

THE
RESTORATIONISTS

BENEATH THE SWIRLING SKY

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WRITTEN BY CAROLYN LEILOGLOU

ILLUSTRATED BY VIVIENNE TO



**BENEATH THE
SWIRLING SKY**



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by Carolyn Leiloglou



WATERBROOK

BENEATH THE SWIRLING SKY

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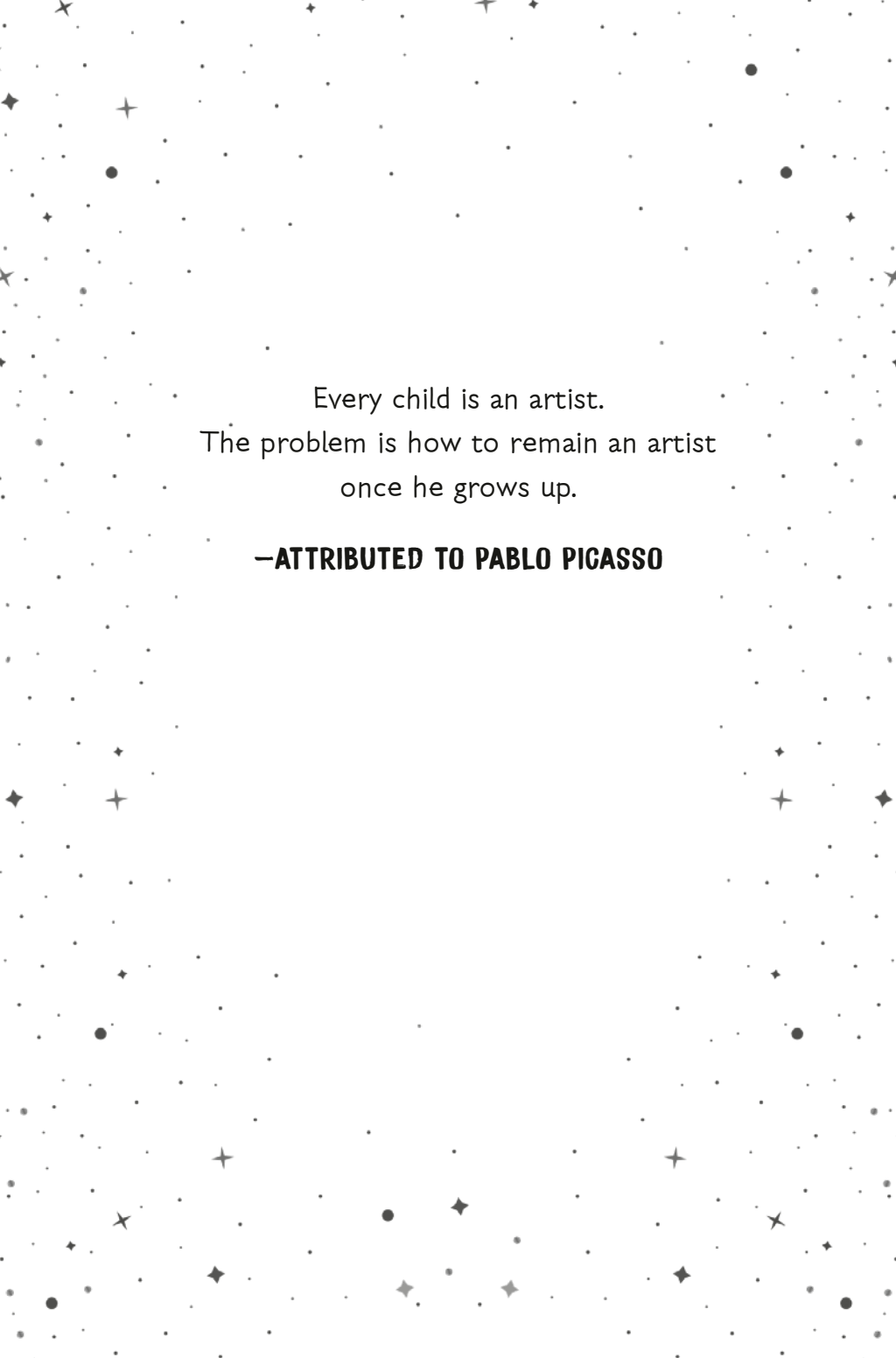
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**TO CAMPBELL,
YOU WERE CALLED TO CREATE—NEVER STOP MAKING ART!**



Every child is an artist.
The problem is how to remain an artist
once he grows up.

