

Eleven

By Sandra Cisneros

What they don't understand about birthdays and what they never tell you is that when you're eleven, you're also ten, and nine, and eight, and seven, and six, and five, and four, and three, and two, and one. And when you wake up on your eleventh birthday you expect to feel eleven, but you don't. You open your eyes and everything's just like yesterday, only it's today. And you don't feel eleven at all. You feel like you're still ten. And you are—underneath the year that makes you eleven.

Like some days you might say something stupid, and that's the part of you that's still ten. Or maybe some days you might need to sit on your mama's lap because you're scared, and that's the part of you that's five. And maybe one day when you're all grown up maybe you will need to cry like if you're three, and that's okay. That's what I tell Mama when she's sad and needs to cry. Maybe she's feeling three.

Because the way you grow old is kind of like an onion or like the rings inside a tree trunk or like my little wooden dolls that fit one inside the other, each year inside the next one. That's how being eleven years old is.

You don't feel eleven. Not right away. It takes a few days, weeks even, sometimes even months before you say Eleven when they ask you. And you don't feel smart eleven, not until you're almost twelve. That's the way it is.

Only today I wish I didn't have only eleven years rattling inside me like pennies in a tin Band-Aid box. Today I wish I was one hundred and two instead of eleven because if I was one hundred and two I'd have known what to say when Mrs. Price put the red sweater on my desk. I would've known how to tell her it wasn't mine instead of just sitting there with that look on my face and nothing coming out of my mouth.

"Whose is this?" Mrs. Price says, and she holds the red sweater up in the air for all the class to see. "Whose? It's been sitting in the coatroom for a month."

"Not mine," says everybody. "Not me."

"It has to belong to somebody," Mrs. Price keeps saying, but nobody can remember. It's an ugly sweater with red plastic buttons and a collar and sleeves all stretched out like you could use it for a jump rope. It's maybe a thousand years old and even if it belonged to me I wouldn't say so.

Maybe because I'm skinny, maybe because she doesn't like me, that stupid Sylvia Saldivar says, "I think it belongs to Rachel." An ugly sweater like that, all raggedy and old, but Mrs. Price believes her. Mrs. Price takes the sweater and puts it right on my desk, but when I open my mouth nothing comes out.

"That's not, I don't, you're not . . . Not mine," I finally say in a little voice that was maybe me when I was four.

"Of course it's yours," Mrs. Price says, "I remember you wearing it once." Because she's older and the teacher, she's right and I'm not.

Not mine, not mine, not mine, but Mrs. Price is already turning to page thirty-two, and math problem number four. I don't know why but all of a sudden I'm feeling sick inside, like the part of me that's three wants to come out of my eyes, only I squeeze them shut tight and bite down on my teeth real hard and try to remember today I am eleven,

eleven. Mama is making a cake for me for tonight, and when Papa comes home everybody will sing Happy birthday, happy birthday to you.

But when the sick feeling goes away and I open my eyes, the red sweater's still sitting there like a big red mountain. I move the red sweater to the corner of my desk with my ruler. I move my pencil and books and eraser as far from it as possible. I even move my chair a little to the right. Not mine, not mine, not mine.

In my head I'm thinking how long till lunchtime, how long till I can take the red sweater and throw it over the schoolyard fence, or leave it hanging on a parking meter, or bunch it up into a little ball and toss it in the alley. Except when math period ends Mrs. Price says loud and in front of everybody, "Now, Rachel, that's enough," because she sees I've shoved the red sweater to the tippy-tip corner of my desk and it's hanging all over the edge like a waterfall, but I don't care.

"Rachel," Mrs. Price says. She says it like she's getting mad. "You put that sweater on right now and no more nonsense."

"But it's not—"

"Now!" Mrs. Price says.

This is when I wish I wasn't eleven, because all the years inside of me—ten, nine, eight, seven, six, five, four, three, two, and one—are pushing at the back of my eyes when I put one arm through one sleeve of the sweater that smells like cottage cheese, and then the other arm through the other and stand there with my arms apart like if the sweater hurts me and it does, all itchy and full of germs that aren't mine.

That's when everything I've been holding in since this morning, since when Mrs. Price put the sweater on my desk, finally lets go, and all of a sudden I'm crying in front of everybody. I wish I was invisible but I'm not. I'm eleven and it's my birthday today and I'm crying like I'm three in front of everybody. I put my head down on the desk and bury my face in my stupid clown-sweater arms. My face all hot and spit coming out of my mouth because I can't stop the little animal noises from coming out of me, until there aren't any more tears left in my eyes, and it's just my body shaking like when you have the hiccups, and my whole head hurts like when you drink milk too fast.

