

BIRCHES

BY MARGARET NEVINSKI

Becca read the slip of paper for the third time:

Grade 6 Community Project

Student: Rebecca Stevenson

Assigned To: Olivia Browne Age: 95

Place: St. Hildegard's Senior Care Facility

Hobbies of Assigned Person: Colors and Words

“Why me?” Becca muttered. A ninety-five-year-old who liked colors and words? She sounded like a preschooler. Becca loved preschoolers, but not when they were practically a hundred.

The bell rang for the start of winter break. Becca hopped up, pulled down her purple T-shirt with “Are We There Yet?” spelled out in sparkles, and shoved her books into her backpack. Everyone in class talked at once.

Ms. Day's voice chimed over the noise. “Be polite on your visits,” she called out. “Remember, you're representing our school.”

“Who'd you get, Becca?”

Becca whirled around to see T.J. “You first,” she told her best friend.

T.J. read, “Gracie Anderson, Age 74. Hobbies:

Grandchildren, Knitting, Flowers.” She looked up. “I bet she's sweet.”

“Check mine out,” Becca said, handing her the slip.

“Ninety-five?” T.J. said. “Wow.”

“No kidding, wow. She's ancient,” Becca said.

She frowned, edging her way behind T.J. through the crowded hallway. She hated the Community Project, which Ms. Day said would “put them in touch with their diverse community.” Becca's section got stuck with St. Hill's across from school, while the other section got the maternity ward at the hospital. Becca loved babies, and she was sick of old people.

Everyone in her life was old.

Mom was forty-four when she had Becca. Now that Becca was twelve, Mom was too tired from work to do normal mom stuff like go to the mall. Dad lounged in his plaid recliner and said his knees were too shot to kick a soccer ball around. And when Becca's grandparents visited, they watched black-and-white movies on PBS, which was kind of cool except that they fell asleep on the couch with the TV blaring. It made Becca want to scream.

Even Dandelion, their French poodle, was old.

When Becca walked him, Dandelion hobbled on stiff legs and took forever to sniff his favorite patch of sidewalk.

Becca slammed her locker shut and headed down the school steps with T.J. The December air cooled her warm cheeks. “Let’s go to your house,” Becca said.

When they reached T.J.’s, they yanked off their boots and padded to the kitchen in their socks. Newspapers sat on the chairs, and baskets of clothes waited to be folded. The radio played a jazzy version of “Jingle Bells.” At the table, T.J.’s little brother focused on his video game.

“Hi, girls,” T.J.’s mom said. One hand patted her pregnant belly while the other stirred a pot of noodles. The baby was due in three weeks, and T.J.’s parents didn’t want to know beforehand if it was a boy or girl. Becca couldn’t wait to hold the newborn with its talcum smell. Why did T.J. get all the luck? No chance for Mom to have another baby.

After gobbling some granola bars, they went to T.J.’s room, where they pulled out their Community Project slips. Olivia Browne. Age 95.

“Should we take them a present?” Becca asked. “My mom does when she visits Great-Aunt Agnes.”

“I got it,” T.J. said. She dug around in her dresser. “One of my relatives gave me these. Don’t know what for.” She held up two white handkerchiefs. “Olivia Browne can have one. I’ll give the other to Gracie Anderson.”

Becca took the stiff hanky that smelled like starch. “I don’t know. It says she likes color, and these are kind of—white.”

“Old ladies like hankies,” T.J. said. “Besides, what else can you give her?”

Good question. What did you give someone whose hobbies were colors and words? A box of crayons and flashcards?

T.J. poked around in her desk and handed Becca a white envelope.

“Let’s go to St. Hill’s tomorrow,” Becca said. She stuffed the hanky into the envelope. “May as well get it over with.”

* * *

The following morning, Becca poured milk over her Corn Pops and plopped down across from Mom and Dad munching their bran flakes. Dandelion tottered in and parked himself next to the heating vent. On the oldies station, a guy crooned “White Christmas.”

Becca told Mom and Dad about Olivia Browne.

“Sounds interesting,” Dad said. “I bet she’s seen a lot in her life. She was born during the flapper era.”

