

# Happy Hour in the Forest of Wonderland

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A CHORUS OF BIRD CALLS FILLS THE AIR, reaching out over the entire city. All across Wonderland, from every place of learning, there is a gasp of delight. All eyes turn towards the forest at the heart of the city. High above the forest, birds of every size, form, and colour move in a circling, flowing dance that spreads over the city.

It's the moment they love best in the school day—Happy Hour! Each day, a different invitation at a different time. Today, it is this song-and-dance from the birds.

“Come on, come on!” J shouts to their classmates who are hypnotised by the bird choreography. J, age eight, is always eager to be outside doing and discovering. Somehow, this ends up getting them into trouble a lot. Today, during indoor learning, they have been invited to sit in quiet at the edge of the room and reflect on this. Why do they have to learn inside a room anyway, J wonders. There's a whole world of interesting things outside. They abandon their reflection in a flash when the birds call. “Let's go!” J urges the others. They leave their things behind and dash outside.

It's the same scene everywhere—children pouring from every type of learning space across the city: indoor, outdoor, built, or nature-made. From toddling two-year-olds to sauntering eighteen-year-olds, Happy Hour is for everyone.

J races ahead with their gang. They know the rule: nothing starts until everyone has arrived at the meeting place. Still, they want to get there before anyone else.

They zoom past older kids, who are moving slowly. Cool kids. M, H, and U especially—seventeen, eighteen, into their last years of high school. They exchange grins and winks and eyebrow waggles. Juniors who want to be like them try to copy their sly smiles. The seniors bask in the attention; they play their role to the full, and that means not hurrying to Happy Hour, even if they secretly want to. They hide their excitement like they hide other things, like how much they put into being edgy and a little transgressive, excelling, outshining, challenging. Or how some days they don't feel so cool; it gets exhausting, and they just want to be invisible.

D, Q, and their friends swarm past in a noisy group of ten- to twelve-year-olds. They are too caught up in anticipating today's Happy Hour and reliving past ones to notice anyone else. Their chatter is like an improv session. Each one flings lines into a story that gets longer and longer: “Yes, and then remember when... Yes, and then...”

K walks alone. Eyes are far away; they're smiling a tiny smile. Always a daydreamer, always teased for it. But inside their bubble, they're free to be as they choose in any world they

choose. No need to rush or try to fit in. They stop for an instant, lost in their reverie, until a line of kids toddling hand-in-hand from the crèche brings them back to here, to age fifteen and Happy Hour. They take the hand offered by a curious little one and go along with them the rest of the way.

Children pour into the forest from all sides. They lead themselves. They meet in a clearing where two giant old trees stand with their limbs touching, forming an arch. This is the place of the ceremony into Happy Hour.

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It's a different ceremony each time. Only one thing remains the same: Everyone who enters must come with a willing heart.

As they wait, little ones race around shout-singing nonsense songs and bursting with giggles. J and friends dig up wriggly worms to drop down other children's collars—an experiment to see what happens next. S, always ready to start something, strikes up a tempo, knocking two stones together as percussion. W, O and other budding musicians add layers—scratchy sticks, whistling reeds, singing leaves. Standing on a rock above them, G adds a song that has no words. It rises and swirls like an air current. Other voices blend in, harmonising. Some clap and cheer along. Some just watch or enjoy the wait in their own ways.

I hangs far back from everyone. Lately, they find themselves caught up in a strange tangle of emotions they don't really understand and can't put into words. From back here, observing, they suddenly recognise the same struggle on other faces. They feel less alone.

And then, sudden stillness. Something vibrates, bubbles, and ripples out from the archway under the trees and passes over them. All movement stops. Even the toddlers fall silent.

A Guide emerges from the archway carrying a basket of feathers of every colour, a welcome blessing from the birds that invited them here. They cover the basket and through a small hole, with their eyes closed, each child chooses a feather.

More Guides emerge from the archway and gather them into groups according to the colours of their feathers. Friends find themselves in different groups. They know why—they must to go on this adventure not with their usual people but with others who are different from them in age, ability, energy, and life story.

