now, could he make a feint to the right or left and grab that pitchfork right out her hand? Yes, but she is an elder, and Apaches respect elders.

She could warn a neighbor about him, or if he tries to get around her to the door it might be the pitchfork. An escape attempt seems risky, so he raises his hands and walks slowly out from behind the saddles. It's good that

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N’Goya learned some English from the fort in Florida.

“Please don’t hurt me.” He raises his hands like the soldiers tell him to do; this should ease her fears.

At the sound of his voice, she whirls around in her long petticoats, pointing the pitchfork at N’Goya. She looks over at his wet clothes, and straw sticking out of his black hair, and her fierce eyes soften, the pitchfork lowers to the ground.

“You poor dear,” she coos. “What’s your name?”

“N’Goya.”

“You can call me Janice.” She sets the pitchfork against the barn wall.

She grabs his hand and leads him out of the barn.

Doesn’t she know I’m a renegade Apache?

“You’re soaking wet! And you smell like a dog, and I bet you’re hungry.” She speaks like an angry hen.

“We’ve got some work to do. Hmmp!”

The farmhouse is warm, and the smell of some kind of good cooking wafts throughout the place. The old woman puts a log of wood on the stove, and puts a big, iron kettle filled with water on top of it. “We need to get you warmed up, and you darn well need a bath! Phew!”

She hands N’Goya a large blanket. “You can go into the parlor, and get rid of those clothes. If you were up in the hayloft, you might have vermin. We’re going to burn those clothes of yours, and after you take a good bath, I’ve got some clean clothes for you.”

This is an unexpected development, but he follows her orders. Following orders is something he’s used to since he left the mountains. He goes into the parlor, strips down, and wraps up in a soft quilt. He knows of different kinds of warm; right now, sitting wrapped up in a quilt in front of a hot stove, all chill is driven out of him. This is really what warm is. She hurries over and grabs the old clothes, and with a wrinkled nose, she tosses them into

the stove.

“Good riddance.”

She sits next to him, takes his hand. “N’Goya, what tribe are you?” She asks.

“Tribe? What do you mean?”

He plays stupid: If she finds out he’s an Indian, and tells on him, who knows what could happen?

She gives his hand a knowing squeeze. “My Grandmother was from a tribe. She was a Sioux.” She speaks softly. “I loved my Grandma. She told me about her life, right here in this room. She told me how the settlers came, and the soldiers chased them, and killed their warriors. If it wasn’t for my Grandpa, she’d be on some reservation, or dead for all I know.” She pauses and breathes in. “I don’t know how it came to this. All the tribes are gone, or on reservations. But I know you’re from a tribe, N’Goya, and you need some help. So tell me, what tribe are you?”

He sees the kindness and understanding in her eyes.

She can be trusted. “Apache,” he says.

She smiles. “Whew! I might have guessed. So where are you headed?”

He can’t think of the word in English that names his home, so he just says: “My mountains.”

She puts a reassuring hand on his shoulder. “Don’t you worry. We’ll get you rested up, and I’ll help you get there.” The tea kettle on the wood-burning stove begins to whistle. “Now it’s time for you to get your bath.” She goes out to the pump and fills a bucket several times with water, and pours it into the bathtub. Next, she pours in the steaming hot tea kettle water. Then, she leaves.

N’Goya inches down into the tub. The warm water soaks right into his bones. For the first time on this journey, he feels safe, and there are no needs. He takes a deep breath and exhales. After he’s toweled off, he finds

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some clothes laid out. Being clean, having dry clothes, he emerges out of the bedroom a new man. She eyes him over. "Those are from my son." She looks down at the floor. "I was going to get rid of them, but you never know when you'll need something."

"Now we'll eat supper." It seems that the Old Lady can't sit still. She's off into the kitchen, banging pans, chopping things. He leans back on the sofa, and nods off to sleep again. Being on the run is tiring.

Maybe it's a dream, a bad dream, but he hears the sound of horses' hooves. His fear increases when he hears the sound of boots clomping on the front porch. Soldier boots. Then there's a knock on the door, and he can see a cavalry hat through the curtains.

The Old Lady hurries back into the room. She gives a signal to be quiet, and motions for N'Goya to hide in the bedroom. He crawls under her bed. N'Goya tries not to breathe too hard, as the front door opens:

"Sorry to disturb you, ma'am. But we've seen a renegade Indian around here. Have you seen anything suspicious?"

The Old Lady is unfazed. "OOhhh. Heavens! I haven't seen anything," she says in a phony, amazed voice. "Do you think he's nearby?"

"We're not sure, just checking things out," the soldier replies. "But don't you worry."

"Well, I hope you catch him. I HATE Injuns," she exclaims.

"Oh, we will. Sorry to bother you." The soldier's boots stride off the wooden porch.

