

# A SIGHT TO BEHOLD

## Chapter 6

On Thursday, Gran E picked us up after school again. As I neared the car, Bud called out the window, “Hurry up! Gran’s taking us to her special beach!”

I opened the door, tossed my backpack onto the back seat, and climbed in.

“Gran made a picnic cake,” Bud reported, pointing to a picnic basket on the floor next to me.

“Red velvet?” I asked hopefully.

“What else?” Gran replied.

My mouth was watering already. Gran made the best red velvet cake, but she only made it for picnics, so it was a real treat.

As we drove over the bridge to Anacostia, I gazed out the window. The big river churned with restless waves.

“Gran, how did you find your special swimming hole?” asked Bud.

“My big brother Robert showed it to me,” said Gran. “It was the very same day those girls chased me away from the public pool. I ran home, and Robert found me crying on the front porch.”



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“He told me not to worry about those mean kids. Then he showed me the swimming spot. It was only a few miles from our house—we could walk there ourselves.

“At the end of a quiet dead-end street, we turned down a path, and before I knew it, we were standing in front of a river. I remember seeing lots of birds, especially a tall cormorant standing on a rock out in the water.”

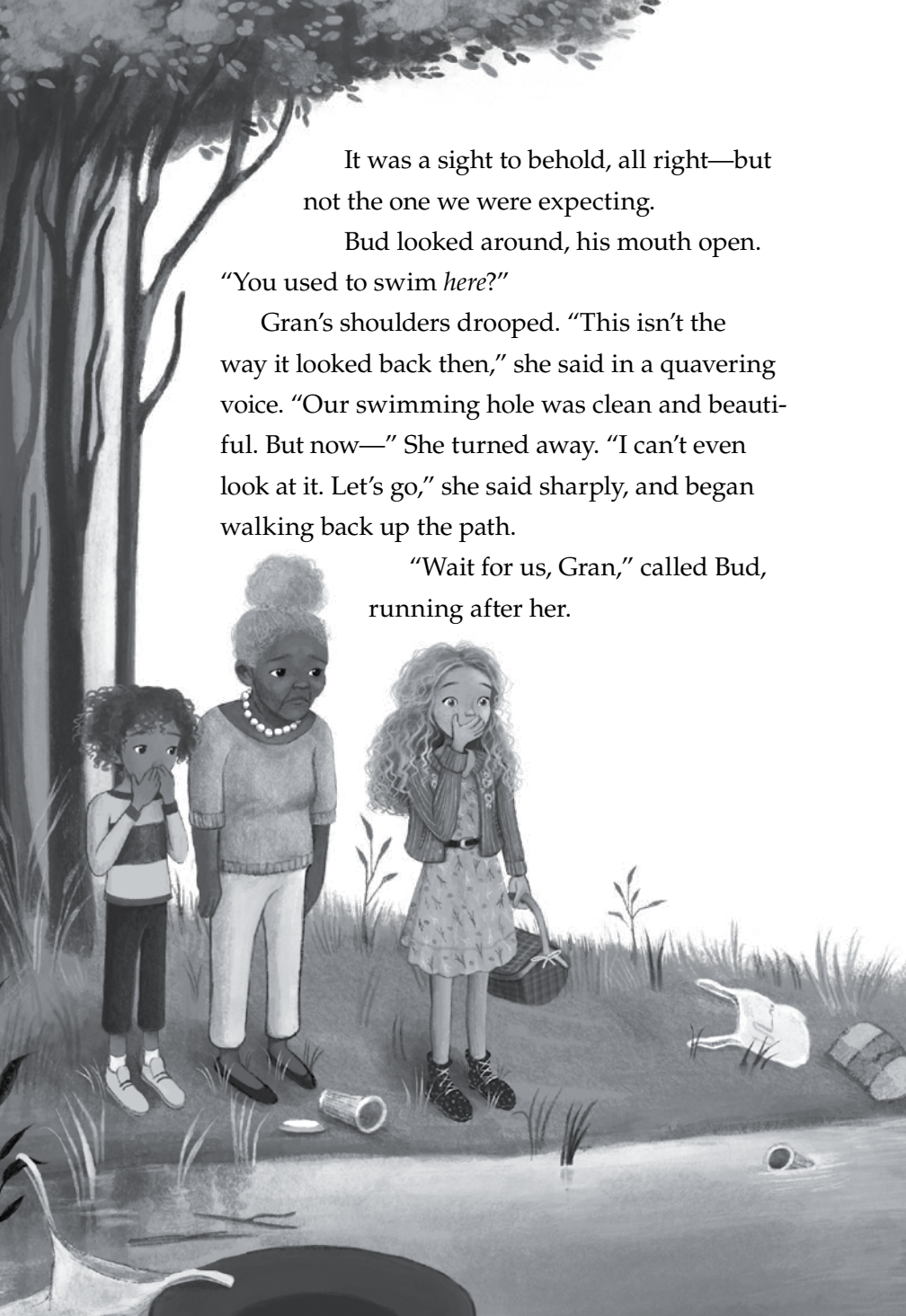
Gran E turned down a dead-end street, parked the car, and we all got out. Bud and I followed as Gran led us down a gravel path and into the woods. I heard birds singing and smelled the scent of pine. Some of the trees were old and huge. The ground was covered with ferns and brambles.

“Oh, this old place brings back such happy memories,” said Gran. “It’s a sight to behold.”

“I wish we had our swimsuits with us,” said Bud.

“We’ll take off our shoes and go wading,” said Gran.

Bud and I grinned at each other. Gran E’s excitement was catching. Through the tree branches, we caught flashes of silvery water. But as we stepped out of the trees, the scene changed. Plastic bags, bottles, and metal cans littered the shoreline and floated on the water. Chunks of Styrofoam were caught in a fallen tree at the water’s edge. I spotted a waterlogged armchair and half-sunk lawn mower. And tires everywhere, stuck in the mud, bobbing in the water, and strewn along the bank.



It was a sight to behold, all right—but not the one we were expecting.

Bud looked around, his mouth open.

“You used to swim *here*?”

Gran’s shoulders drooped. “This isn’t the way it looked back then,” she said in a quavering voice. “Our swimming hole was clean and beautiful. But now—” She turned away. “I can’t even look at it. Let’s go,” she said sharply, and began walking back up the path.

“Wait for us, Gran,” called Bud, running after her.

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I lingered, taking a last look around. I noticed an old picnic table under a tree, but who would want to have a picnic here? Gran E had been so excited to see her river again—we all had—and now her memory was ruined.

My heart ached for her—and for the river, too. There were no cormorants to be seen here. Were there even fish or frogs living in all this garbage? From my earth science class in fifth grade, I knew that the Anacostia River was polluted and the city was trying to clean it up. I'd always thought the big river looked beautiful and mysterious, but I'd never looked closely at it or wondered what was beneath the water's surface. It had been easy to forget about pollution. But now, seeing this place and knowing what it had meant to my grandmother made the pollution feel real. *People* had done this, dumped stuff in the river. Ruined a beautiful place. Damaged nature. Didn't they even care? I wanted to fix it, but the problem was too big.