They sit together, waiting. The little ones are the calmest, at ease. No explanations, no coaxing. They seem to be watching something the older children can't see. Then they curl up in the laps of those closest to them and drift into sleep, going on ahead.

The Guide leads the others:

“Make yourself comfortable.

Close your eyes.

Now, together, breathe in, and out.

In, and out.

In, and out.

Listen to the sound of your breath.

Feel the breath moving through your whole body.

See the colours behind your eyelids.

Feel the air on your skin.

Feel the ground beneath you.

Hear the sounds of life around you.

Smell the scents of the forest.

Can you feel the life inside you and all around you?

Listen to your heartbeat.

Can you hear the music of life inside you and all around you?

Listen...”

Inside the children, the sensation of their heart beating grows. They feel it through their entire bodies. It sounds like a drumbeat. The drumbeat gets louder. The sound of wind, of water, of breath weave in. The tempo rises. And then an array of musical instruments merge in—cymbals, whistles, tambourines, marimbas, djembes, violins and guitars, an accordion, a sitar, mbiras, a ukele, singing bowls, a yidaki, pan pipes, trumpets, a kora, something that sounds like a theremin... The music vibrates through the ground beneath them and rises into their bodies, and they start to move with it. In the vibrations are the thuds of dancing feet, far at first, then drawing nearer.

Some children sway with the music; some rise and start to dance, eyes still closed or wide with delight. Things fall away—emotions and moods they brought with them, expectations, questions, even their ages and differences. They simply move together. They feel it like magic.

A voice rings out, “Let Happy Hour begin!”

The little kids surge awake, unsurprised.

A cheer.

And a sudden carnival erupts from the archway beneath the trees. A colourful throng of people pour out and surge around the groups of children, whooping, hooting, cheering, and clapping. Stilt walkers, fire eaters, dancers—from the can-can to ballet, from breakdance to samba to the Lindy Hop—and acrobats, capoeiristas, clowns, magicians, freerunners, drummers, fortune tellers, puppeteers, beatboxers, musicians of every kind playing the same layered music they had felt in their heartbeats.

“Come on! Come on! Let’s go!” the circus people cry. Without hesitation, everyone scrambles to their feet and follows the circus people in a parade that whirls around the old trees and floods through the archway.

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On this side of the archway, is a fantastical world. All the animals that nature and legend have ever conjured are there. They have come from the dawn of time and ancient tales; from farmlands and garden soil; from forest, savannah and mountain; from the air and under water. Animals from under water float through the air in bubbles of water like astronauts. There are beloved pets and creatures from the children’s dreams, and from films and stories. They merge in among the children, nuzzling, sniffing, and exploring them. They move like water trickling through the crowd of humans. Soon all are meshed into a web of energy. They feel the pulse of life on land, in water, in the air, in spirit. Human language melts away. They feel their kinship with all of life. And this is how the animals lead them in the pledge to care for each other and the land. They call in the wisdom from all forms of life, past, present, and emerging, to be their Guides through Happy Hour. All this takes three heartbeats in time.

Beyond the crowd of animals, the forest has arranged itself into a vast fairground. Coloured lights hang from trees and string themselves through bushes. Bright stalls are positioned along the paths, nestled under bushes, perched in trees or hanging from branches, spinning and bobbing in the currents of the river, twinkling from little caves among boulders. The stalls offer activities and experiences of every kind.

The children flow like bubbling streams along different paths into the forest. The animals fly or race along with groups of children and position themselves at vantage points all through the forest so they can follow the fun and maybe, secretly, share a few helpful hints. From afar, the Guides watch over everyone, waiting to be called upon.

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A few steps along the path, R scurries up a tree, fascinated by something that looks like a giant multicoloured nest. Large rings hang on long strings from the nest and the branches of the tree. Inside the nest is a Weaver, surrounded by piles of coloured words, some long and tangled, weaving them into stories and folding them into tiny glittering eggshells where the stories wait for the right moment to come into the world. They invite the children in for a story. R's group cries out in excitement and helps each other up into the tree. Even the oldest and coolest among them love stories, and this place is a story treasure trove. Happy ones, scary ones, funny ones, moving ones, and some that nobody really understands.