Great. Whatever that was.

Dad glanced out the window. “Don’t stay out long, Becca. It’s supposed to get much colder this afternoon.”

“Okay, Dad.” It was kind of sweet, the way they worried about the cold.

“Don’t forget your thermal gloves,” Mom added.

Sigh. “I’m not walking to Antarctica,” she reminded them.

After sticking the gloves in her pocket, Becca trudged down the street to T.J.’s. She kicked through the snow, light as the powdered sugar on Grandma’s pinwheel Christmas cookies. Mmmm, Becca could almost smell them. The holiday was less than a week away.

T.J. waited on her front step. Her ponytail poked out from a red wool cap. She jumped up, and she and Becca raced the three blocks to St. Hill’s, tossing snowballs and cutting through the park.

In front of the care facility they brushed snow off their parkas. Becca’s legs felt suddenly wooden, like the tree trunks in the park. What would she talk about with Olivia Browne?

“Let’s go,” T.J. said.

The glass doors opened with a whoosh. A fake-flower scent hit Becca's nose. Beneath that were Lysol and an old-people smell, like cabbage. Becca's boots squeaked on the tiled floor. She and T.J. signed in at the front desk, and an aide in a green smock took T.J. to Gracie Anderson.

"Good luck," Becca said, her entire body feeling wooden now. She shook off her parka and stood, not knowing if she was supposed to sit.

Old men and women slumped in wheelchairs along the walls, which were covered with pictures of kittens in watering cans. Some people dozed, their chins bobbing off their chests. Others shuffled down the hall with metal walkers. Becca breathed through her mouth.

"Rebecca?"

A tall nursing aide stood before her. "I'm Stephanie," she said flashing a smile.

"Hi."

"Miss Olivia's the oldest person here," Stephanie said as they walked.

"No kidding," Becca said.

"Your school project is great," Stephanie said. "Lots of these folks don't get many visitors. Miss Olivia, for example. Here she is."

Becca stepped into a tiny room. A narrow bed took up most of the space. Paintings—real paintings, not kittens in watering cans—covered the walls. Stacks of books filled two cases.

"Your visitor's here," Stephanie said.

"Come in. Welcome," said a small woman in a chair. Becca hadn't seen her next to the window. The woman wore blue-tinted glasses, navy sweatpants, and a bright blue sweatshirt. Her short, white hair was cut with bangs, and her

skin was like paper that had been wadded up and unfolded.

"Hi," Becca said edging closer.

"You must be Rebecca Stevenson. I'm Olivia Browne."

"Hi," Becca said again. Should she tell Miss Olivia that everyone called her Becca? Somehow

Rebecca seemed right here, more formal. Not that Miss Olivia was formal, exactly. But the room was elegant, like a tiny museum in a sea of Walmarts.

"I see you two don't need introductions," Stephanie

said and left.

"I'm sorry I don't have a chair," Miss Olivia said. "Will the bed do?"

"Sure." Becca walked across the tile and plopped onto a blanket the color of robins' eggs. Now what? Be polite, Ms. Day had said.

"You must like blue."

"I adore blue," Miss Olivia said. She drew out the word "adore." Her voice was strong and clear for someone so old and small. "Blue reminds me of the outdoors. The expanse of the sky. The wetness of the sea. Oh, how I miss it." She gazed straight ahead, as if the ocean was across the room.

"Don't they let you outside?" Becca asked.

"They wheel us out when the temperature is precisely seventy-five degrees. I miss the extremes. Hot. Cold. Fire. Ice. Love. Death. All elements of life."

Becca swallowed. No one she knew talked like that.

"Do you know Robert Frost?" Miss Olivia asked.

"Um, is he a writer?" Becca glanced at the bookcases. Art books, they looked like, with long,

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hyphenated names on the spines.

“A poet. ‘Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening,’” Miss Olivia said. “Listen.” Her voice lowered. “‘The only other sound’s the sweep, of easy wind and downy flake.’ Don’t you love how the word ‘sweep’ sweeps? Lovely. How I miss

maybe snow wasn’t always white. Becca leaned closer. The house seemed to be asleep. An upstairs window glowed with a dim yellow light—a small lamp? Maybe the family was up with a newborn.