The door closes: "Ha!" She laughs. "Those soldiers are so gullible. Just let them think that you're on their side, and they'll believe anything."

Relief returns, and the smells of a chicken dinner start to waft in from the kitchen.

"Let's eat," she says.

N'Goya is safe, and full of food.

"Thank you, Janice," he tells her, and starts to rise off the kitchen table.

"You're welcome. But you need to stay tonight. That'll give the soldiers time to get further off of your trail. You can start again in the morning," she says.

He goes to one of the upstairs bedrooms, which are never in use since she's the only one who lives here. He knows why she stays here alone: It's home. Everyone needs a home. The bedroom has a little shelf with little porcelain figurines; they're little angels with painted halos. They talked about angels in the church at Fort Marion. N'Goya didn't pay much attention to all that talk in church. But being in that upstairs room, on the feather bed, under the quilts, that's what heaven might feel like.

The next morning, it's the smell of eggs and bacon that's coming up out of the kitchen. N'Goya doesn't say much, and part of him wishes that he could stay longer.

She must sense it too.

"I don't know how to thank you," he confesses. He looks down at the floor.

She smiles. "You just get home, and find your people. Knowing that I helped someone find their home and their tribe is thanks enough. But I've got one more surprise for you." She grabs him by the hand and leads him out to the barn:

"I want you to take my horse Ringer. He's too young and wild for me."

He shakes his head. "I can't take your horse."

"Yes, you can. I can't hardly get a bridle on him. If I go ride him out in the fields, and he bucks me, I might never make it back home. I can't ride him. No, you take him. Besides, it's a waste of a good young horse to keep him stabled up all the time. He belongs out there on the

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plains running wild, just like you.”

Her eyes are hard, and there is an earnestness in her voice that he can't ignore, so he says thank you yet again.

He walks up to Ringer slow and quiet, and reaches out a hand to touch his snout. Apaches know how to quiet a wild horse, and bend them to their will.

“There, there, Ringer,” N’Goya says.

Maybe he’s used to being spoken to in English. He gives a start, and pulls his head back. “There, there,” he says again.

Ringer knows if a horse rider respects him, appreciates him. He can sense N’Goya’s peace. It takes a little time, and a little reassuring, but he urges the bridle over Ringer. Then, they walk out into the corral. Like his ancestors, he quiets the skittish horse. Next, he gets the saddle on.

Ringer rears up strong and unbowed when N’Goya climbs into the saddle. Once again, there is a horse to bring him home. Janice comes out carrying a bedroll, and a full set of saddle bags. “Here’s some food, and a blanket to keep you warm, my boy. Take it. I hope you make it back to your mountains.”

N’Goya reaches around the kind old lady: “I can’t repay you,” he says.

“You just be the one Indian that gets away from the whites and gets to live on his own land. That’s payment enough!” She grins.

Ringer is a quarterhorse, and he’s fast, and he’s strong. N’Goya can feel his power as they rush out of the stable. With a kick, Ringer gets out quick; the wind whips through his hair. He’s smiling, and so is the horse. N’Goya thinks about Janice and her mercy. “Not all settlers are bad,” he says to the horse. They ride with the wind for a while as the farmhouse gets smaller, then he

pulls Ringer back. They travel on into the sunset.

Four days go by as they steadily travel west. With the help of the map, they pass through Texas, and then even further west into what’s New Mexico. Here the land is making another change, growing more arid, and the plants begin to resemble the ones that grow on his own mountains. His spirits rise as he begins to see places that even his band visited on hunting journeys from time to time. By his best estimate, N’Goya thinks he should see his mountains rise out of the hills tomorrow. He pictures finding those who stayed behind. When he finds them, he’ll find her.

As they ride on, N’Goya starts to feel a sickness in his stomach. At first it’s a tickle, maybe like if he swallowed a butterfly. Now, he’s never swallowed a butterfly, but that’s what it feels like. Then, the pain comes in waves and knots. He turns to the side and vomits. Then he vomits again. He’s starting to feel cold, but it’s a nice, spring day. Maybe it’s the food from Janice’s farm, or maybe he caught a cold from that time in the freezing rain.

Isn’t that how it always goes? When it feels like things are going to work out, and victory is at hand, isn’t that when some kind of bad luck jumps out and throws everything into a downward spiral? That’s what happens next.

Ringer is young, a little wild, but it seems that he likes being out on the plains. But what N’Goya learns is that Ringer is terrified of snakes. All horses have some fear of snakes, but Ringer is one of those horses who can’t handle them at all.

