



Movement One

movement = "principal division or section of a composition"

Nine months isn't long enough to form an attachment to four walls. I stand in the doorway of my soon-to-be ex-room, the room that saved me from aging out into the streets, yet I'm as bare as my sheetless bed and empty desk.

This room will save a new system kid now. Another room waits for me in Harmony Hall.

A tingle slides down my arms, like when I play Violin for over three hours straight.

I'm almost out.

I grab my packed trash bag—stuffed with minimal clothes, generic-brand toiletries, and faded lavender bedding—pick up Violin, and shut the door. The bag thuds down the stairs behind me, sounding the alarm of my nearing departure.

The other Borns College freshmen must have suitcases and

storage tubs filled with high thread count sheets, cotton-microfiber towels, saxony plush rugs, and other college must-buys from Target I couldn't afford. My college shopping list consisted of five items, in order of importance: a jumbo box of tampons, a value pack of toothbrushes, a five-subject notebook, and the cheapest ballpoint pens I could find. Most of my spending money went to the tampons. No surprise.

My savings went to Violin and not a laptop for school. Reasoning: students can check out laptops from the library, and multiple academic buildings have computer labs. Plus, I have a smartphone. People write manuscripts and screenplays and business proposals on their phones, so I can manage some ten-page papers on mine.

Music majors prioritize their instruments.

Though I bought my Model 400 D Z Strad Violin at a legit music store in town as an early graduation present, I couldn't afford its case—the one with the purple velvet lining that snuggled my violin. Violin cost \$1,250, warranty and case not included. My stack of one-, five-, and ten-dollar bills—which I'd saved since I was eleven—dwindled to \$85 the second the cash register dinged. My saving grace, the bulky case I found at a pawnshop, has matted gray faux fur and is covered in scratches—a few of which I hid with a giant “wtf” sticker. Violin swims in the extra space. But I could afford it and, hey, it's better than no case at all.

At the bottom of the stairs, I dump the trash bag at the front door and place Violin beside it.

Violin: *No way you're leaving me out here.*

Don't you trust me? I wouldn't dare.

I bought Violin, as opposed to the other fancy violins in the store, for two reasons. Reason #1: It played smoother than the

others and smoother than my past rented violins. Reason #2: It spoke to me—and not as in a cliché. As in, its thoughts were—*are*—my thoughts. As in, it’s a part of me.

Did it freak me out at first? Of course.

Would I trade Violin for the world? Absolutely not.

Have I told another human this? Hell no.

Violin’s my family now. My *only* family. Having its voice—my voice?—comforts me on the hard days. Days like today, when my life is upturning yet again, though for the best of reasons.

I open the entryway closet to a pile of shoes. Some belong to feet that left them behind on their way to permanent homes. The owner of the princess light-up shoes left three months ago.

Part of me wonders why my fosters, Tom and Kathryn Wells, hold on to all these forgotten shoes. The other part of me figures they don’t have time to donate them. They’re busy enough as it is with their jobs. Tom’s Store Manager at Barnes & Noble, and Kathryn’s the Director of Corporate Giving at a nonprofit women’s clinic downtown. Keeping up with me and the other foster kids is a full-time job in itself. Or maybe they keep the shoes because of their revolving door of foster kids, hoping they find new wearers one day.

I toss the shoes into the pile by the door to make room for my trash bag and Violin in the closet. Can’t be too careful in a house full of system kids.

Better?

Violin: *You’re so good to me.*

True. But you’re better to me.

On my way through the living room to the kitchen, I step onto quick pain.

“Dammit.”

A plastic T-Rex roars as if injured on the carpet. I grip my

bare foot, and once the sting subsides, I kick the dinosaur toward the bin full of chipped plastic toys. The other foster kids never pick up their shit. They never take out the trash either—the stench of trash reaches my nose before I reach the kitchen.

Without referring to directions on the pancake mix box, I run through my mental list of ingredients and gather the goods on the peninsula.

First and foremost: maple syrup? (No point making pancakes if we don't have syrup.) *Check.*

Milk? *Check.*

Eggs and lots of butter? *Check, check.*

Vanilla extract? *Check.*

Baking spice? *Check.*

Mixing bowl and spoon? *Check and check.*

One of the other foster kids, Steven, shuffles to a stool in baggy pajamas as I stir the milk lake into the dry mixture. He crosses his scrawny arms and rests his head on the laminate countertop. His usual pale cheeks have a touch of pink from playing outside yesterday.

