

Reagan Graney

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Marie Louise Jensen

Writing for Children

LOST

Chapter One

When you stare at the flashing lights on top of a police car for long enough, the colors start to blend together. Blue and red, blue and red, blue and red, blue and red—until suddenly they become an extraordinary lavender. It's a violent shade of violet, which burns into your eyelids and stays stamped across your vision even when you shut your eyes tight, trying to shield yourself from the flashing strobes.

I've seen this color on three occasions now: once when I was led out of a subway station in Queens at the age of ten, once when I woke up on a bench in Central Park three years ago, and now, this morning, from my hiding place beneath the Manhattan Bridge. Every time, it's been somewhere between 3 and 4 a.m.

My entire body is shaking with cold. I'm sitting with my back pressed against the stonework of the small tunnel, with Cora curled up next to me. I can see her warm breath forming clouds of vapor in front of us as we sit, shivering, in silence. I've given her my thin gloves to protect her tiny hands, leaving me with nothing to save my own blue, frostbitten fingers. Isn't that what big sisters are for?

I kiss Cora's cold forehead with my chapped, cracked lips and whisper a small "shh" to her. We've just seen a flash of gold on the tunnel wall opposite us. The police are lurking, searching, prowling around our dwelling. Their flashlights give them away as they slowly approach.

Cora's eyes are wide, bloodshot. They stare blankly into the distance—terrified, but tearless. Cora hasn't cried since she saw them take Mom away in that police car all those years ago, back when we were in Queens. I don't think I've cried since then, either.

The blue-red-purple headlights are giving me a migraine. They are blinding from their position just above the bridge, shining directly into our little nook, where we sit huddled in our tattered blankets. Blinking, I can just make out our home around us, bathed in an eerie lilac. There are two small pots that we use for cooking, borrowed from the neighbors on the other side of the wall; there's the little box of McDonald's gift cards and spare change that people have given to Cora when she bravely sits out on the streets; and there—I see, with a sinking heart—are my own treasured pair of Converse sneakers, which I found in the trash near the bridge about a year ago. All of this, I realize, must be left behind.

Now there are multiple flashlights shining against the wall. Their lights bob up and down as the officers strut toward us. I hear a loud bang, like a large metal something falling onto the frozen ground, followed by a soft cry from someone I know: "Oh please, have mercy!" she pleads.

It's one of the neighbors in the dwelling. I look down at Cora—she's heard it too. Suddenly she lifts her head up to whisper in my ear: "We need to run." At eleven years old, Cora is smart. She knows that now is the time.

Looking desperately again at our few cherished belongings, I nod.

We leave only with what we have on us: the two scraps of blankets draped around our shoulders, the clothes on our backs, and the worn-down boots on our feet. And as we push through the tattered drapes that shelter our little home under the bridge, I thank God that we have those boots. We know too many homeless people who have no footwear at all.

My boots, old as they are, are quickly soaked through as we stomp through the snow. There's simply nothing we can do about the crunching of ice beneath our feet. Soon, though, we know that the sound has caught the attention of the police.

"This way," we hear one of them say, trudging toward the source of the noise.

But Cora and I run. We run through the shadows of the bridge, under the growling of traffic that beats on persistently above us. We run through the community of makeshift tents and shacks that we have come to know as home for the past two years. We run past people just like ourselves, who are hidden away under their heaps of blankets, some horrified and awake and not knowing what to do, and some deep in slumber, oblivious to the police raid that is about to undo their lives.

Not us, I think to myself. Not again.