The next painting was of birch trees. Twelve trunks (she counted) stood in a grove. The trunks



Erin Fulton

being out in the snow. So alive, so full of color.”

Snow, alive? And it was white the last time Becca checked.

What else to talk about? The flapper era? Miss Olivia seemed more interested in things that were living.

“Can I look at your pictures?” Becca asked.

Miss Olivia smiled. “That would give me great pleasure.”

Becca stood. A small painting next to the light switch showed a house in a snowy field. The house was surrounded by a violet sky, and purple shadows rimmed the edges of snow. Hmmm,

weren’t white either, as Becca expected, but gray, brown, black, and even pink. Fuzzy bumps of green dotted the bark.

Becca squinted. The letters “O. Browne” appeared at the bottom of the painting. The house painting had the same.

“You painted these!” Becca said. Miss Olivia was a real, live artist—the first she’d ever met.

“Which painting were you scrutinizing?”

“The birches,” Becca said.

“Oh, I remember the light that morning,” Miss Olivia said. “It was very early. Clear, winter light, like a dream of winter.”

A dream of winter. Becca let the words play in her mind.

“Have you seen the birch grove?” Miss Olivia said. “It’s in the park next to St. Hildegard’s.”

“It is?” Becca had been playing in the park all her life, but she’d never stopped to look at a bunch of birch trees.

“The branches must be layered with snow,” Miss Olivia said. “Soon the sun’s warmth makes them shed crystal shells.”

“Huh?” Becca said.

“Robert Frost again,” Miss Olivia said. “He seems to be on my mind today.”

Becca’s eyes flickered to the window, which faced the brown brick of her school. Miss Olivia didn’t get to see birch trees or crystals from here.

“Do you read poetry?” Miss Olivia asked.

“Not much,” Becca said. She told Miss Olivia about a funny poet they read in fourth grade. Then they sat in silence, but it was a good kind of silence.

Miss Olivia held her hands in her lap. Maybe she was thinking about winter dreams, or crystal shells. Maybe artists like Miss Olivia didn’t think about normal things like lunch and shopping and clothes.

Stephanie poked her head in. “Your friend’s waiting, Rebecca.”

Becca turned to Miss Olivia. “Bye. I had a good time.”

Miss Olivia held her hand straight out, and Becca shook it. Dry, papery skin, the scent of talcum.

“Good-bye, Rebecca. I hope we meet again.”

Be polite. “Um, me too.”

Out on the sidewalk, T.J. asked, “How’d she like the hanky? Gracie Anderson loved it, told me all about her grandkids. Guess what? One has the same birthday as me.”

Becca had forgotten about the hanky. She’d forgotten to ask Miss Olivia about her hobbies, too. But “colors and words” made sense now.

* * *

Over the next few days, Becca scoured the mall with T.J. for Christmas presents they could afford. What to buy Dad and Mom? Something to give them energy. Barbells to build up Dad’s muscles. A book on Pilates for Mom.

“Get real,” T.J. said. “Your dad’s not gonna lift weights in a million years. And your Mom doing Pilates?”

“You’re right,” Becca said. Mom never had time to cook, so she got her Gourmet Meals in Five Minutes, and picked out a plaid tie for Dad to go with his chair. With the last of her money, she bought T.J.’s little brother-or-sister-to-be a rattle. Pink or blue? She closed her eyes and picked. Blue.

The color made her throat tight. What kind of Christmas would Miss Olivia have? Would they serve a special meal? Would there be a Christmas tree? Becca stuffed the thoughts deep inside her. Stephanie was nice. She’d make sure the old people celebrated.

Two days before Christmas, Becca’s skin prickled with excitement. Even Dandelion seemed perkier with a red bow around his neck.

On Christmas Eve morning, Becca woke in the grayish dark. Streetlight shadows striped her “Save the Earth” poster, and the digital clock glowed red. She wrapped herself in her down comforter. What had Miss Olivia said about winter morning light? Like a dream of winter.

