

The Night Before Camp

Maya had long springy curls, and her sister Kim had straight shiny hair. Every morning, Gran brushed their hair on the back steps and tied it with neat ribbons. Maya was ten and had lately been trusted to tie her own bow, while Kim still wriggled and let the ends flap about.

Tomorrow Maya would leave for a whole term at Forestview Camp. Gran had sewn her name on socks, labeled her torch, and tucked a surprise oat slice into the top of her trunk. After supper Maya slipped outside with a fistful of garden flowers, violets, rosemary, and three brave daisies, and wondered how to make them into a proper bouquet.

The only string she could find was Kim's kite line, and Kim would howl if that went missing. On her cardigan there was a blue prize ribbon from last month's school sports. Maya touched it.

She loved how it shone, but she loved Gran more. Quick as a blink, she snipped off the ribbon near the badge, wrapped it round the stems, and tied a tidy bow. Ben and Jo, the twins from next door, peeped through the fence and burst out laughing.

"Maya, you have chopped your badge," they squeaked, giggling as if a magician had pulled the moon from his sleeve. Kim came back from the shed with a reel of thread and stopped short. "Oh, Maya," she said, already teary.

Maya did not go inside. Hiding beside the kitchen window, she tossed the bouquet so it would land on Gran's lap while Gran mended socks. But Gran had just dropped her needle and was straightening her back when the flowers thumped her hat.

She flinched, felt for what had struck her, and, smiling, guessed who had thrown the peace offering. Then she saw the blue ribbon tied

round the stems, and her smile faded. "Maya, come here, at once." Maya shuffled in, chin high.

If Gran was pleased, she would surely ask Kim to put the flowers in water. A thank you would have made Maya shrivel. But the sound of Gran's voice made her stubborn.

"You have been very thoughtless," said Gran. "Why did you cut your prize ribbon? If this were not your last night, I would send you to bed early.

I WILL not have you spoiling good things." Kim sniffed in the corner. "She meant to please you, Gran." "I know, Kim, but let me speak to Maya," said Gran, whose worry was really about the child going among strangers with a messy badge and unfinished cardigan. "Off you go now." Maya locked her bedroom door, something Gran never allowed, and flopped on the bed.

No one understood, and her cardigan looked a fright. Ben and Jo rattled the handle. Kim begged.

Even Mr Lee from next door offered a biscuit through the window. Maya stayed put. After a while, she opened the door a crack, took the piece of oat slice Kim had left on the mat, and cheered up.

If she combed her hair over one shoulder, the missing ribbon hardly showed. And being misunderstood made you feel different in a not entirely awful way. Later, Gran smiled to herself, a small and stern smile, and before locking up for the night, she slipped the blue ribbon into the tin where she kept treasures, buttons, birthday candles, and two tiny teeth.