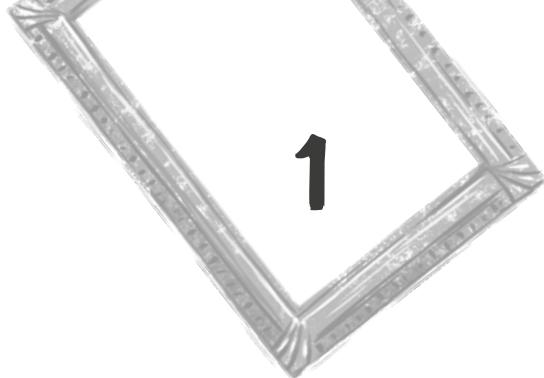
—ATTRIBUTED TO PABLO PICASSO

There's something of Rembrandt in the Gospels
or of the Gospels in Rembrandt, as you wish;
it comes to more or less the same.

—VINCENT VAN GOGH



**BENEATH THE
SWIRLING SKY**



Vincent should have been spending spring break at the beach or Knott's Berry Farm or at least having a video-game marathon with his friends. Instead, he was staring out the backseat window at the endless Texas countryside rolling by. He let his eyes unfocus, and the field, cows, and clumps of short trees blurred like an impressionist painting. But painting—or rather, not painting—was what had gotten him into this mess. Mom thought she was being subtle about it, but Vincent knew the only reason she and Dad had booked a cruise out of Galveston instead of Los Angeles, where they lived, was her “secret” plan to reconnect him with art. Mom wanted Vincent and his sister, Lili, to meet her uncle Leo, who was some kind of art restorer.

Not just meet but stay with him for the whole week of spring break.

In the middle-of-nowhere Texas with no cell service.

At least when her plan failed, Mom might finally quit bugging him to paint again.

When Mom and Dad had sprung this plan on them, Vincent had tried to talk his way out of it. They'd never even met Mom's extended family. Mom had just sighed and responded that sometimes family is complicated. Lili, of course, had instantly added Uncle Leo to the family tree she was making for school, right alongside Vincent, Mom, Dad, and the birth parents she had never met.

Vincent smiled at the memory. Lili was always ready to welcome someone new, though she hadn't always been that way. Three years ago, when Vincent was nine, his parents had adopted three-year-old Lili from China. They'd spent almost two weeks with her in China, and then finally, on the day before they needed to fly home, Lili had clutched Vincent's hand, refusing to let go. Some siblings didn't get along, but Vincent and Lili had been close ever since that moment, even though it had taken a while before they spoke the same language.

"I'm amazed you can still find this place without GPS," Dad said as Mom pulled off the two-lane road onto a gravel drive.

Vincent got his first glimpse of his great-uncle Leo's two-story white ranch house. It stood alone in a field

dotted with red and blue wildflowers. Vincent felt like he'd been dropped in an endless world on *Minecraft*, minus the ability to build.

“Remember,” Mom said as they got out of the car, “your great-uncle does some very important art conservation he can tell you about, and he’s got lots of beautiful paintings you can look at. But no touching the art.” She gave Vincent a very serious look as if this were something he might actually be tempted to do. “Understand?”

“No problem.” He wasn’t planning on touching the art or doing anything else with it.

“I want to see all the pretty pictures,” Lili said. She hopped up and down, her ever-present toy bunny, Mr. Rumples, tucked snugly under her arm.

“You can look at all the pictures that aren’t in Uncle Leo’s work studio. And there’s lots to do outside. You can pick wildflowers, catch grasshoppers. There’s even a river, but you should not go there without your brother. Vincent, please make sure to watch your sister.” Mom sighed as she looked out across the field with the hint of a smile. “I used to love it here.”

The front door burst open, and a thin man with wiry gray hair and a bushy white mustache strode toward them with arms stretched wide.

“Artemisia! Jeffery! How the heck are y’all?” His deep Texas drawl surprised Vincent. Mom had grown

up nearby and didn't really have an accent. Did she use to talk like that?

Uncle Leo hugged Mom and shook Dad's hand before turning to Vincent and Lili. "Vincent! You remind me so much of your grandfather with those brown eyes." He clapped him on the shoulder, then squatted. "And you must be Lili." He stuck out his hand for her to shake, and she gave him a high five. Vincent smiled while his parents tried to show Lili how to shake hands.

A laugh from the porch drew Vincent's attention. A tall girl in short overalls stood in the doorway. She looked about Vincent's age, with olive skin and short copper-red hair sticking up all over her head like she'd cut it herself. His own curly brown hair might be untamable, but at least he tried. She had a gray smear of *something* across her cheek, and more spots covered her arms and clothes like she'd just lost a mud fight to a pig. He wouldn't be caught dead in public looking like that. Even if there was barely anyone here to see him.

"Georgia," Uncle Leo called, waving her down to join them, "come meet your second cousins."

Vincent hadn't realized he had a second cousin, much less that he'd apparently be spending a week with her. Hopefully she wouldn't be as weird as she looked.