But before they can choose any stories, the Weaver asks for their help. There are so many stories to be woven, and so many people in the world waiting for stories, and it takes time to weave even a single story, sometimes years, and it's too much for just one Weaver. Will the children weave just one story for the Weaver? It shouldn't take them long if they work together. They agree to help.

First, they must choose an idea. The dangling rings outside are story catchers that the Weaver has hung all through the forest to collect ideas to start the stories from. The Weaver gathers up a large scoop of words that they hand to each of the older children along with a small frame loom. The Weaver shows them how to pass the words through the loom and pull them tight. To their surprise, weaving words is a lot harder than they thought, even when they have a good idea to start with. They try over and over again, feeling more and more frustrated. It's as if the words wriggle out of their grasp. Some get so discouraged, they want to give up, especially R, who usually has a gift for words.

The younger children don't wait to be shown how to weave a story. As the Weaver is guiding the older ones, the little ones fling themselves into the piles of words. They gather armfuls and toss them into the air and watch them fall like sparkles into the Weaver's big loom. In no time, they have created a colourful new story. It's extraordinary, made of simple words, toddler babble and the wildest imaginings, and it goes on and on and on.

Watching them, the older children suddenly remember what it was like when they were two, three, five years old—how easy it was to weave stories and how brilliant all the stories were. They toss their looms and the Weaver's instructions in the air and leap into the piles of words with the little ones. Soon, everyone is laughing out of control as they patch different bits into the long, long story. The tale makes little sense, it is full of flaws, but it is a joy and precious. They offer it to the Weaver who accepts it with a laugh and a wink to the little ones. Then they select one story each from the nest and wonder where to go next. From up here in the tree, they spot a group at the colour camp near the river working on a giant canvas that seems to have the same mood as their absurd story. They scurry down the tree and run over to see.

R is the last to leave. The Weaver hands them a playing card. A single flower petal is pressed into it. The petal is woven from a rainbow of threads—the names of each of the children who wove the new story.

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At the river, X and the others are crouched around a canvas the size of a theatre stage laid out on the ground. They are busy with quick-drying paints, brushes, paint markers, and chalks creating a giant mural. Atop a boulder nearby, a music box that is full of art supplies is playing heavy metal music. They are painting what the music feels like.

The tubes of paint, brushes, and markers wriggle around in the children's hands. They make comic alterations to the emerging artwork.

After three hundred heartbeats, the music box abruptly switches to brisk tempo violins at an alarming volume. The change startles the canvas. It shakes off the pack of young artists who shriek and tumble on the ground. The canvas rolls itself up, twists and spins, stretches itself back out, and rises into the air—a giant flying carpet. When the music changes to a soft piano sonata, the canvas floats back to the ground. The children run around catching brushes and markers and get back to painting.

None of them are in the same spot on the canvas as before. They have to let someone else, maybe even a toddler, continue 'their' little piece of art in their way. And they have to carry on someone else's artwork as if it were theirs, all to a new musical mood. Some of them don't find this easy or fun. X, in particular. They are an art student, they are good at it, they are proud of their spot of canvas, and they feel the others are ruining it. Sour emotions stir and stick in throats. A few protective shoulders 'accidentally' bump others away from their patch. But the brushes, chinks, and paint tubes wriggle and buzz in everyone's hands and the mural grows in its haywire way. Some tight throats start to loosen.

Three hundred heartbeats later, the same loud jittery violins and the same response from the canvas and the art supplies. Squeals of laughter as the youngsters chase buzzing paint brushes. The music changes to deep house. A new mood emerges in the paintwork.

It turns into a musical painting game. Every three hundred heartbeats, the circuit breaking violins, and then country music, opera, jazz, drum & bass, disco, K-pop, gospel, singalong nursery rhymes. Each time, the children dash to a different spot on the canvas and let the music tell them what to do.