He doesn’t even see the rattlesnake. At least then N’Goya could get a tighter grip on the reins and dig his legs tighter in the stirrups. But no. While he’s ambling along, thinking of his future triumph, he hears the rattle

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and almost instantly Ringer rears up, then he bucks as he tries to stomp the snake. N’Goya is sent sailing. The horse screams and bolts. He is fast, of course, and Ringer’s gone before N’Goya realizes what’s happening. He rests on his hands and knees and watches as his transportation, as well as his food and bedroll, take off in the opposite direction. He could follow Ringer and hope to catch up. The problem is that if he doesn’t catch up, then that puts him even further behind. It’s better to keep going west. There’s always the chance that another horse will present itself. This only adds an extra day to N’Goya’s journey.

“Keep walking.”

It’s warm for a spring day, the mirages dancing over the grass. In the distance, there is a line of bright green trees — cottonwoods most likely. This means that there’s water. By the time he makes the creek, his lips are cracking. He drops into the cool water, drinking all that he can hold. There’s not much time to waste though. He has to get to the next water, find a little food and shelter and get to the mountains where everything will work out.

The land is changed, there used to be nothing for miles — unmarked and unspoiled by the white man’s work. Now there are roads, fences, houses, barns, silos. They have come here and changed everything. But they can’t build on the mountains, there’s no way they can build a road up there. That’s the place to get away from the settlers.

The evening sun dips below the horizon, and the shadows get longer and he finds the perfect place to bed down. It’s a depression, a hollow that sits below the line of the plains. No one will see him, and they can’t see the light of the fire either. There is plenty of wood to gather, and soon a fire is ready. But the fire doesn’t seem to warm N’Goya, and he throws up again. As he lies there

shivering, it occurs to N’Goya that he has the Shaking Sickness too.

“No.” He moans and shivers. “Not me. Not now.”

Not everyone dies from it, many Apaches go on to survive. He thinks he can make it. And in the mountains there might be a Medicine Man, a healer to cure him. He has to make it.

The next morning, he starts again at dawn, vomits again, and gets moving. It doesn’t take long for him to get warm, to begin to recognize the land. It’s close! Then he sees them. There are his mountains, the Chiricahuas, standing tall over the surrounding land. They’re still pretty far off, but they stand tall like a promise.

It’s getting warm, but just thinking of the trails, and the spring with the cool water keeps him going. There must be signs of the families who stayed behind there too. His journey will be complete and his triumph will be total. They will smile and cheer when N’Goya finds them and shares his story. He’ll get some regular moccasins and regular clothes. He’ll be made a warrior too because of his great journey. Push past the pain, find his people.

The pain grows with every step; it takes hours to make the distance.

“Keep moving,” N’Goya says over and over.

When he makes the foothills, he goes for a leap of joy, but doesn’t get too far off the ground. He’s made it, returned to the Chiricahuas. His ancestors have been here for hundreds of years and he’s back. He scans the foothills with their junipers and his eyes trace up to the heights of the mountains where the tall pines are. He breathes a sigh of relief.

This land and everything in it, the animals, the memories, the Apache history: It all envelops him. Apaches have been chased, imprisoned, relocated and had their culture ‘educated’ out of them. But N’Goya has

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beaten all of that; this lonely journey is over.

N’Goya finds the old trail that leads to the spring where Jania will meet him. It’s worn by thousands of footsteps. In the second clearing on the way, he finds their last encampment, a little clearing surrounded by junipers. His smile fades, though; there is no one here. The remains of the cooking fires are covered in dirt. He scans the ground for tracks. Fresh tracks, old tracks, any type of moccasin. Any sign of his people being around, but there is none.

“Keep moving.”

In widening circles, peering down at the ground, N’Goya searches, but there are no signs of moccasin footprints, or even the boots of the cavalry men. There is one set of deer tracks and that of its young. They must have ambled through here in the last couple of days. That’s it.

He stoops over, and puts his hands on his hips.

“The Spring! They have to be there!”

He starts off at a faster pace, thinking of a strategy:

“If they’re not here, there will still be tracks. It’s the only water for miles. They may still be on the move, hiding only in the highest of mountaintops. But even if they’re moving, they still have to get water at the Spring. I can pick up a track, and figure out where they are. I’ll find them.” He starts down the ridge to the Spring.

Walking gets harder; N’Goya’s legs feel as if they’re made of iron, but nothing will stop him.

“I’ll get some water, and find a place to hide and rest. Then I’ll track my brothers and find them.”

He keeps descending, climbing over boulders and rounding past junipers on the way down. Every Apache will come by the spring at some point this time of year.

He avoids the trail the cavalry men use when they come out of their fort. He weaves in between the rocks,

being careful not to make much noise. Finally, he sees the sycamores and the other trees with their big, green leaves — a sure sign of a plentiful water source. Next, there is the sound of trickling water. This is it.

