

Steven loved Marbut Elementary School almost as much as he loved to draw. He loved walking to and from school with his younger sister Sarah, he loved his art teacher Ms. Grayson, he loved his job taking care of Fuzzybottom (the class hamster), he loved –

“Did you hear me, Steven?” Ms. Grayson asked.

“Hm?” Steven looked up from his desk, where he’d been making a list of things he loved about Marbut. He doodled next to each item on the list, filling up the space with lines and colors. It was after school, so Fuzzybottom was free to run around the room; currently, he was nuzzled against Steven’s empty *Star Wars* lunchbox, looking warm and cozy. Steven rubbed the animal’s tummy. He could’ve sworn the little guy was smiling.

The teacher laughed, noticing Fuzzybottom having a good time. “I said it’s time to go. Art Club is finished for the day. I’m sure your sister is waiting for you out front.”

“Oh, okay,” Steven said, gently nudging Fuzzybottom off the lunchbox and packing it into his bookbag. Ms. Grayson was staying later, so she’d put the hamster back. “See you tomorrow, buddy. And you too, Ms. Grayson!”

She waved, readjusting her glasses as she returned to her desk with Fuzzybottom in hand.

After a quick stop at his locker, Steven found Sarah leaning against the door at the school entrance. Her arms were crossed, and she was tapping her foot. It looked fun, so Steven joined her.

“Stop copying me, dummy!” Sarah yelled. “Let’s just go home.”

“I can do this all day!” Steven said, tapping his foot faster and faster as Sarah began to walk away. He imagined tapping so fast that he drilled a hole in the ground, discovering buried treasure beneath the pavement – a great subject for his next drawing. If he imagined any longer, though, Sarah would get home without him; she was already near the edge of the parking lot. “Hey, wait up!”

Sarah turned, stuck her tongue out at her brother, and kept moving.

“Mom said not to do that to me anymore,” Steven said, breathing hard from running to catch up with his sister. “She said it’s not nice.”

“Yeah, well, Mom also wants me to walk home with you every day. That’s not so nice, either.” Sarah huffed, blowing her cheeks out like a chipmunk storing nuts for the winter. “You’re a fifth grader. You should be able to walk home by yourself.”

Steven wondered what that would be like, but... he had his routine, and if he didn’t keep it, who knew what would happen? Walking with Sarah was part of that routine.

They were silent for a little while, dragging their feet down the sidewalk – until Sarah took a sharp left into the forest halfway between school and home.

“Um... Sarah?” Steven shifted his backpack. “We can’t go home that way.”

“Yes we can,” she said. “Come on. My friends showed me a shortcut the other day when you were sick and didn’t come to school.”

Steven thought he was going to be sick right then and there. Didn’t he just think to himself what horrible stuff would happen if he broke his routine? Maybe this was it. Maybe he and Sarah would get eaten by some ferocious beast in that forest, straight out of the pictures Steven drew. But he couldn’t just leave his sister alone! He had to protect her.

“I’m... I’m coming,” he said, gripping the straps of his bag so tight he thought they might snap.

“Yes!” Sarah shouted joyfully, grabbing Steven’s hand and tugging him along. “It’ll be fun! There’s something really cool on the way for you to draw.”

“Really?” That made the whole situation a little less scary. Even if their mom worried about them not getting home when they usually did, a brand-new drawing might help put her at ease.

“Really! So let’s go!”

Holding hands, the siblings took off at a run, kicking up dirt and leaves as they made their way into the forest.

The trees were tall and thin, like giant brown colored pencils with green tips. Birds and squirrels chirped and chattered from up above, an orchestra of sounds composed by nature itself. It was wonderful, like nothing Steven had ever experienced before. His family usually went on vacation to the beach, and the one time they planned to go camping, Steven refused, wanting once again to stick to routine. Seeing this forest made him wish he’d gone camping instead after all.

“Look!” Sarah pointed up ahead, between two thicker trees. “Right through there!” They passed through the gap, and...

“A waterfall!” Steven said. The water cascaded down a cliff about 20 feet high, glinting with light and life. Tiny fish glimmered in the pond below, specks of color dashing under the blue water. “Wow! This is amazing, Sarah!”

“See what happens when you’re not so strict about your schedule all the time?” she said triumphantly, sticking her tongue out again.

“Sarah...” He put his hands on his hips. “I don’t know why Mom said that’s not nice, but it’s not nice!”

