

Matt ate his yogurt snack while he looked at his spelling words. His teacher gave him a list of new spelling words on green paper every Monday morning. On Monday afternoons, he looked at the words during his snack and then copied them as he sat on the floor in front of his mother and listened to his sister Angela's gymnastics class.

Now and then he looked up at the class. Some girls always seemed to be graceful, no matter what kind of event they were doing; some of them always seemed to be wobbly. And some of them, like his sister, were really good at their favorite things and wobbly at the other things. Matt liked watching the vaulting best.

"Center," Matt whispered to himself, flicking his eyes back to his spelling list. "C E N T E R." The vocabulary words this week all had soft-C in them. After a little while, he finished his yogurt snack, put the trash in the plastic bag in his Mom's canvas bag, and started copying the spelling words. He finished by the time Angela was running off the mat to pull on sweatpants, socks, and sneakers and his mom was folding up her cell phone. Dropping his spelling and pencil into his backpack, Matt followed his mother out to the lobby where Angela joined them and they trooped to the car.

He used the hand sanitizer in the car so he wouldn't get his teacher's piano sticky. His lesson came next, while Angela listened and probably did homework. His piano lesson was his favorite activity of the week. Matt loved the way that his fingers learned where to go. At first each part of a new piece was reading the notes one at a time and finding the right keys, one at a time. After practice at home, though, certain notes just automatically followed each other; first maybe three notes in a row, then the left hand at the same time, then a whole measure and finally the phrases of music, that his hands just put together naturally. His hands would play each phrase while he paid attention to how he wanted that phrase to sound, soft or loud, crisp or smooth. Piano was definitely his coolest thing.

On his way back to the car, he passed his friend Jim, whose sister was the next piano student. "Hey, Matt!" said Jim. "Want to come over tomorrow? I built the coolest thing in my back yard!" Jim had a really big back yard with a stream.

Matt looked at his mother, "Can I, Mom?"

Mom shook her head, "I'm sorry, Matt, but Art Club is tomorrow, remember? Thanks for asking, Jimmy, how about another time?" Matt and Jim shrugged at each other. Mothers did things like that, sign you up for Art Club and call you Jimmy.

Matt hadn't remembered about Art Club. He hadn't managed to memorize his new schedule since it was only the beginning of the school year. And Art Club wasn't exactly his choice. But he had to do something while Mom drove Angela and her three friends to ballet class on Tuesdays.

Matt stared out his car window wishing that he knew what Jim had built in his back yard. The sun was sinking lower and the slanted light made the yellow birch leaves look like gold. It was so pretty that he pointed and turned to show Angela, but she had pulled her jacket over herself and fallen asleep with her face scrunched against her door.

By the time they got home, their Dad was home with Diana. Her junior high school was on his way home from work, so he picked her up after her activities. Diana was kind of a know-it-all and a grump, but Mom said that was just junior high. Matt wandered into his room and unpacked his backpack. He smoothed out his spelling word sheet on his bedside table. "Balance," he whispered, looking at the top word again. "B-A-L-A-N-C-E." He pictured the letters on the balance beam at Angela's gymnastics class.

"Wow!"

Matt heard his older sister's voice from the family room next door. There

was something strange about the way she said it, and he hurried in to see what she was wowing at.

The sun hung, blazing orange, just above the horizon on the far right of the picture window. An evening fog was rolling in on the left side, and the sunset-light was lighting up the tiny droplets of fog so that the fog bank shone like copper. The birch and pine forest in the distance straight ahead was like flecks of gold on a blanket of deep green, and the clouds high above in the west looked like brush strokes of pink on turquoise canvas.

Matt hardly dared to breathe. His sisters stood nearby and his parents leaned in the doorway. They all just looked at the impossible colors. In a minute, Matt's dad moved up behind him and put his hands on top of Matt's head. He heard his mother moving closer to the girls.