But the worst part is right before the bell rings for lunch. That stupid Phyllis Lopez, who is even dumber than Sylvia Saldivar, says she remembers the red sweater is hers! I take it off right away and give it to her, only Mrs. Price pretends like everything's okay.

Today I'm eleven. There's a cake Mama's making for tonight, and when Papa comes home from work we'll eat it. There'll be candles and presents and everybody will sing Happy birthday, happy birthday to you, Rachel, only it's too late.

I'm eleven today. I'm eleven, ten, nine, eight, seven, six, five, four, three, two, and one, but I wish I was one hundred and two. I wish I was anything but eleven, because I want today to be far away already, far away like a runaway balloon, like a tiny o in the sky, so tiny-tiny you have to close your eyes to see it.

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Literary Essay On "Eleven" by Sandra Cisneros Written By Jill

In my life, not everything ends up like a fairytale. I like to read books where characters are like me. They don't live fairytale lives. We have the same kinds of problems. Many people read Sandra Cisneros's essay "Eleven" and think it's about a girl who has to wear a sweater she doesn't want to wear. But I think the story is about a girl who struggles to hold onto herself when she is challenged by people who have power over her.

When Rachel's teacher, Mrs. Price, challenges Rachel, Rachel loses herself. One day Mrs. Price puts a stretched out, itchy, red sweater on Rachel's desk saying "I know this is yours. I saw you wearing it once." Rachel knows that the sweater isn't hers and tries to tell Mrs. Price, but Mrs. Price doesn't believe her. Rachel reacts to Mrs. Price's actions by losing herself "In my head, I'm thinking... how long till lunch time, how long till I can take the red sweater and throw it over the school



yard fence, or leave it hanging on a parking meter or bunch it up into a little ball and toss it over the alley?" This shows that Rachel loses herself because she's not listening to her teacher, she's dreaming about a whole other place. It is also important to see that Rachel has all this good thinking about the sweater but when she wants to say the sweater isn't hers, she squeaks and stammers, unable to speak. "But it's not," Rachel says. "Now" Mrs. Price replies. Rachel loses herself by not finding complete words to say when Mrs. Price challenges her.

When Rachel's classmates challenge Rachel, Rachel loses herself. Sylvia Saldivar puts Rachel on the spot ^{light} when she says to Mrs. Price, "I think the sweater is Rachel's." Sylvia is challenging Rachel, she is being mean and she makes Rachel feel lost, Rachel cries to let her emotions out. Rachel feels sick from Sylvia. Rachel tries to cover herself up by putting her head in her sleeve. Tears stream down her face. She doesn't feel special like it's her birthday. Instead she feels



lost in Sylvia's challenge.

In "Eleven" Rachel is overpowered by both Mrs. Price and Sylvia Saldivar and this causes her to lose herself. I used to think that when people turn eleven they feel strong and have confidence but I have learned that when you're eleven you're also 10, 9, 8, 7, 6, 5, 4, 3, 2 and 1.

A Literary Essay
Based on the Book
Baseball Saved Us by Ken Mochizuki

Depending on how you look at it, baseball can be a game of fun, a serious sport, or a way to cope with difficulties in life. The game itself requires cooperation, strategy, and above all, determination. After reading the story, *Baseball Saved Us*, and talking about it with others, it seems that not everyone thinks about the story in the same way. Some people think that the story is about a group of Japanese-Americans who play baseball just to keep busy while they are detained in an internment camp during World War II. They think that the people just wanted to do something fun because they were bored. But I think the story is much more than that. I think *Baseball Saved Us* is really about how the power of determination helped a group of Americans cope who were unjustly detained and wanted to have some sense of normalcy in their lives once again.

Early in the story, there is evidence of the power of determination. For example, the narrator states that the Japanese-Americans didn't have anything they needed for baseball, but they found ways to get what they needed. They created the baseball field with shovels and water. They build bleachers out of trees. They sewed uniforms out of mattress covers. All the while, the guards were watching to make sure they did not step out of line. These Japanese-Americans were being confined after Japan had declared war on the United States - even though they had nothing to do with it. This shows that, through the power of determination, they were able to experience a part of the everyday life they once enjoyed.

