

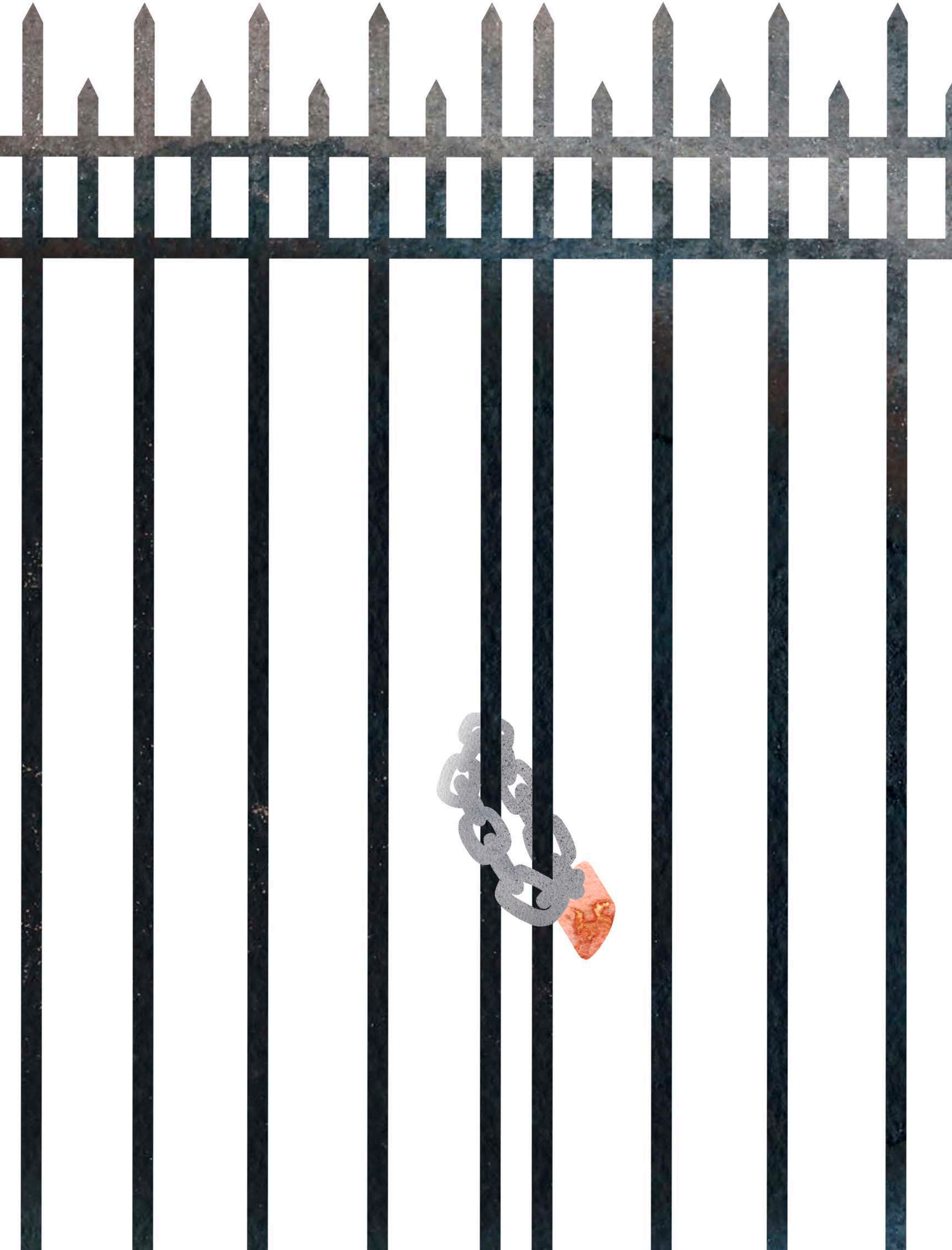


bench friends

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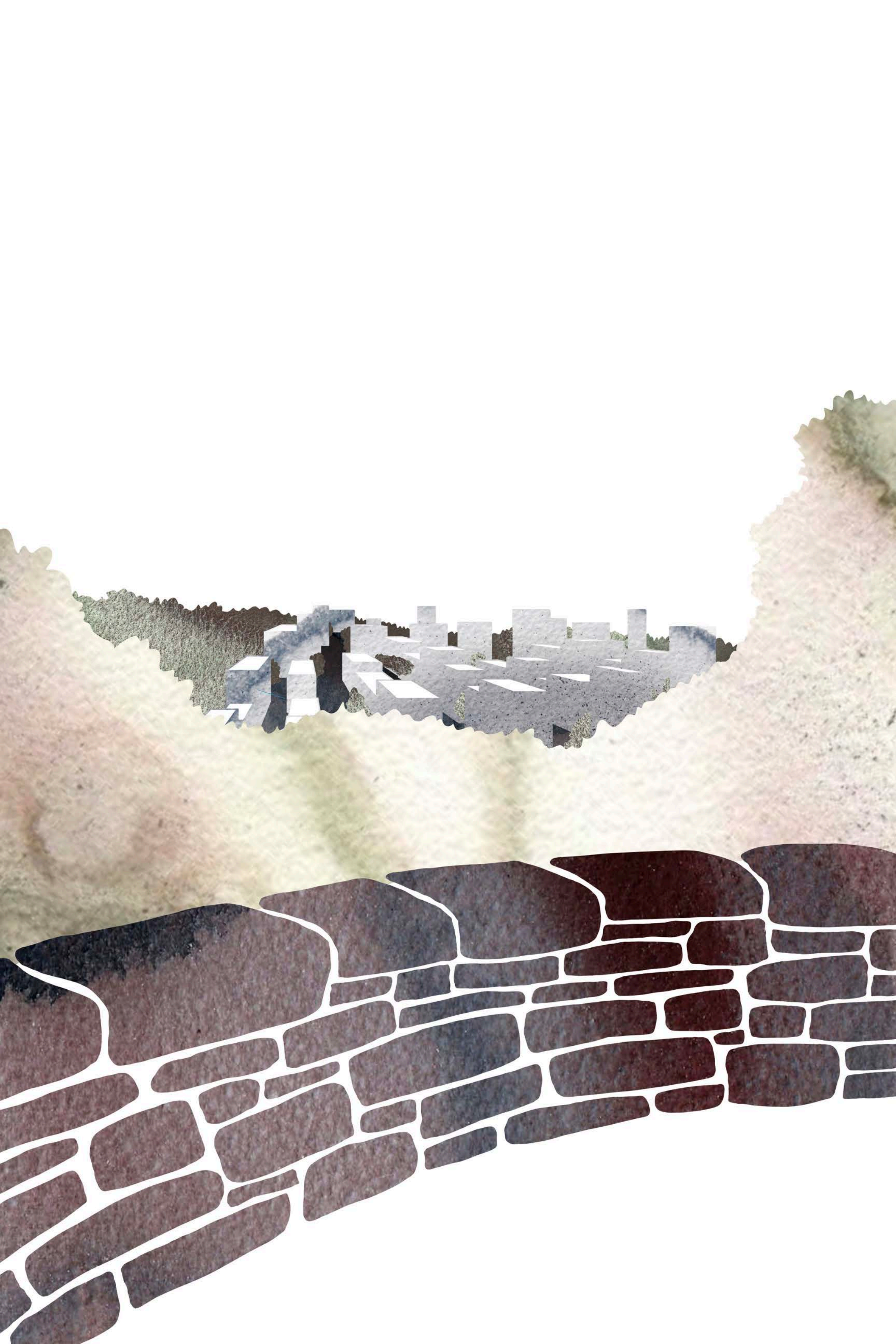
kimmie was listening to her mom tell her two-and-a-half-year-old brother, again, that he could wave hello to the playground, but he could not play on it. she rolled her eyes as her mom tried to explain "invisible germs" to the toddler. By now, kimmie herself had fully internalized the need to not touch anything any stranger might have touched, in order to not get the virus, but it made her sad to have to hear about it over and over again. staying home from school had been fun at first -- like a snow day -- but after weeks of watching her teacher on video chat and staying inside nearly all day long without even being able to have play dates, it no longer felt exciting.



kimmie sighed. she wasn't trying to walk too far ahead of her family, but her mom kept stopping to chase her little brother, and their dog was preoccupied with chewing on sticks, so they weren't making much progress. she hummed to herself, trying to be patient. behind her, she heard her mom start on why her brother could not -- "No, no, please no" -- pick up the ball that he had spotted behind a tree. It was hard for him to understand.