He lies down by the spring and listens to the water trickling. It sounds so peaceful. He cups his hand and takes a long, deep drink. Once again, there are no moccasins in the dirt, only the boots of the soldiers. He doesn’t know where they are, but N’Goya begins to realize that he may not find them. The shivering starts again, and he starts heaving, and there is none of his people here to help.

He won’t cry. Apaches don’t cry.

“I’ll just lie down here and catch my breath,” he says to the trees.

It will be good to rest here in his homeland. Just being here has to count for something. Hopefully, the pain will fade away soon enough that he can get back up and go searching. Maybe he can get to one of the reservations and find other Chiricahua Apaches, maybe they are back down in the Sierra Madres in Mexico.

He lies down on the ground and looks up at the sun that is broken apart by the big green leaves of the old sycamore. That old sycamore. It would take three men holding hands to reach around its gnarled trunk. It’s been giving his people shade for over a hundred years. Is he the last Apache to rest under its branches? Apaches don’t cry, but the tears just find a way out of his eyes. It’s hard to tell if they’re caused by happiness for being home, or sadness from all his people being gone. But he looks up into the trees at the sky, and the sun. The trees start spinning, becoming a whirling mix of green and white. Then, the green fades out and a pure whiteness takes over.

He feels the strong hands of his ancestors reaching

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down for him. They put their arms under N’Goya, and lift him skyward. Strong hands, reassuring hands. N’Goya sees the faces of his father and his grandfather.

“Our proud warrior,” they say.

And there are those who he thought were lost from the cavalry attacks, and those who didn’t survive the Mexican soldiers. They all welcome him home. There is my maiden! She is here too smiling down on N’Goya.

“You are home,” they welcome.

“I am home.” N’Goya feels the joy coursing through him.

He laughs because he knows that he’ll be with them forever. Their spirits are home in their mountains, the Chiricahuas, and no blue coat cavalry man on a horse can ride them out. They’ll be here as long as these mountains stand.

They’re lifting N’Goya higher still, and when he looks down he can see the spring, and his own body. His pain is gone, and his people are here.

He’s finally home.

Staff Sergeant Chambers and Private Jorgensen dismount and lead their horses down the steep, rocky trail that leads to Indian Spring.

“Sergeant? Why do we gotta keep patrolling these dang trails? Geronimo and the other Apaches were cleared out months ago. There ain’t a dang Apache within 200 miles of this godforsaken place. So what’s the point?” One can surmise that Private Jorgensen wants to

be transferred out of the hellhole.

Chambers grunts and pulls his horse’s bridle over the rocks. “The point being, Jorgensen, is that we’re following orders! The Major wants us to keep sharp, be on our guard. And even though there ain’t a goldang Apache in over 200 goldang miles, he still wants us to come to this goldang spring to check it out! And until they close this goldang fort, we’re going to have to come to this spring to check for Apaches who aren’t anywhere near this goldang place! So get used to it!”

Private Jorgensen is suitably shouted down into a sullen quiet, so he silently guides his horse behind the waddling Sergeant. There are innumerable big rocks in the path, and the angry Sergeant Chambers isn’t done shouting as they near the mouth of the spring.

Chambers is made angry by Jorgensen’s outrage, and his own struggles with guiding his horse down the rocky path. “I’m sick of this too, Jorgensen! Sick of...” Chamber’s complaint is cut short.

“What is it, Sergeant?!” Jorgensen asks. But Chambers doesn’t reply. He’s stopped short of the spring, looking down at the ground with his mouth hanging open. Jorgensen maneuvers around the sergeant to see what he’s looking at, and his mouth drops as well.

It’s a young Apache lying dead beside the spring.

“What the ... ?” Jorgensen gasps.

They both stare down at the young man. “He’s wearing white man’s clothes,” Chambers observes. “Where did he come from?” Jorgensen asks.

“Why is he smiling?” they both say in unison.

A Call to Writers for The Blue Guitar Jr.

Open to children and teens who write
and to adults who write
for children and teens

The Blue Guitar Jr. magazine seeks literary submissions for its next annual issue for children and teens. Submissions from children and teens and adults who write for children and teens are sought by Oct. 1, 2026, in all genres — fiction, poetry, plays, creative nonfiction — all geared to appeal to youthful audiences. Writers must submit original work and must live in Arizona (no AI-generated works). Simultaneous submissions will be accepted, but the writer must notify the magazine as soon as possible if the work is accepted elsewhere. It is free to submit, and submissions may be made in multiple genres. Please include your name and the best way to contact you on your submission. To submit or for further information, e-mail Editor Rebecca Dyer at rebeccadyer@theblueguitarmagazine.org. For additional information, visit www.theblueguitarmagazine.org.

A Call to Artists for The Blue Guitar Jr.

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and to adults who create art
for children and teens

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*Blue Guitar Jr.
will return in
2026!*

*“Things
as they are
are
changed
upon
the
blue guitar.”*