Later in the story, in one of the last games of the year to decide the championship, a young boy nicknamed Shorty showed determination when he was up to bat with two strikes and a runner on second. He wanted to prove to himself, the other kids, and the guards that he could play well, even though he usually grounded out. The other players teased him when he was up to bat. He "glanced at the guardhouse behind the left field foul line and saw the man in the tower, leaning on the rail with the blinding sun glinting off his sunglasses. He was always watching, always staring." This suddenly made him mad. He gripped the bat harder and decided that he was going to hit the ball past the guardhouse even if it killed him. And he did! He crossed home plate, and his teammates lifted him onto their shoulders in celebration. This shows that Shorty, through the power of determination, was able to prove to himself and to others that he was a strong player.

At the end of the story, when the Japanese-Americans were released from the internment camp and returned home, Shorty showed determination during the first game of the season. Everything was not really better at home as he hoped it would be. Shorty was getting teased because he was the only Japanese-American on the team. He "looked at the pitcher. The sun glinted off his glasses as he stood on the mound, like the guard in the tower." Shorty



desperately wanted to show his teammates that he was not the enemy. He "swung and felt that solid whack again." In the end, Shorty's power of determination helped him win the game for his team.

Now, as I think about the power of determination, I realize that much of what we can accomplish in life is because of how strongly we feel on the inside. When we dig down deep and will ourselves to accomplish our goals, we are far more successful than if we rely solely on our physical ability. In my life, I have found that determination is the key to getting good grades in school, doing well in sports, and reaching other goals. It takes body and mind to accomplish what we want in life. If you dig down deep and find your own reason to be determined, it will make a difference in your life.

Your Name in Gold

Anne sat at the breakfast table, eating her cornflakes and reading the print on the cereal box in front of her. "Tastee Cornflakes—Great New Offer!" the box read. "See back of box for details."

Anne's older sister, Mary, sat across from her, reading the other side of the cereal box. "Hey, Anne," she said, "look at this awesome prize—*your name in gold*."

As Mary read on, Anne's interest in the prize grew. "Just send in one dollar with proof-of-purchase seal from this box and spell out your first name on the information blank. We will send you a special pin with your name spelled in gold. (Only one per family, please.)"

Anne grabbed the box and looked on the back, her eyes brightening with excitement. The name *Jennifer* was spelled out in sparkling gold. "That's a neat idea," she said. "A pin with my very own name spelled out in gold. I'm going to send in for it."

"Sorry, Anne, I saw it first," said Mary, "so I get first dibs on it. Besides, you don't have a dollar to send in, and I do."

"But I want a pin like that so badly," said Anne. "Please let me have it!"

"Nope," said her sister.

"You always get your way—just because you're older than me," said Anne, her lower lip trembling as her eyes filled with tears. "Just go ahead and send in for it. See if I care!" She threw down her spoon and ran from the kitchen.

Several weeks passed. One day the mailman brought a small package addressed to Mary. Anne was dying to see the pin, but she wouldn't let Mary know how eager she was. Mary took the package to her room. Anne casually followed her in and sat on the bed.

"Well, I guess they sent you your pin. I sure hope you like it," Anne said in a mean voice. Mary slowly took the paper off the package. She opened a little white box and carefully lifted off the top layer of white cotton. "Oh, it's beautiful!" Mary said. "Just like the cereal box said, *your name in gold*. Four beautiful letters. Would you like to see it, Anne?"

"No, I don't care about your dumb old pin."

Mary put the white box on the dresser and went downstairs.

Anne was alone in the bedroom. Soon she couldn't wait any longer, so she walked over to the dresser. As she looked in the small white box, she gasped. Mixed feelings of love for her sister and shame at herself welled up within her, and the pin became a sparkling gold blur through her tears.

There on the pin were four beautiful letters—her name in gold: A-N-N-E.

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pack of food and a few tools and a heavy cloth to erect a hasty tent. Gabriel saw himself sleeping among coyotes. But next he saw himself sleeping beneath the glittering lights of a movie theater, near the bus stop.

Gabriel was a boy who thought about things so seriously, so fully, that on this evening he nearly missed hearing a cry from the street. The cry was so weak and faraway in his mind that, for him, it could have been the slow lifting of a stubborn window. It could have been the creak of an old man's legs. It could have been the wind.

But it was not the wind, and it came to Gabriel slowly that he did, indeed, hear something, and that it did, indeed, sound like a cry from the street.

Gabriel picked himself up from the stoop and began to walk carefully along the edge of the street, peering into the gloom and the dusk. The cry came again and Gabriel's ears tingled and he walked faster.

He stared into the street, up and down it, knowing something was there. The street was so gray that he could not see. . . . But not only the street was gray.