She peered out the window. Frosty lace scratched the pane. Pale dawn light glimmered behind the trees—not light exactly, but the beginning of light. A brown rabbit hopped across the yard, its tail bouncing like a tossed snowball.

Miss Olivia’s words came to her. Hot. Cold. Fire. Ice. All elements of life. Becca could experience that herself, right now, before the sun came up.

She burrowed deeper under the comforter. So warm. So much better to stay right here.

Wimp, she told herself. You're acting like Mom and Dad.

She peered out again. Could she do it? "Ten... nine...eight..." she whispered, "seven...six... five...four...three...two...ONE!" She flung off the comforter and threw on her nearest clothes.

Downstairs, Becca slipped into her parka, scarf, hat, boots, and thermal gloves. "Shhh," she told Dandelion, who stood up and yawned. No sound from Mom and Dad's room. She tucked the key inside her pocket and eased open the back door.

The bitter air shocked her lungs. With her gloves, she scraped snow from the porch thermometer. Seventeen degrees. Slapping snow from her gloves, she maneuvered the icy sidewalks and headed for the park next to school and St. Hill's.

The park was deserted. Her boots crunched on the hard-packed snow, creating never-before-made footprints. Her breath escaped in quick puffs. A bright orange band shone at the horizon. A morning halo.

Becca headed straight for the center of the birch grove. The trunks circled her like twelve tall friends. Removing her right glove, she stepped up to one and touched it. Hard and solid. The bark, tinted yellow and pink by the halo of light, had the papery texture of Miss Olivia's hand. Fuzzy green bumps dotted the bark. Lichen, she realized. Like crusty, ancient sea creatures. Her fingers peeled off a strip of bark, which came off in curlicues. The bark underneath was baby's skin, smooth and brand-new.

Becca lay down in the snow and made an angel for each tree. Twelve birch angels. She glanced toward St. Hill's and the deck facing the park. It was empty.

The sun peeked over the halo. Time to go home.

Back at the house, the kitchen light was on. Through the window, Becca saw Dad holding his phone and Mom fussing with the belt of her pink robe. Both had bed hair, like they'd just woken up. Uh-oh. Their parent alarm must have gone off.

Becca turned the key in the lock.

"Becca!" Mom said rushing to her. "Where were you? We were just calling 911." Behind her, Dad lowered his phone. Dandelion barked.

"Nowhere," Becca said. "In the park."

"The park?" Mom's voice raised an octave. "Don't you realize how dangerous that is?"

"It wasn't dangerous!" Becca said.

"Sweetheart," Dad said, "you didn't even leave a note."

"I was just..." A picture sprang into her head: the twelve birch trees, and the never-before-made footprints in the snow.

"What?" Dad said.

"I had to see some trees."

"Trees?"

"Forget it." They'd never understand. Becca ran up to her room, Dad's voice echoing behind her about being grounded.

She stayed in her room all morning. After a silent lunch with Mom and Dad—not the good kind of silence—Becca threw wrapping paper around their gifts: the plaid tie for Dad and the cookbook for Mom. The spine poked out of the wrapping.

More images from the birch trees drifted into her mind. Pink and yellow. Crusty lichen. Air so crisp you could bite it. She had Miss Olivia to thank for that. What had Miss Olivia said? Sweeping snow and fire and ice. Becca's throat closed tight again. What was Miss Olivia doing for Christmas?

Miss Olivia's words came to her. Hot. Cold. Fire. Ice. All elements of life. Becca could experience that herself, right now, before the sun came up.

Becca tossed aside the wrapping paper and grabbed her sweatshirt.

She leaped down the stairs and stopped on the landing. She had to take something for Miss Olivia. The stiff, white handkerchief was all wrong. Miss Olivia liked snow, fire, and ice. Becca couldn't give her those. After getting Mom's permission to walk ONLY the three blocks to and from St. Hill's for a school project, Becca left empty-handed.

In the care facility, a different aide sat at the front desk. Becca told him why she was there, but the aide said, "Miss Olivia's napping."