“Oh, stop repeating yourself and draw the waterfall already,” she said, plopping down on a rock. “I don’t mind waiting. This place is really pretty.” She reached into her bag. “Plus, I brought the Switch. Gonna play *Animal Crossing* while you work.”

But Steven didn’t hear her. He was already sketching his heart out, bringing the scene before him to life with his pencils and pens. He knew that one day, when he finally fulfilled his dream of becoming an animator, that he’d have to include this very waterfall in his work.

Whenever Steven drew, all his habits and worries fell away. Every ounce of his energy was concentrated on the paper, on the perspective of his piece, on making something better than last time. The other kids in Art Club made fun of him for how obsessed he was, but he never noticed. He was always too busy creating his next masterpiece – on making his illustrations come *alive*.

In that moment, despite his normally unbreakable focus, something in the water caught Steven's attention. He didn't really mind, since he was just about done drawing the waterfall.

"... Sarah?"

"Hold on," she said. "Talking to Blathers right now."

"No, seriously. Look." He stood up from the log he'd been resting against, inching his way towards the pond beneath the waterfall.

"Hold *on*, I said."

Steven ignored his sister. Reaching into the water, he pulled out the object that'd caught his eye: a polished blue stone, painted with a design of a man sitting at an easel.

"Hello, Steven," the man said, looking away from the easel and right at him.

Steven yelped, sending the stone flying out of his hands as he fell. It landed next to Sarah, dangerously close to her head.

"Steven! I *told* you, I'm talking to –"

"My apologies, miss," the stone artist said. "I scared your brother and he dropped me. He wasn't trying to hurt you."

Steven couldn't describe the look on Sarah's face; he'd always been bad at reading people. However, he thought it was quite similar to the look his mom gave him when he came home one day with a racoon in his arms.

"Yahhhhhh!" Sarah screamed, covering her eyes as if that would make the stone disappear.

“Whoa, whoa!” the man said, putting his hands up as a sign of peace. There was a paintbrush in one hand and a palette in the other. “I bark, not bite.”

Cautiously, Steven picked up the stone. “What the heck is going on here?”

“Mom would’ve used a very different word than ‘heck’ right there,” Sarah said from behind a bush, her voice muffled by the leaves. Steven had no idea how she’d moved back there so fast.

“Huh?”

“Nothing! Just – get that creepy stone guy out of here!”

“Creepy?” the stone man asked. “I think I’m pretty nice, all things considered.” He looked at Steven. “You don’t think I’m creepy, do you? You’re an artist, like me. You get me.”

Sarah charged out from the bush, snatching the stone from Steven. “How do you know all this stuff about us? Who are you?” She took out her phone, waving it in front of her. “I’ll call my mom. She works from home. She can be here in three seconds.”

“And tell her what? That a stone started talking to you?”

“Well…”

The man coughed, clearing his throat. “Allow me to introduce myself. My name is… difficult to pronounce, so you can call me Grayson.”

“Hey!” Steven said. “My art teacher’s named Ms. Grayson! Are you her husband?”

“If she was married, her name would be *Mrs.* Grayson, now, wouldn’t it?”

“Oh, right,” Steven said, scratching his head in embarrassment. “Sorry.”

“No need to apologize. But if she doesn’t mind marrying a rock, let her know I’m available.”

Sarah leaned close to Steven’s ear, whispering. “See what I said? Creepy.”

“I heard that!” Grayson said.

“And?” Sarah smiled. “What’re you gonna do about it?”

“Maybe something like... this!” At lightning speed, Grayson painted a perfect replica of Sarah on his easel, only she was wearing a clown’s rainbow wig, red nose, and multicolored makeup. There was a flash of light, so fast it was hardly noticeable.

“Oookay,” she said. “That’s kinda mean, but it doesn’t change anything.”

“Don’t be so sure,” Grayson said with a wink.

Steven looked at Sarah and –

“Sarah! Your face!” Steven started laughing hysterically.

“What? What about my face?!” She dropped Grayson (“Hey!”) and ran over to the pond to check her reflection in the shimmering water, only to see exactly what Steven was laughing at: she looked exactly like the clown version of herself that Grayson had painted.

Speechless, she stomped back over to where Grayson had fallen to the ground, a strange look on her face. Steven had trouble enough reading people’s facial expressions, and the clown makeup didn’t help. It only made him laugh harder.

“Shut up!” Sarah cried. Steven may not have been able to understand her face, but Grayson might. “Fix this, you stupid rock, or I’m throwing you straight under the waterfall, where no one will ever find you again.”