There, sitting on skinny stick-legs, wobbling



Spaghetti

It was evening, and people sat outside, talking quietly among themselves. On the stoop of a tall building of crumbling bricks and rotting wood sat a boy. His name was Gabriel and he wished for some company.

Gabriel was thinking about things. He remembered being the only boy in class with the right answer that day, and he remembered the butter sandwich he had had for lunch. Gabriel was thinking that he would like to live outside all the time. He imagined himself carrying a

to and fro, was a tiny gray kitten. No cars had passed to frighten it, and so it just sat in the street and cried its windy, creaky cry and waited.

Gabriel was amazed. He had never imagined he would be lucky enough one day to find a kitten. He walked into the street and lifted the kitten into his hands.

Gabriel sat on the sidewalk with the kitten next to his cheek and thought. The kitten smelled of pasta noodles, and he wondered if it belonged to a friendly Italian man somewhere in the city. Gabriel called the kitten Spaghetti.

Gabriel and Spaghetti returned to the stoop. It occurred to Gabriel to walk the neighborhood and look for the Italian man, but the purring was so loud, so near his ear, that he could not think as seriously, as fully, as before.

Gabriel no longer wanted to live outside. He knew he had a room and a bed of his own in the tall building. So he stood up, with Spaghetti under his chin, and went inside to show his kitten where they would live together.

turn on a small color television he had sitting in a corner, and he and Rocky would watch the soap operas. Rocky liked to scream when the romantic music came on, and Mr. Tillian would yell at him to shut up, but they seemed to enjoy themselves.

The more Mr. Tillian grew to like his parrot, and the more he talked to it instead of to people, the more embarrassed Harry became. Harry would stroll past the shop, on his way somewhere else, and he'd take a quick look inside to see what his dad was doing. Mr. Tillian was always talking to the bird. So Harry kept walking.

At home things were different. Harry and his father joked with each other at the dinner table as they always had—Mr. Tillian teasing Harry about his smelly socks; Harry teasing Mr. Tillian about his blubbery stomach. At home things seemed all right.

But one day, Mr. Tillian became ill. He had been at work, unpacking boxes of caramels, when he had grabbed his chest and fallen over on top of the candy. A customer had found him, and he was taken to the hospital in an ambulance.

bins or to sample Mr. Tillian's latest batch of roasted peanuts. Mr. Tillian looked forward to seeing his son and his son's friends every day. He liked the company.

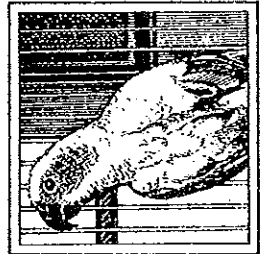
When Harry entered junior high school, though, he didn't come by the candy and nut shop as often. Nor did his friends. They were older and they had more spending money. They went to a burger place. They played video games. They shopped for records. None of them were much interested in candy and nuts anymore.

A new group of children came to Mr. Tillian's shop now. But not Harry Tillian and his friends.

The year Harry turned twelve was also the year Mr. Tillian got a parrot. He went to a pet store one day and bought one for more money than he could really afford. He brought the parrot to his shop, set its cage near the sign for maple clusters and named it Rocky.

Harry thought this was the strangest thing his father had ever done, and he told him so, but Mr. Tillian just ignored him.

Rocky was good company for Mr. Tillian. When business was slow, Mr. Tillian would



Papa's Parrot

Though his father was fat and merely owned a candy and nut shop, Harry Tillian liked his papa. Harry stopped liking candy and nuts when he was around seven, but, in spite of this, he and Mr. Tillian had remained friends and were still friends the year Harry turned twelve.

For years, after school, Harry had always stopped in to see his father at work. Many of Harry's friends stopped there, too, to spend a few cents choosing penny candy from the giant

Mr. Tillian couldn't leave the hospital. He lay in bed, tubes in his arms, and he worried about his shop. New shipments of candy and nuts would be arriving. Rocky would be hungry. Who would take care of things?

Harry said he would. Harry told his father that he would go to the store every day after school and unpack boxes. He would sort out all the candy and nuts. He would even feed Rocky.

So, the next morning, while Mr. Tillian lay in his hospital bed, Harry took the shop key to school with him. After school he left his friends and walked to the empty shop alone. In all the days of his life, Harry had never seen the shop closed after school. Harry didn't even remember what the CLOSED sign looked like. The key stuck in the lock three times, and inside he had to search all the walls for the light switch.

The shop was as his father had left it. Even the caramels were still spilled on the floor. Harry bent down and picked them up one by one, dropping them back in the boxes. The bird in its cage watched him silently.