“Who’s gonna make Saturday pancakes now?”

No wonder he wakes up at the first clinks and clanks of pans from the kitchen. He started his last year of middle school a week ago, but he looks like he started his first on account of his thin frame. He’s still catching up from the pre-foster-care months he went without much food. Plus, the boy burns through calories from unabashed yearning for his mom. What he does eat and doesn’t hoard, that is.

Sloppy batter sizzles. I shrug. We both know Kathryn won’t carry on my tradition.

“My mom will when they let me go back.” His expecting sunken eyes zero in on me for consolation, as I flip the golden-

brown pancake onto its goopy side.

What I think: *Well, she can't buy pancake mix without a job, and she can't make pancakes without a kitchen.*

What I say: "You'll be together again. She'll get back on her feet." Which is sure as hell not happening soon.

Steven closes his eyes, and I flip another pancake on the griddle. The sweet, buttery stack soon grows to tower above his head. His shoulders twitch with a quick snore, and a dribble of drool lands on his hand. As I turn off the heat, the front door opens and bangs shut, and he bolts upright.

The shrine of shoes I built to past foster kid's feet clunk, clunk, clunk collapses into the entryway.

Kathryn, back from her daily morning run, huffs as she fills a glass at the sink. Sweat drips down her forehead and dampens her shirt, leaving dark horizontal lines across her stomach and shadows beneath her armpits. Her drenched blonde hair looks as if she stepped out of the shower, but the smell of her BO tells me otherwise.

She doesn't mention the shoes.

Both Kathryn and Tom are more oblivious than parental: Kathryn's spandex tank tops constrict her indifferent heart, and Tom's books get more face time than us foster kids. As far as foster houses go, though, theirs isn't a horrible place to come back to for college-recognized holidays and summer vacation. Perks of extended foster care.

Kathryn gulps down the last of the water. "I meant to make breakfast for you, Coralee." Her voice lacks emotion either from her ten-plus-mile run or insincerity. Maybe both.

"No worries. Can't skip my breakfast routine on my last Saturday here." Steven's shoulders straighten with pancake panic, so I add, "For a while."

He slumps back onto the counter, slightly more relaxed. I roll my eyes and bring the syrup and plates to the table. Without warning, my chest tightens.

Maybe it's not just the pancakes he'll miss when I'm gone. Maybe he'll miss me.

A gruff voice yells, "Shit!" from the living room, as the dinosaur roars again.

Guess I didn't kick that damned toy as far as I thought. And I guess I need to lecture the younger kids about not cursing again. I've given the same lecture to countless foster kids:

Me: "We don't have the luxury of cursing. We don't have the luxury of messing up, being human. So, stop!"
claps hands for emphasis

Them: *bottom lips quiver* "That's way harsh, don't you think?"

Me: "I'm not harsh, the system is harsh! Foster parents can get rid of you for a lot less than cursing. And I've learned the hard way so you won't have to."

Them: *eyes well up with tears*

Me: "And you better not forget."

Them: *nod through sobs*

Me: "Good. I'm going to go make us pancakes now."
pat them on head

I cringe as Kathryn shouts, “Zeke, language!” but she heads upstairs without further comment for a much-needed shower. She and Tom haven’t kicked out any foster kids—or not that I know of.

Zeke Gamble, the oldest besides me, slumps onto a stool next to Steven with a notebook tucked to his side. He carries it everywhere, constantly scribbling, but slams it shut whenever anyone’s eyes drift its way.

With his deep voice, strong jawline, and now acne-free brown skin, Zeke looks like the star high school senior. Except he won’t win homecoming king anytime soon, on account of his reserved—indignant, even—demeanor and multiple detentions. He doesn’t seem to have friends either. On the weekends, he locks himself in his room and won’t resurface till Monday morning.

Aside from Saturday pancakes, of course.

I like Zeke, though I don’t know basic information about him. Not his favorite color or his subject in school, his hobbies, or why he’s in foster care.

Foster Kid Rule #1

Don’t ask other kids why they’re in foster care.

Teachers ask. Classmates ask. Strangers ask. They ask because they don’t know the pain in answering. The conversations go like this:

Them: “Why are you in foster care?” *lean close like about to hear a secret*

Me: “Um, my parents didn’t want me. Or couldn’t take

me. I wouldn't know. I've never met or talked to them. But thanks for the reminder."