“Wow,” he responded. “How old are you? Your voice is absolutely *dripping* with venom.”

“Old enough to have a good throwing arm,” she said.

“I see.” Grayson crossed his legs, looking deep in thought. “I *could* fix you up, but there’s a slight... problem.”

“What?” she muttered.

“Heh heh, sorry,” Grayson said. “It’s hard to take you seriously, looking like –”

“Just tell me!” Sarah hissed through gritted teeth.

“I’ll need your brother to listen in. Do you mind getting his attention?”

Without a moment’s hesitation, Sarah ran over to Steven and punched him in the stomach, not hard enough to hurt him but not soft enough that he could ignore it.

“Ow…” he mumbled, rubbing his tummy like he rubbed Fuzzybottom’s tummy.

“Now that I have your ear, allow me to provide the problem and the solution,” Grayson said, clearing his throat again. “The problem: I can’t seem to remember what Sarah looks like without her, ah, new face.”

“There’s no way you forgot so quickly, you liar!” Sarah yelled.

“The solution,” Grayson continued, “is Steven.”

Steven’s mouth fell open. “Me? What can I do? All I know how to do is draw.”

Grayson snapped his fingers. “There’s the rub, my friend.”

“Huh?”

“Oh, my apologies,” Grayson said, looking past his easel. “What year is it?”

“2020,” Steven answered.

“Ah. I’ll keep that in mind when using expressions, then.”

“I don’t really know what you’re talking about,” Sarah said in a sweet voice, “but I’m starting to lose my patience, rock.”

Grayson laughed, almost dropping his paintbrush. “My, my, you’re a plucky one. Have no fear, dear Sarah. As I said, Steven can fix you up in a jiffy.” He paused, reconsidering. “You *do* use ‘in a jiffy’ in 2020, don’t you?”

“Not often,” Sarah answered, “but we know what it means, don’t we, Steven?”

“It means really fast!” he said, shooting his arm forward like a rocket ship. He thought drawing outer space later might be fun.

Sarah rolled her eyes. “Are you *sure* my brother can fix me?”

“Positive,” Grayson said. “All he has to do is put me in his pocket and draw a picture of you.”

Steven paused in the middle of his mini rocket ship adventure. “I... don’t understand.”

“Think of it this way, Steven. Remember earlier, when –”

Suddenly, Sarah’s phone began ringing. “Hold that thought. My mom’s calling. Hello? Hi, Mom. No, we’re okay. We’re in the forest by the school. I’m showing Steven a cool waterfall me and my friends found last week. Yeah! It’s really cool. Don’t worry, we’ll be home before dinner. Yes, Steven’s okay. Anyway, Mom, gotta go. We were in the middle of a conversation with a talking rock when you called. No, really! Love you. Bye.” She tucked her phone away in her pocket. “Now, where were we?”

“Might I ask again how old you are, Sarah?” Grayson asked. “I’m truly in awe of how mature you sounded on the phone with your mother.”

“Start talking, or I start throwing.”

“Understood,” Grayson said, clearing his throat again. Steven figured it was probably a habit of his. “As I was saying, Steven. Remember when I painted the picture of your sister as a clown earlier?”

“I remember,” Steven said.

Grayson lifted his eyebrows expectantly, but when Steven said nothing further, he continued. “Well, what happened after my painting was done?”

“I... started laughing?”



“Yes, yes!” Grayson said, smiling. “But what – or who, rather – were you laughing at?”

“Sarah. She looked just like the picture you made.”

“Precisely,” Grayson said, clapping. “So, what’s the final piece of the puzzle?”

“What puzzle?” Steven asked. Grayson had been funny earlier, but now he was being confusing. Why couldn’t he just tell them the answer to fixing Sarah?

Sarah herself was the one who responded. “Whatever you paint happens in the real world. Isn’t that right, Grayson?”

“Exactly right, Sarah. And by putting me in your pocket, Steven,” Grayson said, “you gain my power. You of course know what your own sister looks like without her clownish new look, so all you need to do is draw her while I’m in your pocket! I –”

Sarah stuffed the stone in Steven’s pocket. “Chop chop, mister. I have dignity to maintain.”

Steven shrugged, happy for any excuse to draw again. He flipped the page of his sketchbook, his nearly complete waterfall sketch saved for later, and began working his pencils across the page.

He’d drawn Sarah so often in the past that he didn’t need to look at her to know what to draw. If he did look at her, he’d start laughing again, anyway. He knew he wouldn’t, though, because drawing meant focus, and focus meant getting the job done.