Harry opened the new boxes his father

hadn't gotten to. Peppermints. Jawbreakers. Toffee creams. Strawberry kisses. Harry traveled from bin to bin, putting the candies where they belonged.

"Hello!"

Harry jumped, spilling a box of jawbreakers.

"Hello, Rocky!"

Harry stared at the parrot. He had forgotten it was there. The bird had been so quiet, and Harry had been thinking only of the candy.

"Hello," Harry said.

"Hello, Rocky!" answered the parrot.

Harry walked slowly over to the cage. The parrot's food cup was empty. Its water was dirty. The bottom of the cage was a mess.

Harry carried the cage into the back room.

"Hello, Rocky!"

"Is that all you can say, you dumb bird?" Harry mumbled. The bird said nothing else.

Harry cleaned the bottom of the cage, refilled the food and water cups, then put the cage back in its place and resumed sorting the candy.

"Where's Harry?"

Harry looked up.

"Where's Harry?"

Harry stared at the parrot.

"Where's Harry?"

Chills ran down Harry's back. What could the bird mean? It was like something from "The Twilight Zone."

"Where's Harry?"

Harry swallowed and said, "I'm here. I'm here, you stupid bird."

"You stupid bird!" said the parrot.

Well, at least he's got one thing straight, thought Harry.

"Miss him! Miss him! Where's Harry? You stupid bird!"

Harry stood with a handful of peppermints. "What?" he asked.

"Where's Harry?" said the parrot.

"I'm here, you stupid bird! I'm here!" Harry

yelled. He threw the peppermints at the cage, and the bird screamed and clung to its perch.

Harry sobbed, "I'm here." The tears were coming.

Harry leaned over the glass counter.

"Papa." Harry buried his face in his arms.

"Where's Harry?" repeated the bird.

Harry sighed and wiped his face on his sleeve.

He watched the parrot. He understood now:

Papa's Parrot

someone had been saying, for a long time,
"Where's Harry? Miss him."

Harry finished his unpacking, then swept
the floor of the shop. He checked the furnace
so the bird wouldn't get cold. Then he left to
go visit his papa.

William aka Bill

Kind words do not cost much. Yet they accomplish much.

Blaise Pascal

William was a bully. He moved to our town during the fourth grade from no one knew where, and I wished he would just go back.

William sat in front of me in class, and sometimes when I went to the front of the classroom, he would stick out his foot to trip me. I freaked out every time I had to go up to the front. Even if William didn't end up doing anything to me, he would sit there grinning, his crew-cut hair bristling with pleasure at my tension.

On the first day of fifth grade, William showed up in a stained sweatshirt with his typical Cheshire-cat smile. William's name came right after mine alphabetically, and when our new teacher—a 6'5" giant the kids called "Mr. Sandy"—took the first attendance, he boomed out my name, and then . . . "Bill."

William looked startled.

"Bill?"

"His name is William!" a classmate called out with disgust.

Mr. Sandy looked at William, who was slouched down in his seat.

"Is your name William?"

"Yeah."

"Do you like being called William or Bill?"

"I hate William."

"Bill." Mr. Sandy uttered it and then continued calling the attendance.

During the first weeks, Mr. Sandy asked Bill to pass out papers and take on other duties. He praised Bill's abilities and called on him in class, coaxing answers out of him. Soon, he didn't have to coax, and Bill was raising his hand with the rest of us. Mr. Sandy didn't treat Bill like he was a bully—he treated him like he was any other good kid.

Bill was starting to change. My opinion of "Bully William"—a person to be feared and despised—had changed, too. I realized that Bill had probably been mean because he hadn't felt accepted or liked by the rest of us from the beginning.

We started inviting him into our games. He stopped tripping us in the classroom aisles. Mr. Sandy took Bill aside one day and pointed out that he had natural leadership abilities, which could be helpful.

So instead of controlling the playground like a tyrant, Bill became an honorable leader. Bill taught me how to properly swing a baseball bat. When I tripped and fell down on the playground and broke my nose, Bill was instantly at my side with a tissue.

"I know what to do," he said. "I've had a lot of bloody noses."

"Bill's dad hits him," some kids whispered. I don't know how they knew that, but I knew in my heart it was true. My feelings had completely changed toward Bill over the course of two years. I liked him. I respected him, too, for turning his life around.

Bill didn't go on to sixth grade with us. He moved away as suddenly as he had come, and I didn't know where he had gone. I just wished he'd come back.

Tanya C. Sousa