

Five Steps Away

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My heartbeat speeds up when I steal a glance at the clock. Nearly two hours has passed since I began studying, and I have to be across campus and ready for my lab meeting in exactly three minutes. I hastily pluck out my earbuds and began shoveling my laptop and notebooks into my backpack. In my haste I knock over my water bottle, which falls off the table and shatters the stifling library atmosphere. More than one person glances at me in annoyance. I feel my face grow hot, my embarrassed blush an attempt at an unspoken apology. I've been sitting still so long that my left foot erupts in little pinpricks of tingling pain as I hobble my way out of the maze of bookshelves. When I get to the stairs, I take them two at a time, causing people to leap out of my way with startled grunts. I burst from the stale library air to find yet another surprise—rain.

Great. Just great. I think as I hold my arms above my head to fend off the rain. I glance at my watch. Two minutes. There is no way I'm going to make it on time, let alone look over my notes like I had planned. This is the last meeting of the semester, and I am supposed to give a presentation of what I've been working on in front of the entire department. What an embarrassment of our lab I'll be, showing up late, unprepared, and soaked to the core! I sigh and begin to walk, thinking of excuses I can give for my tardiness. Around me flows the lifeblood of campus— a constant array of students from every walk of life. They all hurry on their way, their only thought to get inside and out of the rain. As I quickly scan the upcoming maze of sidewalks, trying to determine the quickest route, my gaze falls on a girl. And for some inexplicable reason, my rushing thoughts stop.

Her small, black umbrella sways by her side, unused. Her backpack seems to hang weightlessly from her shoulders and she strolls amongst our hurried peers as if the sun is shining bright and there isn't a cloud in the sky. As I watch, she stops and bends down. She picks up something—a small red leaf, indistinguishable from the others littering the sidewalk. For a moment, she stares at the leaf, transfixed. I catch a glimpse of a smile, unmarred by the rain, spread across her entire face. And then, shockingly, she begins to laugh. Her laughter comes without reason, yet flows freely. It seems to invite me to

join in. *Come*, it sings. Join me. *Stop and see the wonder of this world. Come laugh in the rain.* I hear the bell tower chime in the distance. Bong! peals its lonely cry. The answering echo overlaps the next distant clang, creating a phantom chorus of chiming bells which seem to weave past the patter of the rain and the gentle tinkle of the girl's laughter. Time is frozen.

Suddenly I feel frigid water seeping through my shoes and soaking my socks. I stop in the middle of the puddle, standing in shock. I blink once. Twice. The rain falls. The people surge past. One step is all it takes for me to join them. Two steps is all it takes for my socks to be completely soaked. Three steps is all it takes for me to remember my lab meeting. Four steps is all it takes to remember the incessant weight of the world, pressing down with each pounding rain drop. Five steps is all it takes to leave the girl behind.