Ahead, the path rounded a corner. The short stone wall along the edge cut into the trees and overlooked her neighborhood. she paused on the landing, picking out her apartment from amongst the buildings. It was her favorite view, and she couldn't help but smile. she heard her mom call after her, "i'm sorry kimmie, we are coming!"

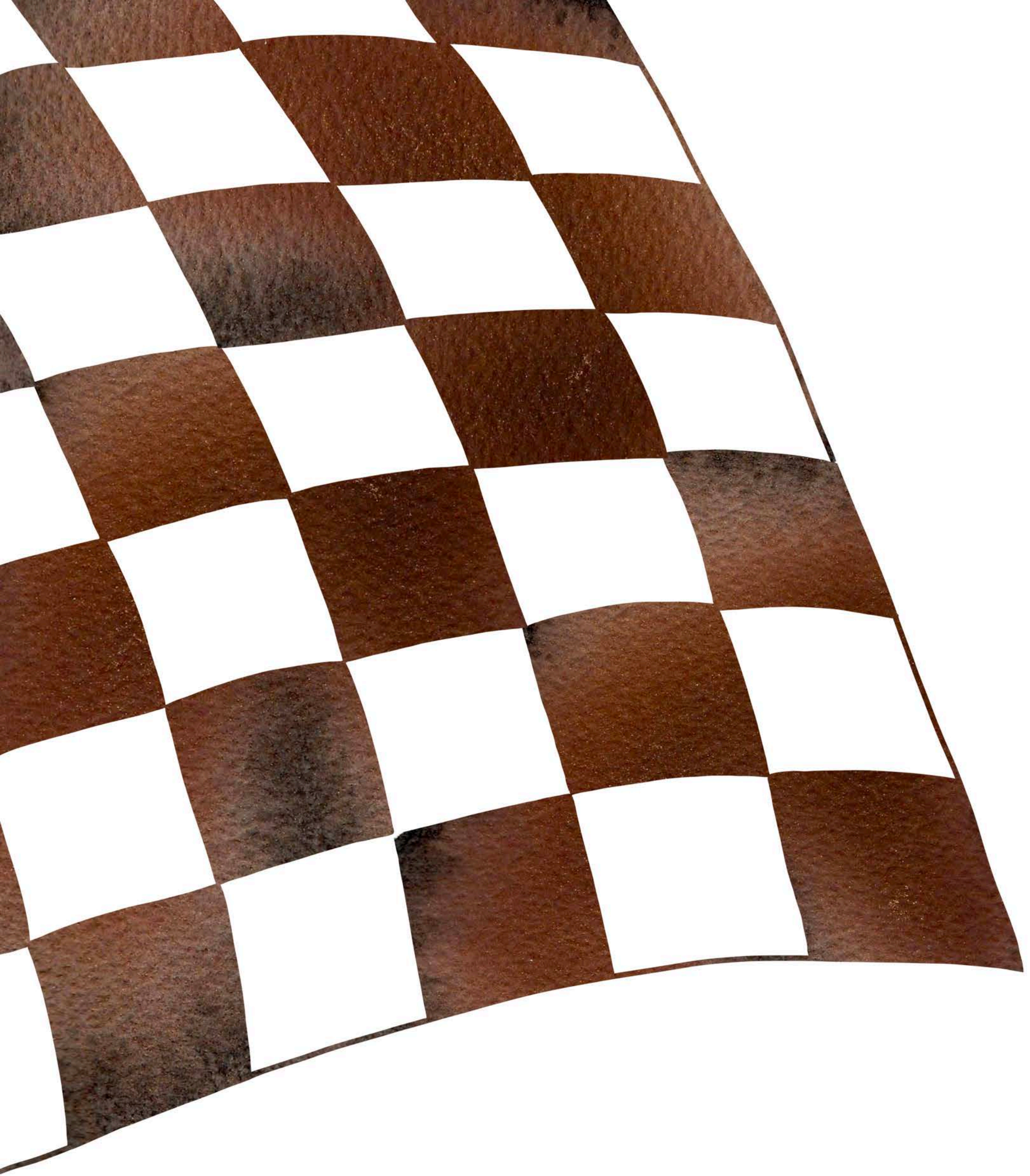


kimmie turned around towards her mother's voice and called back that it was alright. she came upon an old wooden bench situated under a tree full of blossoms. she knew better than to sit down, in case of germs, but something about it made her want to get a closer look. The bench looked a little worn and weathered, but it was well-built and inviting.

simply because she didn't have anything else to do, she picked up a rock near her foot and with it, touched the bench's surface. she was surprised at how easily she was able to mark into the surface. before thinking better of it, she had scribbled her name. "kimmie". suddenly she heard her little brother bounding towards her, and she quickly stood up, letting the rock fall to the ground. she intercepted the toddler and headed towards her family. They walked together back to their apartment. kimmie didn't know that there was another lonely girl nearby.



Monica went to the park later that same day. Her mom had asked her to take her little sister outside -- to blow bubbles, of course. Monica didn't mind. It was nice to be outside in the park again, and besides, she hadn't been able to stop thinking about the old wooden bench. When they found their way up the path to the area where the bench was, Monica's little sister squealed with delight upon seeing all the pink blossoms that covered the ground. As she skipped around collecting as many as she could hold in her little hands, Monica's eyes went to the bench. Immediately she found the new message, and her face lit up. "Oh cool!" she thought. "We are the same age!" Being careful to not let her little sister see what she was doing, Monica quickly responded, "Me 2! Want 2 B friends?" Monica happily blew bubbles for her sister until the whole bottle was nearly empty. Then she followed her sister home along the path. She couldn't help but smile as she thought about her new secret friend!