"Georgia! It's nice to finally meet you." Mom's fake-happy voice set Vincent on edge. She talked like that only

when things weren't going the way she had planned but she didn't want anyone to know. She gathered Georgia into an awkward hug, but Vincent didn't miss the worried glance she shared with Dad over Georgia's shoulder. Yup, something was off here. "Uncle Leo didn't tell me you'd be here! Are your parents visiting as well?"

"No, ma'am, it's just me," Georgia responded. Now that she was closer, the spots on her face and arms definitely looked like mud.

"I see." Mom looked significantly at Uncle Leo. "Vincent, why don't you grab the bags? And, Georgia, do you mind helping them get settled while we have a little chat with your grandfather?"

Georgia nodded and jogged down to the car. "I can carry Lili's bag upstairs." She lifted Lili's flower-covered suitcase from the trunk.

She seemed nice enough, even if she looked like a homeless person. So why was Mom acting so jumpy? Something strange was going on.

Lili was talking nonstop as Georgia lugged her suitcase up the steps.

Vincent pulled his own bag slowly from the trunk, trying to eavesdrop as his mom spoke in an urgent whisper. He caught only two words—*traveling* and *involved*—but she sounded concerned.

"Wouldn't dream of getting him mixed up in it!" Uncle

Leo's booming voice didn't seem capable of whispering. "I already spoke to Georgia. She's not here to travel anyhow."

Travel? What was that supposed to mean? Mom seemed upset about Georgia *being* here, not that she would go somewhere else. Vincent rolled his suitcase toward the door as slowly as possible, trying to act oblivious to the conversation. Dad placed his arm around Mom's shoulder as if trying to comfort her, but Vincent couldn't make out her reply.

"Maybe she'll be a good influence on Vincent," Uncle Leo continued. "You wanted him to reconnect with art, right?"

Vincent rolled his eyes as he dragged his bag up the steps to the house. Mom's plan wasn't going to work. He was done with art for good, and sticking him on this ranch with perfect strangers wasn't going to help anything.

He paused at the top step, straining to hear just a little bit more.

"Do you want to cancel the cruise?" Dad asked. "I don't think we can get our deposit back, but—"

"No," Mom cut in. "As long as—"

"Vincent, come see the house!" Lili called, her voice drowning out the rest of Mom's reply.

Dad caught his eye, and Vincent knew he couldn't linger any longer without getting in trouble. But their conversation had left him with a nagging question: If his

mom wanted him here to reconnect with art, what was it that she *didn't* want him involved in?

That question dropped from his mind the moment he stepped into Uncle Leo's house. Mom had said there'd be a lot of art, but this was ridiculous. Paintings were jigsawed together like a real-world *Tetris* game covering every inch of wall space in the entryway, into the next room, and even up the stairway. Some canvases were taller than him, and others were smaller than his phone. There were splotchy modern-art pieces, hazy impressionistic landscapes, hyper-realistic portraits, and every style in between. This was more art than he'd expect in a museum, much less someone's home. And even weirder—not a single painting was framed. He shook his head. Art was the last thing he wanted to think about, but if every room was like this, there'd be nowhere to escape. This was going to be a long week.

“Never seen a painting before?” Georgia asked. A smirk played on her face as she stared down at him from the top of a narrow staircase to his left. Lili stood next to her, lost in a painting.

Great. He'd already been caught looking at the art. Point one to Mom. “Not all crammed together like this.” He tried to sound as uninterested as possible, but he couldn't help but ask, “Why aren't any of them framed?”



Georgia shrugged. “Reasons.” He waited for her to add more, but she continued to stand at the top of the stairs, staring at him. She was so weird.

Lili, finally seeming to notice he was here, ran back down the stairs, grabbed Vincent’s hand, and pulled him after her. “Come on! I want to see everything.” She had Mr. Rumples clutched in her other hand, and to avoid looking at any more art, Vincent focused on the way the rabbit bounced against Lili’s leg with each step.

The stairs led to a dim, narrow hallway that smelled old and stuffy. Three doors lined the left side, though only the first two were open. On the right was a row of sliding doors that Vincent assumed was storage space. Through the open door at the hall’s end, he could make out a bathroom. The hallway was lit only by the dim evening light filtering in from the open doors, casting shadows on the walls.

“It’s spooky up here.” Lili stepped closer to Vincent and glued herself against his leg.

“That’s because this is where the boogeyman lives!” Georgia made her eyes big and held up her hands like claws. “If you don’t do as you’re told, you’ll vanish!”

“Really?” Lili tensed against Vincent’s leg, fingers digging into his side. Vincent squeezed her shoulders.

“No, not really.” Georgia dropped her hands and laughed. “Everything’s just really old.”

What was wrong with this girl? She might be weirder than this house. “It’s not nice to scare little kids.”

“I’m not little! I’m six!” Lili crossed her arms. Mr. Rumples dangled from one hand, as if challenging anyone to disagree.