A small child scurries across the canvas, oblivious, leaving multicoloured footprints and handprints behind them. Something explodes inside X: a blast of realisation. Kicking off their shoes, they streak paint across the soles of their feet and start to dance across the canvas. Others follow, some walking on their hands. Afterwards, they decorate the footprints and make each one unique.

When every inch of the canvas is covered, the music transitions to a high vibration instrumental. The mural is a layering of dots, scribbles, swirls, paint dribbles, splats, fantastical creatures, geometric shapes, graffiti, stick figures, animals, rivers, leaf patterns, and doodles beneath vibrant dancing feet.

The painting lies flapping gently on the ground. The little children understand. "Come on, come on!" they call to the older ones. "Let's go!" They pile onto the canvas that begins to hover low over the ground.

X is tidying away the art supplies. As they pack the last of the markers into the music box, they notice a playing card tucked inside the lid. A single flower petal covers one side. The petal is shaped from a snatch of colourful canvas bearing the names of the artists who painted the mural. X smiles, pockets the card, and hops onto the canvas. It rises into the air, flies off across the river, and begins to swoop over the forest, the sound of scared-happy shrieks floating behind it.

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The music is still playing, calling. A steps out from among some thick bushes. They had snuck away during the painting game. The sadness had come back, worse than ever. The others often tease A about being fierce, always ready for a fight, their sharp tongue and fiery words. They don't know about the sadness underneath. Today, all the words are a big ball in A's throat,

and they feel so tired from always singing and dancing and laughing along, from holding their breath, from fighting the sadness.

A walks up to the music box. When their hands are working, their mind falls quiet and they feel better. They choose some colours and a small canvas from the box, sit down in the grass, and let the music guide their hands.

The sounds of the forest and the river merge into the music. A spotted owl glides out of the woodland across the river and perches not far from A. It watches with big black eyes. A breeze passes over A. It lingers on the back of their neck. The breeze tickles, nuzzles. A turns around, puzzled. A young impala is sniffing their neck. It pauses, unafraid, and stares at A. Looking around, A finds animals dotted everywhere, watching them, as if listening. They come closer. A feels as if the animals are touching them, holding them up. They feel afraid and awkward in this circle of tenderness. Their throat tightens. They turn back to the little impala. It has huge liquid eyes. A's eyes begin to prickle. Their throat becomes even tighter. The paintbrush drops from their fingers. They reach out to the impala. It backs away, stops, backs away, stops. A doesn't want to let it go. They get up and go after it. The other animals follow, gathering close around A.

The impala leads A to a small blue door among the trees. It seems to be attached to nothing. The wind chimes above the door tinkle. It opens. A looks back. All the animals have vanished. They step inside.

The room looks like A's room at home. There is their desk, their bed, all their teenage things, the dish of pebbles on the windowsill. But it feels different; there's something emanating, something that feels like a slight glow, a scentless fragrance and a cool air current all in one.

The aura is coming from the person sitting in the window seat, writing in a notebook. They look up and smile—a Listener. Through their closed eyelids, they look straight into A's eyes. Their wordless voice arrives through their silent smile. They invite A to sit with them. The Listener's body is about the same age as A's, but A recognises the Listener as an old soul.

They sit in silence for a while, the Listener writing in their book, their eyes closed. The sounds of Happy Hour reach them faintly. A turns to watch the Listener. The notebook is full of words. As the Listener writes, the words disappear. The pages empty slowly as the pen moves over them. When the last page is empty, the Listener closes the notebook and hands it to A. They see that it is a silent journal for unsaid and unsayable things.

Before they can ask about the vanishing words and where they go, the Listener jumps up, stretches, and cartwheels out of the window. Only then does A notice there's no glass in the windows. They follow the Listener. Outside is a wild herb garden: A's grandparent's garden. A's grandparent knew the herb to treat every ailment. For a long time after they circled out of this life, the garden was left to its own rhythms. Now, the Listener has stepped in.

