

WE ALL MATTER

A fictional story written by Brynn Weiss

1

Three girls, each of them living with a grandparent, sat down on the rug in Miss Tiffany's first-grade classroom for storytime. They had classmates, but this story is focused on these three girls. There was Isabelle (she liked being called Izzy) Johnson, Chloe Rogers, and Juanita LeFig. Miss Tiffany was barely twenty, and she was the youngest and most lively teacher in the school. She enjoyed interactive activities and often changed her lesson plans at the last minute, and she turned assignments into songs or games. "Hello, students!" said Miss Tiffany, her eyes glowing as much as the children's eyes. "Today, we're going to read a book called Tina the Lonely Turtle." The students who had read that book looked excited, the ones who had not read it clapped, and they all eagerly waited for their teacher to begin reading. Izzy, Chloe, and Juanita related Tina instantly, and they normally felt the same way Tina did: lonely, not useful, forgotten. At the end, the animals learned to appreciate Tina, and the last line was: "Why do you matter?" "Can you answer that?" asked Miss Tiffany, genuinely curious. "Why do you matter? Roger?" Roger said uncertainly, "I'm good at soccer?" Miss Tiffany clapped her hands enthusiastically, encouraging other students to speak up. After three other kids had been called on, Miss Tiffany said, "Let's see. Chloe, why do you matter?" Chloe wished she could have curled up into a tiny ball, but instead, she whispered an inaudible reply. The two playful braids that Miss Tiffany was known for shook as she leaned in and said, "Chloe, can you repeat that?" Chloe repeated herself softly. She could see her teacher's jingle-bell earrings wiggle as she said, "What was that?" Frustrated, Chloe shouted, "I don't!" She burst into tears and sat down on the ground, cupping her hands over her eyes and sobbing into them. The rest of the students uncomfortably looked at one another. Nobody had ever cried in school. They all hovered between comforting her or scooting away. Through her heavy tears, Chloe whimpered, "I don't matter. I really don't." Miss Tiffany had the personality of a child, and she knew exactly how to gently stop the tears. She said kindly, "Chloe, honey, do you need to go to the bathroom and wipe the tears off your face?" Chloe nodded and didn't hesitate to race out the door, only stopping to grab a tissue and blow her nose. "Come, students," said Miss Tiffany, her funny, cheerful self again. "Let's go to our desks and color some bunnies!" All the students cheered, because coloring was their favorite part of the day. Everyone, even Miss Tiffany, was so focused on coloring their bunnies that they didn't notice Izzy and Juanita slipping out of the room and darting down the hall towards the bathrooms.

2

Chloe had locked herself in the biggest bathroom stall and was now playing with the plastic toy monkeys she found in her pocket. As she turned a piece of toilet paper into a little ramp, she heard an almost silent knock at the door. Because they had been friends for a very long time, she knew who it was. Still choked up from her crying, she said, "Go away, Izzy." A kind and quiet voice said, "Chloe, we need to talk to you." "Juanita?" wailed Chloe. "You're here too?" Izzy threatened, "Hairpins unlock these doors, and I have a hairpin!" Chloe sighed, but opened the door just quickly enough to let them inside before locking it again. "What are you doing?" said Chloe. She had a fiery temper, and her friends knew that this Chloe-volcano was about to erupt, so quickly tried to pour water on her. Izzy said, "I know you were just being truthful, but honesty isn't always the best option." Juanita, who listened to Miss Tiffany more than her friends, shot Izzy a glare. Although she was normally kind and caring, her anger was still almost as bad as Chloe's. Chloe opened her mouth to say something, but heard a clicking noise, and she hissed, "Quiet! It's Miss Tiffany!" They peeked through the peephole in the door, and their faces were squished together

as they all desperately tried to look through. Miss Tiffany was there, in her striped pants and her quilt-like dress. She hardly ever left her students, so there was probably an extremely important purpose for her leaving. Last Halloween, Miss Tiffany was super hungry, but she refused to go get any snacks until school ended and everyone had left. Miss Tiffany whispered, "Chloe? Are you here? Juanita? Izzy? Where are you, girls? I just want you to know that you should visit Madame Lilly's hut." She almost absentmindedly placed a paper by the sink. After she left, the three girls practically tackled each other to grab the paper. Juanita succeeded, and she said, "It's a map. It starts at the playground...and it goes to a hut! Madame Lilly's hut!" She looked up at Chloe and Izzy. All of their faces were shining brighter than the Sun, and the remaining tears on Chloe's face had dried or vanished. Izzy's voice trembled with excitement as she said, "What are we waiting for? Let's go."