"Oh." Becca picked the fuzz on her gloves. "Thanks."

On her way home she stopped at T.J.'s. "You won't believe my parents," she said. She told T.J. about Miss Olivia, the birch trees, and the curly bark.

"Brrrr," T.J. said. "You got up at dawn in the middle of winter, during break when we can sleep in, just to see some trees?"

"But—" Becca started. Never mind. Not even T.J., who always understood everything, understood why the birch trees were important.

* * *

At home, Grandma and Grandpa had arrived for Christmas Eve. Dad plugged in the white, sparkly tree lights, and after dinner the grown-ups talked about Great-Aunt Emma and Great-Uncle Jake. Becca was pretty sure they were dead. Dandelion stretched over the heating vent.

"Excited about Christmas?" Grandma asked. She handed Becca a plate of pinwheel cookies.

"Of course she is," Grandpa said, his bald head pink under the lights.

"Sure," Becca said. She kissed them all good night before Grandma and Grandpa turned on the TV to blaring levels. Upstairs, she buried herself under her comforter. Safe and warm. Soft. Yet something was wrong. It was Christmas Eve, and she didn't feel loving or giving.

She drifted into sleep, deep as the outside snow. A sound jolted her awake. Reindeer hooves? Right, Becca. She snorted at herself and sat up. Uneven buzzing. Grandpa snoring across the hall.

Otherwise, it was still. The digital clock glowed red, just like yesterday. The same time. The same striped shadows. The same lacy frost. And when she gazed out, the same pale light. A rabbit (was it the same one?) hopped across the snow. Only one thing was different: today was Christmas.

A brilliant idea flashed in her head. No counting backwards today. She had to hurry. She threw off her comforter.

Quiet, quiet. Becca tugged on her corduroy pants and hooded sweatshirt, then tiptoed down the stairs. Creak. She paused. Just Grandpa's buzzing and Dandelion's snores.

Parka, boots, scarf, hat, gloves. She scribbled a note and inched open the door.

It was Christmas morning and the world was silent.

At St. Hill's, she glimpsed through the locked glass door. Stephanie and another aide sat reading at the front desk. Becca tapped lightly, and Stephanie's head jerked up.

"It's Rebecca, right?" Stephanie said, holding open the door.

"Uh-huh. I want to give Miss Olivia a Christmas present."

"Now?"

Words tumbled out of Becca's mouth about her plan.

Stephanie grinned. "What a great idea. I'll see if she's awake. She's an early riser."

While Stephanie was gone, Becca read the plaque beneath the statue of St. Hildegard. She was a poet born in 1098. That was old. Did St. Hildegard know about sweeping snow?

Stephanie touched Becca's shoulder. "All set."

Miss Olivia sat in a wheelchair, wrapped in a blue blanket over a navy-blue coat. Her white bangs peeked out from a matching wool hat, which touched the frames of her blue-tinted glasses.

“I don’t want her to get cold,” Stephanie said.

Miss Olivia chuckled. “No chance of that. Let’s hurry.”

Becca wheeled Miss Olivia to the end of the hall. Stephanie opened the door onto the deck. “Knock when you want to come back in,” she said.

The deck faced east toward the park. Across the snow, the birch grove waited for morning. The air sparkled, touching the branches with silver. This was better than snow on Christmas morning.

“It’s like your painting of the birch trees,” Becca said.

“Could you describe what you see, Rebecca?”

“What?” Becca faced Miss Olivia, who stared straight ahead.

“My vision deserted me,” Miss Olivia said. “Several years ago. One of the unpleasant things about aging.”

Becca shifted on the ledge. “All your books...and paintings....” Her voice trailed into the frost.

“Ridiculous, isn’t it?” Miss Olivia said. “For the last few years I haven’t been able to paint. But I feel so much. The air, the light, I can sense it. This was my favorite time to paint. I came to love the dawn, even in winter.”

Becca’s cheeks burned in the cold. Miss Olivia couldn’t see, but she could see.

Miss Olivia’s laugh tinkled like a clear, sharp bell, as if she’d read Becca’s thoughts. “Now tell me about the birches. How are they like my painting?”