The Listener is crouched among the herbs, murmuring silently to roots, listening to leaves, harvesting buds, just like A's grandparent used to do. A sits on the old bench under the guava tree and watches the Listener work through their sealed eyes. They begin coaxing a suffering plant out of the ground. Its roots are swollen and discoloured and seem to be choking on something hard inside. It takes a long time, moving gently and slowly, to get the plant free. Some roots snap, some leaves fall off, and the base of the stem changes colour to a dark purple.

A watches, in agony for the plant, their breath caught in their throat. The more soil the Listener clears from around the roots, the more A feels the plant's wound inside themselves. It hurts and it's scary. The Listener's fingers in the soil seem to be prodding their heart, their lungs, their throat, their belly, their temples, their spine. The mass choking the roots starts to emerge. It finally erupts from A's throat in a snarling screaming sound, followed by a rush of sobs.

The Listener gathers A into their arms and lets the flood of tears wash over the ailing roots of the plant in A's hands. They listen to the things that had been held in A's heart and body for so long. The plant absorbs the bitter salt water and begins to heal.

Flood to trickle to quiet. A stops to breathe. The air flows easily through them. They notice the Listener's hands—wrinkled and spotted and soft. Grandparent's hands. The Listener looks at A with wide open eyes—grandparent's eyes, owl's eyes, impala's eyes, and finally, A's own eyes. A gasps and hugs the Listener with fresh tears in their eyes.

"Come on," says the Listener at last. "Let's go." They gather up the plant to take to the Sanctuary. The plant will recover, but it will need some care before it roots back into the ground.

A turns to pick up the journal. The pages are full of words again, their words. They hand the book back to the Listener: "You keep it."

"Thank you," says the Listener. They smile and walk with the plant through the blue door. It closes with a tinkle of wind chimes and vanishes.

A stands alone in the garden for a moment. Feeling. The sounds of Happy Hour reach them through the trees. The Wonder Games are about to start. Just as they are about to dash towards the sound, they notice a playing card on the garden bench. A single flower petal is stuck to one side. It's made out of a page of a journal and has the names of all the animals who led A here and all the herbs in the garden.

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They pour into the place where the Wonder Games are about to start. Little ones arrive perched on the shoulders of tall teenagers. Friends dash to hug each other, full of stories about their Happy Hour experience. Some are wearing pieces of carnival costumes they have picked up along the way. Some have painted faces. Many have scratches and bruises and very dirty clothes.

The Wonder Games is the final event of Happy Hour—an oddball obstacle course with two rules: 'Together,' and 'Everyone Counts.' Today, the Guides tell them they must reach the Rainbow Blossom that flowers at the top of a tall tree that stands on a cliff overlooking a waterfall at the end of an underground river that flows down a long tunnel that starts in a rabbit hole... here!

A Guide sneezes three times. The ground trembles and a rabbit hole opens at their feet. It gets wider and wider and the children tumble in, shrieking. They fall slowly down long tunnels going in different directions. Glowing mushrooms make magical light patterns all the way down. Creatures looking like sea anemone float by, untroubled by the falling children. Soft thuds as they shoot out of their different tunnels and land on mossy ground.

Moss, mushrooms, and underground creatures make stunning colour patterns on the walls and ceiling. Fireflies flit into the cavern and show the children a ring of ten buttons that will open the way to the underground river. The buttons are set high in the ceiling in deep little holes that only the smallest fingers can fit into. They must be pressed at the same time for the way to open.

The children put their minds together. Pre-teens will sit on the shoulders of the tallest and strongest teenagers and raise some of the smallest children to the ceiling. The others will steady everyone and lift the little ones up into the arms above. It takes several tries. Then, together, they count "1, 2, 3, go!" and ten tiny fingers push ten twinkling buttons into the rock. The ground beneath them again starts to move, falling away and becoming a soft bouncy float that they all tumble into.

The float spins downwards and bumps to a stop on the banks of a river rushing by in the dark. It's heading towards a faint glow on the horizon. That's where they're going. But when they heave the float into the water to travel down the river, it fizzes and dissolves—it was made of sherbet!