3

"I wish the map had shown this," groaned Chloe as they caught sight of a swamp for the third time that day. "Why did we go here?" grumbled Izzy as they began to wade through the swamp. They had been traveling for two days, and nobody except Juanita still showed enthusiasm or hope. But even Juanita was struggling to keep their anger in, and they each had at least one outburst a day-although Juanita's were far less contagious and almost amusing. They knew quite well that there were many bad things on a journey-wolves, poisonous plants, natural disasters-but they knew the worst thing. It was simple but terrible: swamps. Swamps often were full of slugs and snails and fire ants, and sometimes even mice or rats. Several times, they had gone a few minutes before noticing that a praying mantis had nested in their shoe. Walking through a swamp was like walking through quicksand. It always stuck to them, and it somehow managed to cover the body parts they hadn't put in the swamp, including shoulders, necks, arms, and heads. They had so much swamp slime on them that they looked like a Dirt Creature from their favorite movie, *Interdimensional Zombies*. A Dirt Creature was basically a mummy with mud instead of toilet paper. Once they got out of the swamp, nothing got easier. They had to scrape seventeen tiny eggs out of Izzy's sock, escape a giant swarm of hornets, get a parrot to drop Chloe's hat, and they also had to sneak into a coyote's territory to grab Juanita's backpack. Then, the hornets had come back and chased them until the girls fell into a rosebush. After a painful session of removing thorns from their body, they continued to hike down the path. Finally, they found the hut. It looked just like a tree and fit in perfectly with the jungle. The windows were covered in DO NOT DISTURB signs, and Madame Lilly had gone to great lengths to make sure nobody noticed her house and therefore didn't disturb her by coating the welcome mat in leaves, allowing fields of tiny trees to grow on her roof, and occasionally placing a toy owl or a toy iguana on the steps, convincing other animals that this was an occupied territory. They peeked through the windows. The lights weren't on, but it looked like Madame Lilly brewed potions or something. Pictures of certain people, failed experiments, or awards lined the walls. The counter, which went around the entire house, held things like bubbling cauldrons that fizzled so loudly that they could hear it, potted plants, and lots and lots of journals. Only a note sat on the doorstep. Juanita picked it up and gasped.

My friends,

I am currently on vacation in France. It is a beautiful place. You must go sometime. If you have come to me to discover why you matter, think about it. Everyone matters. Everyone. You probably hide under layers of shyness, doubt, and confusion, but you have a warm heart that purely reflects on the world why you matter. Someone knows this too. Is it a friend? A parent? A teacher? With hopes that learning this will make your day,

Madame Gertrude Lilly

This news hit the girls like a comet. They all realized that they mattered-and they made their mark on the world. "Come on!" said Juanita firmly. "We still have to get back!" The girls groaned.

Epilogue

The girls in this story have grown up, and now they are women. Juanita is 35, Izzy is 39, and Chloe is 37. They are all doing what they love for a living: Juanita is an author, Izzy is a soccer coach, and Chloe is a toymaker. Juanita laid down on the blanket her sons Jeremy and Jack had put in the yard for her as she finished writing the first chapter of her latest book. She only wrote about animals, and her books included *The Twelve Puppies*, *Ant Attack!*, and the prizewinning *Zap the Super Cat!* Right now, she was working on her third comedy book, *Snakes Can't Be Spies!* She lived on a cozy farm in Missouri, and had recently adopted two seven-year-old boys. Izzy taught soccer at the Bright Light College. She lived in an apartment in Utah, and was married to a man named Zack. Chloe was a toymaker. She invented several types of toys, including *Chrysalis Babies*, *Little Unicorns*, and *Dragon Guardians*. The *Dragon Guardians* came in playsets, and you could make an entire city of toy dragons. *Little Unicorns* came in big packets, and they were stuffed animals. *Chrysalis Babies* came in plastic chrysalises and you could unfold it to reveal a blue morpho butterfly. She was the founder of the company *Toys-for-Kids*. She lived in a house in California, and had three daughters named Brooke, Candy, and Rose. They had one golden retriever puppy named Holly. Chloe wasn't a fan of dogs, and she had only gotten one to amuse her daughters while she worked. On Saturday, May 12th, she waited outside excitedly. Every other Saturday, her childhood friends came over. They weren't best friends anymore and had moved away from each other just a year after college, but they were still friends, and they enjoyed each other's company. They got together at a school for an assembly. When they were there, Juanita got offstage to take a drink of water. She heard a young boy sniffle, "I'm useless." "Well," said Juanita, smiling slightly as she remembered something someone had told her when she was a child. "Why do you matter?"