Them: *stare with a blank expression*

Only Tom and Kathryn know Zeke's story. Because of Foster Kid Rule #1, I don't ask. His story isn't my business.

Steven, however, made his story my business the day we met, the day I arrived at the Wells' house. I had yet to set down my trash bag before he waltzed inside my new room with an unopened Juicy Juice.

"My mom got laid off, and we lost our house. One of our neighbors reported her. Found out we were living on the street. Here." He handed me the juice box. "This one's fruit punch. My favorite's kiwi strawberry," which he then pulled out of his back pocket and stuck in a straw. "I'm Steven Hart, by the way."

"Coralee Reed." I followed his example and took a sip.

Fruit punch wasn't my favorite either.

I gulped the drink until splutters remained, then offered, "Lifelong system kid."

He didn't respond. The only evidence he heard me was his arms hugging his sides. On the way out, though, he looked over his shoulder with a grin that didn't carry a trace of pity. No one had smiled at me like that in a long time.

Another juice box poked out of his pocket.

Since then, my mission remains to make him smile as often as possible. The easiest way is with food, hence our Saturday pancake tradition.

I carry the pancakes to the long kitchen table, followed by Zeke and Steven, who both find seats nearest to the plate. Tom already sits at the head of the table reading a romance novel with

Camila Garcia, the youngest of us fosters, in her rainbow-heart-patterned pajamas on his lap.

She has tiny feet for being eleven years old. They'd fit in those light-up shoes.

Our entire neighborhood knows Camila's story. Her stepdad got busted for dealing, and the system split up her and her little sister Nicole until after the trial, after their mom can prove a stable home environment. Tom and Kathryn take her for her sibling visit every month, but a month is a long time to be separated from her six-year-old sister. Camila runs away to find Nicole on the other side of town every other month on average, so neighbors on our block stand on 24/7 lookout duty. It takes a village, or in this case, a subdivision. Her sense of direction always impresses me—she's almost reached Nicole's foster house a couple times.

Tom likes for us all to be at the table before we start eating, but the smell of butter and maple proves too strong. We snatch the pancakes, but I save the last two for Kathryn. When she does join us—this time without her sweat—she ruins them by forgoing the maple syrup and spreading organic almond butter on them instead.

Before she takes her first nutty bite, Kathryn says, “The whole band wanted to give you a little something, Coralee.” She winks at me and slides an envelope across the table.

Steam from my pancakes warms my face. I tuck the envelop on my lap to open it with a smidgen more privacy and pull out a purple construction paper card with Tom's all-caps handwriting on the front:

WE'LL MISS YOU

Not only did they remember my favorite color, but they wrote notes—even Zeke—and Tom and Kathryn stuffed three hundred dollars inside. I shove the money into my duct tape wallet (Steven made it for me in a Home-Ec class) before they change their minds, but also to distract from the building pressure behind my eyes.

Moments like this, when they do more than what the system demands, my heart begs to give Tom and Kathryn more credit. After all, thanks to them, I'm going to Borns College.

When they found out their new foster kid played the violin, they bought tickets to the Borns String Orchestra's winter concert. I'd been at their house for a week. Tom brought me early to look around campus, a fifteen-minute drive from their house. We could walk from one end of campus to the other in under ten minutes; people held doors open for us to each building we managed to peek inside; and when the auditorium dimmed, the audience fell silent, the director raised his arms, the first-chair violinist raised her violin to her shoulder, and her bow raced across her strings in the most precise yet ethereal solo I've heard performed live.

She played without fault. She demanded attention with each perfect note.

The applause rings in my head nine months later.

"Aren't you gonna read it?" Steven squirms in his chair, unable to contain himself any longer.

What I think: *Not with you staring.*

What I say: "I'll read it when I need it. Like if I'm super nervous before a test or audition or something."

I turn to Tom and Kathryn. "Thank you both. That was really generous."

"Of course." Tom snuffles before dabbing syrup off of

Camila's face with a cloth napkin. She doesn't stop eating, though, and more syrup drips to her chin to replace the last. "You deserve it."

"This and more," Kathryn says. "And you don't have to wait to read the card. You know you can call us, no matter what or what time is. We'll be there."

"I know."

I tuck the card back inside the envelope to avoid her eyes.