The children sit in the dark, unsure of what to do. N, always caring, passes around a bottle of water and a pack of mixed nuts. Surprisingly, there's enough to go around such a large group. C, one of the littlest ones, drops their nuts in the dark and starts to wail. Others start to cry too. They want to go home. This isn't fun.

As their tears fall onto the riverbank, they turn into tiny spots of light on the ground and begin to grow. The children stare in amazement. The tiny lights stop growing as the tears stop. N drizzles a few drops of water from their bottle onto the ground. The lights shrink and some go out.

"They need salt water!" shouts E, who is fascinated by the science of what makes things grow. "We have to cry."

Even if they can barely see each other in the dark, the older children turn expectantly towards the toddlers who they believe are expert criers, mostly for no reason. But the little ones are fascinated with the tiny lights going out one by one. They shed no more tears.

"Come on, come on! Cry!" shouts E. The command sounds so ludicrous, several of the children burst out laughing. The laughter catches them one by one and turns into a laughing fit. It echoes around the river gorge. They clutch their bellies and tears pour out of their eyes. All along the riverbank, as the tears of laughter reach the ground, tiny lights blink on and start to grow. When they are as big as a dove's egg, they roll into the water and begin to open into water lilies. Soft light pours out of the water lilies, illuminating the river gorge.

Giant leaves unfold around the water lilies and float along the riverbank. "Rafts!" cries E. Some of the children try to clamber onto the leaves. The leaves tip out of balance and the youngsters fall into the water. It's cold! Swarms of tiny fish flock under the children and help them back to the riverbank. They pause, get their breath back, and put their minds together again.

There are only so many leaves and many more of them. They decide to climb onto one leaf at a time, one person at a time. Several tries and many splashes later, they are spread out evenly over the water lily rafts, lit by the blossoms, and sailing along the underground river.

The river goes fast. The glow on the horizon gets bigger and stronger. Soon, they can make out the mouth of a tunnel ahead. The sound of a waterfall reaches them, getting louder fast. They are racing to where the tunnel opens in the side of a mountain. From there, the river cascades far down a cliff face.

Fear grips the children. They have no solution for this. Some begin to cry. Some begin to quarrel. No one can agree on what to do. Or that there is nothing they can do. They grip the sides of the giant leaves or hold on to each other in fright.

The smallest children are untouched by the fear and tension. They are enthralled by the water lilies lighting their way and the tiny fish racing alongside their rafts. They see that the little fish have tiny wings and are arranging themselves in formation under the rafts. The little ones point this out but the older kids can't take in what they're saying. They have forgotten it's Happy Hour and nothing bad can happen. So to remind them, the little ones start to sing: "Row, row, row your boat, gently down the stream. Merrily, merrily, merrily, merrily, life is but a dream."

As the rafts burst through the tunnel opening and into the air, three sets of cries go up—screams of panic, cries of amazement that the rafts don't tumble over the edge, and squeals of delight as a cloud of tiny silvery flying fish soar into the air, carrying giant water lily leaves full of children.

The children begin to laugh and cry all at once as they sail through the air. Another vessel appears—their beloved canvas, hovering beneath them. They scramble off the leaf rafts and onto the canvas, shouting choruses of thank yous as the little fish dive to the water below and the water lilies spin and float down behind them. The older children turn to the little ones in wonder. How did they know this would happen?

They begin to sing in rounds: “Row, row, row your boat, gently down the stream.” The canvas rises to the top of the cliff, far above the waterfall, deposits the children beneath a tall tree, and rolls itself up in the shade to rest.

The youngsters are wondering what to do next when a piano key sounds. They look around. There is no piano. The key sounds again. It keeps sounding and they keep searching until T gets fed up and plops themselves down on a stone in the shade of the tree. As their bum touches the stone, another note sounds, just above the first. T jumps up. Sits back down. The notes sound again: first one, then the other.

The children crowd around; they all want to try. They step around the stone and on it. Sometimes one note sounds, sometimes the other. The older ones get bored of the two notes and flop down in the grass.