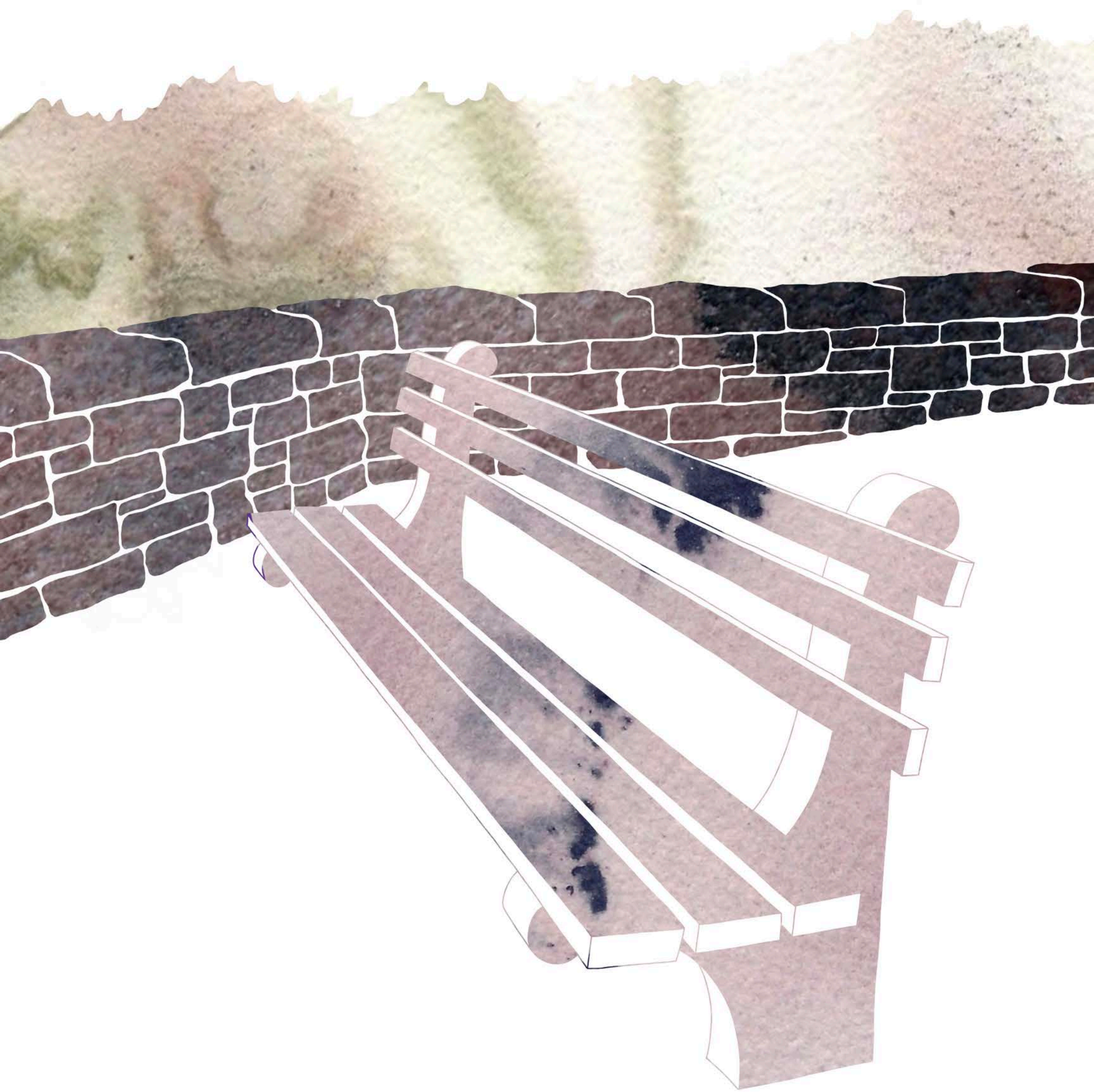


Monica wandered off by herself. It felt so good to be outside in the fresh air. Rounding the corner of the path, Monica spotted a bench ahead of her. She wished she could spread out on it but knew she shouldn't even touch it. She looked up at the blossoms on the tree branches above the bench and sighed.

Monica was about to turn around to walk back towards her family's picnic spot when she noticed something out of the corner of her eye. It was a word scratched into the bench's seat. "Kimmie" she read. "Who is Kimmie?" she wondered. "Maybe she feels alone", just like me. Suddenly, Monica heard her dad call out her name. Quickly, she scoured the ground for a rock and then quickly scratched her own name into the bench. "Monica". Then, she hurried back over to her family, with a little flutter of excitement in her heart.



The next day, Kimmie slowly made her way up the path to the old bench with her dog by her side. Her eyes were at her feet, and she tried to dawdle as much as she could. She really didn't want to have to say goodbye to Monica. She was concentrating so hard on the ground that when she finally rounded the corner, she didn't notice that there was someone else on the landing. The other girl seemed just as startled to see her! Kimmie stopped as to not get any closer. Even at a distance, she realized the girl was crying. Kimmie felt sad for her. "Hi, I'm Kimmie. What's your name?" The other girl's eyes widened. "Oh!" she gasped. "You're Kimmie? I'm Monica!" Kimmie couldn't believe it! Her friend -- who she was finally seeing for the first time! "It's you!" she beamed. Monica noticed Kimmie's dog, and exclaimed "And hi to you too!" The girls both laughed together. "But why are you crying?" Kimmie suddenly remembered to ask. Monica pointed towards their bench. Kimmie followed her gaze, but all she saw was the same old, wooden bench. Then she realized what was different. "All our messages! Where are they? Monica shook her head, still in disbelief. "I came up here as usual to write you a note and was so sad when I realized all our messages were gone. I was worried I would never be able to talk to you again."