Everyone being silent and still felt weird to Matt, but he didn't want to wreck the moment of looking at that sunset. He leaned against his Dad. The colors continued to shift and they could see the line of darkness move upward across the fog bank as the sun set.

Finally, the sun left the sky and the sunlight was vanishing. "Wow," said Angela softly.

Matt looked at his family. His mother and father were exchanging a look like they were telling each other something. Diana started to hunch her shoulders again and turn away, but she had been the one to call them to see that beauty and for a minute she had just stood quietly with them.

Mom seemed to reach a decision. She grabbed the cordless phone and handed it to Diana. “Pizza,” she said. “We’re ordering out, no one’s cooking, and no dishes. You order three mediums.”

Diana gave Mom a look but she took the phone. “They can’t all be super-veggie!” said Angela quickly. “You should get one that each of us likes!”

Matt said quickly as Diana opened her mouth, “Justice!”

“What?”

“J-U-S-T-I-C-E, it’s a spelling word this week. Three kids, three pizzas.” he said.

Diana rolled her eyes, but she dialed the pizza house number. Mom and Dad talked quietly and Angela and Matt hovered around Diana while she ordered one super-veggie plus pineapple, one sausage, and one plain cheese. When she hung up, she glared at Matt. “Sausage is gross,” she said.

“Eggplant and pineapple touching the same pizza is gross,” he shot back.

“Why are we having pizza tonight?” Angela piped up.

Mom answered. “Because Diana reminded me of something I hadn’t thought of in years. Today is the Autumn Equinox, and we’re going to do something about it. Matt, get a tablecloth and spread it out in the living room, Diana, pull the chairs back. We’re having a picnic.”

In thirty minutes the pizzas arrived and the living room had been transformed. Not only was a floor-picnic ready, but Dad and Angela had arranged some short candles on a plate in the middle of the tablecloth and turned out all the lights but one.

“Where did you get those?” Diana asked, frowning.

Her dad answered, “Out of a box in the attic that hasn’t been opened in ten years,” and shot a smile at Mom. “I want each of you to pick a color and that will be your candle. The gold and silver ones are taken, and the dark blue and the green one that have already been burned some are Mom’s and mine.”

OK, so the parents were definitely being weird, but Matt went along with it. He chose a creamy ivory one, the color of piano keys.

His mom leaned forward to light the dark blue one. “I’m grateful that we’re having supper together. I want you all to know that I really want to give up

Library Committee and get some balance in my life.” she took a deep breath.

“Each of you, if you like, you can let us know what you feel grateful for and what you’d like to do to be more balanced in your life.”

“This is weird,” protested Diana.

“Yes,” agreed her father, “and it’s what we’re doing tonight.”

“Is this like the vault?” asked Matt, out of the blue.

“What, Matty?” his mother frowned.

“In the gymnastics class, there are lots of events and I know that Angela really doesn’t like the bars, and she’s wobbly at them, but she loves the vault and when she does it, it’s like she’s flying.” He wasn’t sure he had said what he meant.

His father looked thoughtful. “I’d like to hear more about that when we’re eating, but I think, yeah, I think this is like that.”

Diana looked at him funny, but she couldn’t make Matt not say anything.

“OK,” he said, “I’m grateful for all the stuff you plan for us, Mom and Dad, but I really don’t want to do Art Club.” Then before he lost his oomph, he went on, “I want to just play the piano really, really well.” He felt a little embarrassed, saying his secret dream out loud like that, and he covered up by lighting his candle.

Everyone else, even Diana, said something and lit and candle. “What are the

gold and silver ones for?” Matt asked.

His Dad answered. “They sort of symbolize balance. That the Spirit of the Universe is balanced. Um. It will take a long time to explain and I’m hungry?”

Dad and Mom each leaned forward and lit one of the universe-is-balanced candles.

They ate pizza together that night and no one had to fight over dishes. It took a few weeks for Matt to get out of Art Club and everything else to kind of settle down. But he did get to see the pyramid in Jim’s back yard before it was washed away.