And then the two notes sound together. Everyone turns to look. Two younger ones, L and V, are playing a jumping game. They jump together and come down together, one on the stone, the other on the spot just in front of it. The two notes continue to sound and a second stone appears, just above the first. Everyone rushes over, intrigued.

L steps onto the new stone. A new note, one step up the scale. But the first two notes fall silent. They try again. And again. What if...? A third child joins them—one standing on each step. The three notes sound together. A fourth step appears.

One step at a time, one youngster at a time, a musical staircase climbs into the air, to a chorus of notes and a precise choreography. As each new stone step appears, all the children move one step up in perfect time and a new note layers into the growing chord. Higher and higher they climb, until everyone is standing on the staircase and L is level with the top of the tree. No more steps are needed; none appear. Beneath the piano sounds, they can hear the wind in the tree top and the sound of the waterfall far below.

Suddenly L gasps and cries out, “There’s something shining in the tree!” Everyone wants to see, but if they move, the staircase will go out of tune and collapse and they’ll tumble to the ground.

“What is it?”

“It has lots of tiny lights in the middle. It looks like a flower but it doesn’t have any petals.”

A understands immediately. The Rainbow Blossom. “Here, take mine!”

They pass their playing card up the staircase. L takes it and stretches towards the flower. The petal slips off the card and settles into the flower. Everyone begins to pass their petals up to L. There are multi-coloured ones, plain colour ones, dark ones, bright ones. Each petal carries part of the story of Happy Hour. Every one counts.

When the last petal is in place, the staircase dissolves into notes of music that float with the children back to the ground. The Rainbow Blossom’s heart begins to beat. It is made of tiny beads of light. As the flower’s heartbeat grows, the beads of light shoot high into the sky in a burst of fireworks. A cheer goes up from across the forest. The children have done it—they have brought the Rainbow Blossom to life.

The flower’s heartbeat blends into the music, echoes in the children’s heartbeats. It sounds like a drumbeat. The drumbeat gets louder. The sound of wind, of water, of breath weave in. The tempo rises. Other instruments join in. The music vibrates through the ground beneath them and rises into their bodies. In the vibrations are the thuds of dancing feet.

The carnival surges out of the trees and draws the children into a celebration. The animals and the Guides follow. There are cries of joy, hugs, jokes, and some tears. The Guides have brought all kinds of good things to eat and drink. Everyone helps to arrange a picnic around the Rainbow Blossom tree. None of them had realised how hungry they were!

With bellies full, they start to feel tired. Limbs grow heavy. One by one, the children stretch out on the ground. Eyelids close. Breath and heartbeats slow. And they melt into sleep.

A breeze passes over them and swirls away into the forest. It carries the sound of wind chimes from above a blue door attached to nothing. They awake to the sound of tinkling. Around them, the dream world has dissolved. It is the end of Happy Hour, the charm that lasts for hours.

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Out in the hallway, they hear time ticking. The school day starts to trickle back in. They look at each other in a daze, wanting to grasp the magic before it fades. The thirty-minute recess will be up soon. They must get back to their classrooms before their students. Teachers are supposed to be on time, after all.

They hug each other one last time before it slips away, whispering “Remember.” Remember the way here. Remember all the adventures we had. Remember everything we saw and did and learned. Remember to let go. Remember to trust. Remember to see. Remember to feel. Remember to fail and start again. Remember to laugh. Remember to cry. Remember to breathe. Remember to sing. Remember to dance. Remember the wind. Remember the music. Remember ourselves. Remember each other. Remember that every one counts. Remember the Rainbow Blossom. Remember Happy Hour. Remember that it doesn’t end. Remember to come back. Remember we will always find ourselves and each other here.

They emerge from the quiet room and step back into their adult forms—teachers of every subject, of every age. Sometimes two or three of them step back into a single adult form. They hurry back to their schools across the city, musing on everything they have learnt and unlearnt, on what has healed and what has blossomed, on everything they have brought back from Happy Hour, still feeling the wonder, bursting to share it all with the children they teach, the children who are their Guides into Happy Hour and the Wonderland within.