Becca described the trunks. The curly, textured bark. The baby skin underneath. The fuzzy lichen like sea creatures. The birch angels, with their blurred, snowy outlines.

She stopped. The sky colored from silver to crystal blue.

Hey,” Becca said, “Do you always wear blue?”

“Blue simplifies my life,” Miss Olivia said. “I never have to worry if I match.”

“Like my dad,” Becca said. “He loves plaid. Even his recliner.” In a rush, she told Miss Olivia about Mom, Dad, Dandelion, Grandma, and Grandpa. “They’re all old,” she added.

“Old? That makes me—”

Becca flushed. “You don’t seem old. You think about stuff.”

“I’m sure your parents think about stuff,” Miss Olivia said. “I bet they can surprise you. And you can surprise them.”

She could?

“Oh,” Becca said. She had her second brilliant idea of the day.

She wheeled Miss Olivia back inside, told her she’d visit soon, and raced all the way home. No key.

Becca peeked through the kitchen window. Dad patted Dandelion while Mom poured yellow batter into a bowl. Becca tap-tapped the window.

Mom’s mouth shifted to a frown. She unlocked the door with a click. “Becca! We saw your note, but we’re still—”

Becca flung her arms around Mom. “Merry Christmas.”

Dad came up, and Becca hugged him, too.

“What’s going on here?” Dad asked.

*Across the snow, the birch grove
waited for morning. The air sparkled,
touching the branches with silver.*

“Get dressed,” Becca said. “Hurry. I have to show you something.”

Mom’s eyes met Dad’s. “She’s your daughter,” their expressions said.

“Please?” Becca said.

In five minutes they were back, pulling on heavy jackets.

Outside Becca skipped ahead of Mom and Dad, down the snow-packed sidewalk and toward the park. She called back, “Hurry up, you guys.”

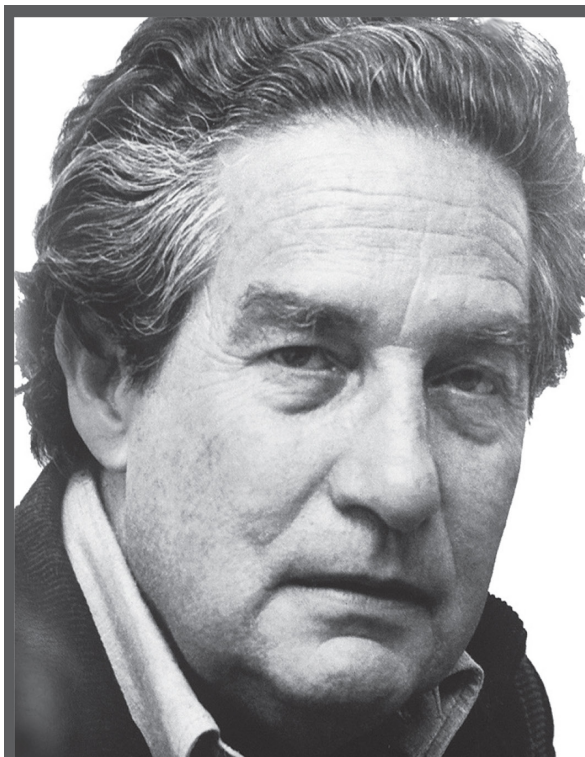
At T.J.’s house she stopped. When the baby was born, she’d get to visit the maternity ward after all. Becca kicked up a spray of snow, sending crystals all around.

Mom and Dad caught up. “What’s this all about?” Mom asked.

Becca linked her arms through theirs. What had Miss Olivia said? I bet they can surprise you. And you can surprise them.

“You’ll see,” Becca said, and led them to the birches. ∞

Margaret Nevinski received her MFA in Writing at Vermont College of Fine Arts. She lives on Bainbridge Island, Washington, where she writes, blogs, and teaches writing workshops for kids, teens, and adults. Her young adult story, “The Eve of St. Agnes,” appeared in *Hunger Mountain*. Visit Margaret at margaretnevinski.com.



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