“Sorry.” Georgia gave a somewhat-apologetic shrug. “I’m not around other kids much. Not in person.”

“What does that mean?” Vincent asked as Georgia rolled Lili’s bag into the first room. “Don’t you go to school?”

“I’m homeschooled.” Georgia scooped a mound of clothes from one of the two single beds and tossed it into a corner. “But I travel with my parents so much that *road-schooled* is a better word. I’ve got some friends from a couple online classes, but we aren’t ever in one place long enough to make many in-real-life friends. Plus, I’m an only child, so . . .” She shrugged again, like it was no big deal, but it sounded like a lonely way to live. Sure, school sometimes stunk, especially math, and Vincent didn’t always enjoy Lili tagging around, but not having friends you could see most days sounded miserable.

Vincent glanced around the room as Lili, with Mr. Rumples, bounced onto the now-clear bed. The room looked very lived in, but at least there were no paintings. “How often do you stay here?”

“Pretty much any time I’m not traveling with my parents, so a lot. Come on, and I’ll show you your room.”

Lili continued to play with Mr. Rumples while Georgia walked back into the narrow hallway and gestured toward the room next door. Vincent stepped inside and took in the space. It was smaller, with a double bed against one wall and a desk and dresser against the other. Thankfully, this room was also painting-free.

“We’ll have to share the bathroom. And if you get bored, the closets are always interesting.” She slid open the door to one of the hall closets, revealing piles of junk: out-of-date clothes, lamps, broken chairs, old toys, and even a beat-up canoe.

Vincent stepped back into the hallway and glanced toward the one thing Georgia had failed to mention. “What’s in there?” He pointed at the closed door.

“It’s just . . .” Georgia glanced uncomfortably at the ceiling. “It’s just locked. We’re not supposed to go in there.” Before Vincent could reply, she turned back to the room she was sharing with his sister. “Lili, do you want to see my wheel or look at art?”

“I want to see everything!” Lili said.

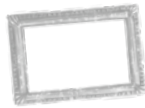
Wheel? Vincent pictured Georgia guiding his sister to a sinister spinning wheel like in the fairy tales. He was tempted to tell Lili not to touch the spindle, but that would be super weird.

Instead, he leaned in and whispered to Georgia, “No more scary stories, okay? Lili gets bad dreams.”

“Got it.” Georgia saluted him on her way down the stairs.

He couldn’t figure her out. She acted odd, then nice, then clueless, then evasive. At least Lili seemed to like her, despite the boogeyman joke. But he wanted to find out why she made Mom uncomfortable.

He walked up to the closed room and jiggled the knob. Well, she wasn’t lying about it being locked.



Vincent hugged his parents while Lili clung to Dad’s leg like she wasn’t going to let him go ever, until she got distracted by a yellow butterfly.

Vincent pulled out his phone. No bars, of course. He hadn’t had reception for the last hour of their drive, so he’d need internet if he wanted to text or game with friends or anything. “What’s the Wi-Fi, Uncle Leo?”

“The what now?” Uncle Leo’s bushy eyebrows drew down, casting a shadow over his eyes.

“You know, Leo,” Dad said. “For the internet. The password and all.”

“Ahh, I have the World Wide Web on my PC in the

studio,” Uncle Leo said, “but I can’t have these kids running in and out of there. It’s best to just use the telephone.”

Georgia rolled her eyes. “Gramps only has dial-up.”

Dad stifled a laugh.

“Oh no!” Mom said. “Then we won’t be able to video chat with the kids while we’re on the cruise!”

“What’s dial-up?” Lili asked.

“It’s like Stone Age internet,” Georgia said.

Uncle Leo crossed his arms. “It’s a waste of money when I already pay the phone bill. Anyone who wants to get ahold of me knows how.”

Great. A week in middle-of-nowhere Texas surrounded by the very thing he didn’t want to think about and no internet. At least he’d downloaded a couple of games onto his console before their trip.

“It’s less than a week,” Dad said. “It’ll be good for you. Fresh air and all that.”

“You’ll find things to do. There’s so much art to look at, and Uncle Leo can show you how he restores paintings,” Mom said. “Boredom breeds creativity, right?”

By which she obviously meant “Start painting again.” Not likely. And if there was anything else to do in an old house in the middle of nowhere with no internet, Vincent couldn’t imagine what.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Carolyn Leiloglou is the granddaughter of art collectors, daughter of an art teacher, and homeschooling mom to four wildly creative kids. She's the award-winning author of the picture book *Library's Most Wanted*, and her poems and short stories have appeared in children's magazines around the world. You can find her at carolynleiloglou.com.

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Vivienne TO is a New Zealand-based illustrator and visual development artist. She has designed several animated feature films and created illustrations for many middle grade books. When she isn't drawing, Vivienne can be found knitting on the couch, watching cute dogs at the local park, or reading in the children's section of the library.