Less than 10 minutes later, the drawing was complete. And after the same flash of light as before, Sarah was back to normal.

“I’m kinda going to miss your clown face, Sarah,” Steven said. She slapped his shoulder playfully, laughing. He took the blue stone from his pocket. “So... can I keep using you, Grayson?”

“Of course!” the man on the stone said happily. “I was hoping you’d ask.”

“Great! I think it’ll be easier to make friends if I have you around.”

“*Much* easier,” Grayson said, his voice suddenly dropping low and quiet. “I think –”

Just like earlier, Sarah snatched the stone from Steven. “Hey! Give him back, Sarah!”

“No!” she said. “Don’t you see what he’s trying to do?”

“What I’m trying to do?” Grayson said, voice normal again. “I’m trying to make your brother more popular with his classmates, that’s all.”

“Yeah. That’s all.” She leaned into a throwing stance, gripping Grayson tightly.

“Sarah, stop!” Steven tried taking the stone back, but Sarah was too quick. “Why are you doing this?”

“Because I’m tired of people taking advantage of you, Steven!” she screamed, tears falling down her face. Bad at reading people’s emotions or not, crying was a pretty clear sign of sadness. He just didn’t understand what she was so upset about.

“My dear,” Grayson said, “Steven would be the one taking advantage of *them*, not the other way around! If they want ice cream, he could make it for them. If they want a puppy, he could do that, too. Anything their little hearts desire! He’d be king of the castle!”

“See, Sarah?” Steven crossed his arms. “Grayson just wants to help me out. He’s my friend.”

Sarah nodded. “Okay, then. Let me ask you something, rock.”

“I’m all ears, young lady,” the artist said, crossing his arms.

“What’s in it for you?”

Grayson paused. “Well... Steven’s happiness is my happiness!”

“Even though we all just met?”

“I haven’t known you two for long, but I can tell you’re upstanding children. Steven especially!”

“See, Sarah?” Steven picked up his sketchbook, smiling at his drawing of the waterfall. With Steven in his pocket, he could make the waterfall appear wherever he wanted. Everyone would be *so* impressed. “I’m gonna make friends this way!”

“Not real friends,” Sarah said. “Only people who want what you have.” She took her brother’s hand, smiling. “Who are you going to trust, Stevie?” That’s a nickname she hadn’t used in a long time, Steven realized. “A talking rock, or your sister?”

“Don’t listen to her, Steven,” Grayson cut in. “She doesn’t even want to walk home with you every day. She brought you here so she could leave you alone in the forest, lost.”

“What?!” Steven said. “Sarah!”

Steven fully expected Sarah to yell at him, but she was surprisingly calm. “That’s not true.” She turned to Grayson. “I love my brother. He’s annoying sometimes, and I don’t really get some of the things he does...” She looked back at him, her smiling growing wider as more tears fell. “But our mom told me I have to watch over him, even though I’m younger.”

Steven was as confused as he’d been when he first started learning how to draw, but his love for art had carried him through those days. Here, now, he felt an even greater love for his sister. Something was wrong with what Grayson was trying to do. He didn’t really understand what it was, but he understood that his sister loved him, and Grayson... didn’t. Fellow artist or not, Grayson could never replace Steven’s love for and trust in his sister.

Slowly but surely, Steven took the rock from Sarah’s hand.

“Now, Steven,” Grayson said, “think about what you’re doing...”

His throwing arm wasn’t as strong as Sarah’s, but the waterfall was close enough.

“Steven... Steven!” Grayson shouted. “I can make you and your classmates’ dreams come true! They’ll be the best friends you ever had, I promise!”

Steven looked Grayson right in the eye. “The only friend I need is right here,” he said, pointing at Sarah with his free hand.

And with that, Steven let loose the magical stone, tossing it like his life depended on it. Grayson screamed as he soared through the air, the sound cut off upon contact with the waterfall.

The siblings shared a tight hug before packing their things in silence. No more words needed to be said.

Just before they began walking the rest of the way home, Steven pulled out his sketchpad one last time.

“What’s up?” Sarah asked.

“Give me... one... minute...” he said, pencil flying across the paper. “There. All done.”

“Let me see!”

Steven turned the sketchpad around, revealing a picture of Sarah in a full clown outfit.

“Really?” she said. “You little...” Before she came up with a fresh insult, she burst out laughing, much like Steven himself had earlier.

He couldn’t help but join in her laughter. He might never truly understand what’d happened today, but as long as he could laugh with Sarah, nothing else mattered.