

The Creek

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Yaya and Nico descend the old, overgrown bulldozer road into the forest and the creek below. They are heading off to an adventure, something Yaya is looking forward to sharing with her grandson, who is almost four.

It has rained recently and the road has no rock so the water running down it creates mud wallows between the fallen logs. Salmonberry canes reach across the path, and trailing blackberry vines catch the ankles of unmindful trekkers. Yaya and Nico slip and trip but holding on to each other's hands, they make it down to where the creek has cut through the clay soil down to rock. Tall maples and firs filter the sun and trillium dot the floor amongst ferns and deep forest duff. Yaya wants to watch the clear rivulets of water carom off the rocks on their way toward the ocean, but Nico takes to the stream to make dams and disrupt the flow of water. The stream turns brown as Nico digs clumps of mud and grass from the banks and urges Yaya to do the same. "Help me make the dam, Yaya." Yaya tells him again about fish habitat and healthy streams, but Nico has something else in mind and his yellow boots stir up the silt as he hunts for more construction material—rocks, sticks, mud. So, Yaya helps.

When the creek is sufficiently dammed, they sit on the grassy bank and eat snacks. After snacks, Yaya says, "Let's see where the creek is going," and they begin to follow a game trail along the far side of the creek. Barely discernable among the ferns and salmonberry, the trail nonetheless faithfully accompanies the stream. Yaya helps Nico over logs, holding his hand at times. They plunge farther into the green undergrowth, the excitement of discovery drawing them on.

The stream takes a turn, and the path comes alongside it. There is a little muddy beach, and clear water slowly flows by. It is cool and quiet, a place unseen, undiscovered. Nico wades into the shallow water, overturning rocks to find crawdads or other creatures that may be hiding there. "Look, Nico," Yaya says and points to a tiny red salamander on the muddy edge. It looks impossibly delicate. Yaya produces a plastic cup from her pocket and

scoops the salamander up with some water. Nico calls it Sally and holds the cup carefully. The salamander is suspended in time and water and awaits her fate.

Nico wants to hold Sally.

“I think it’s too little to hold. I’m afraid we would hurt her,” Yaya warns. But she agrees to let him release the tiny amphibian and pours it and the water into his palm. Sally pauses, then makes a break for the creek below. Yaya and Nico search for her but she is gone.

“I feel bad for Sally.” Nico says. “What if she’s hurt?”

“I think she is just going back to her home,” Yaya says.

The light coming through the leaves of the big leaf maple trees high above is changing, becoming cooler.

“We should head back,” says Yaya. They begin walking back along the trail again toward Nico’s dam, but Yaya feels impatient and looks for a short cut over the creek. The banks are higher and narrow over a portion of the creek and Yaya considers whether they can jump across.

“Okay, buddy, we’re going to try jumping. You think you can do it?” Nico is uncertain, scared.

“Here, let me hold onto you,” Yaya says and grasps his hand. She is counting, one, two, thr... when the bank beneath them gives way. WHUMP! The overhanging chunk of earth and grass and ferns they had been standing on has dropped straight down into the creek, and they with it, still standing shakily. Yaya throws her arms around Nico.

“You alright?”

“Yeah.”

“Whew! That was quite a trip, wasn’t it?” and Yaya laughs, but her heart is pounding. She curses herself for taking risks with her grandson. What if? she asks herself.

They pull themselves up the far bank, finding places for their feet on roots and rocks, grasping handfuls of fern. Yaya hoists Nico up the last bit onto the grass above and follows him up. Their boots and jeans are muddy but they are unhurt.

“We probably shouldn’t tell Mom and Dad about that,” Yaya says. “It might scare them.”

“Okay.”

The ascent back up the overgrown road is a slog and Yaya is tired. They hold hands and come out of the forest into the pasture. The sun is still on it. Salmonberry has given way to blackberry and then tawny dry grass. Below, the creek trickles on in its green canyon.