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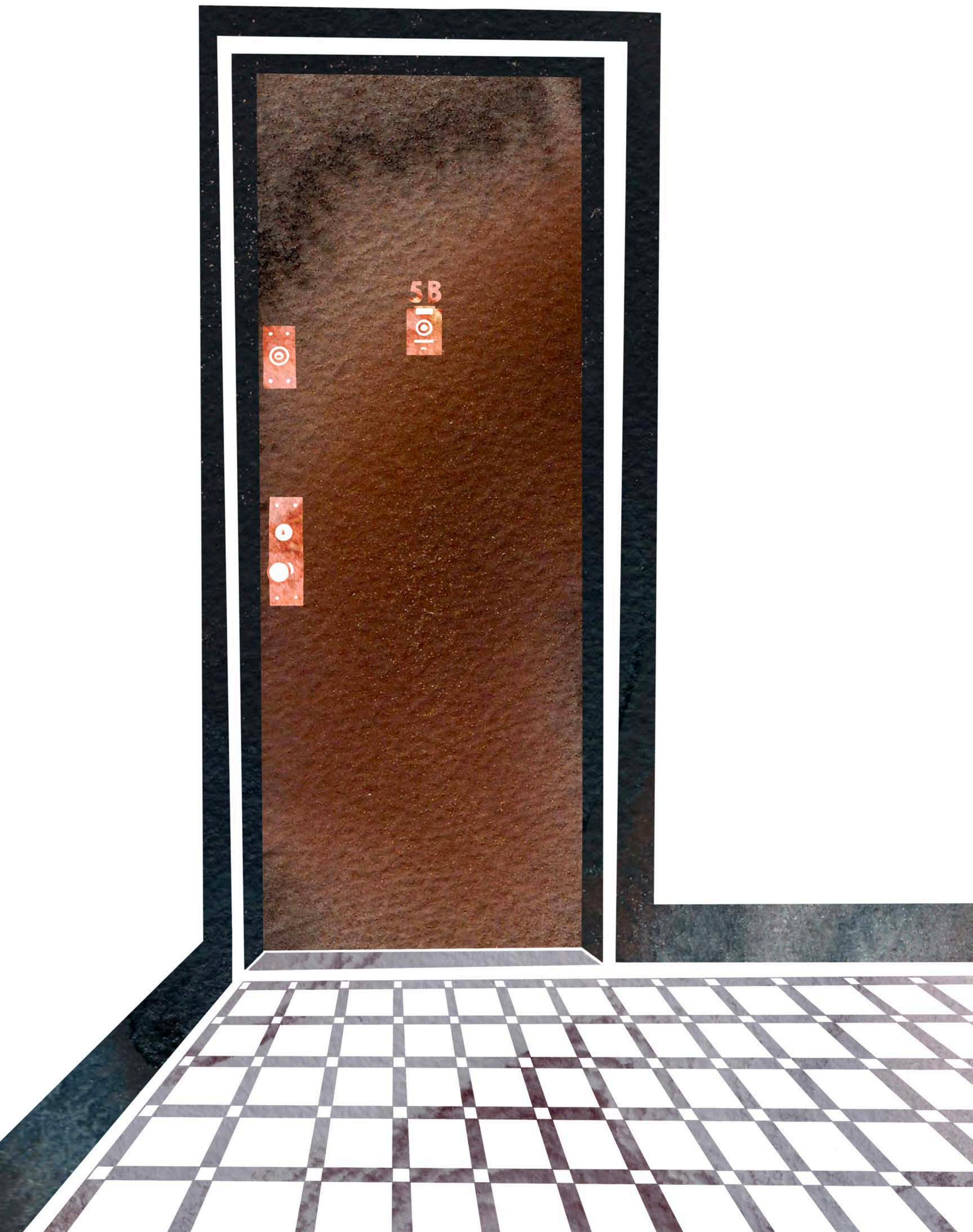
The two girls began leaving messages to each other on the bench almost everyday. They asked about each other's hobbies and talked about sports, art, and favorite school subjects. They told each other how they missed being able to go out to eat and even being able to go to school. They each eagerly went to the park every day to look for a new message on the bench. Neither girl ever considered that the wooden bench was easier to scratch into than it should have been.



The trees around the bench eventually lost their blossoms, and these were soon replaced with green leaves. The bench began to fill up with messages from the two girls. They were best friends, but they didn't even know what each other looked like.



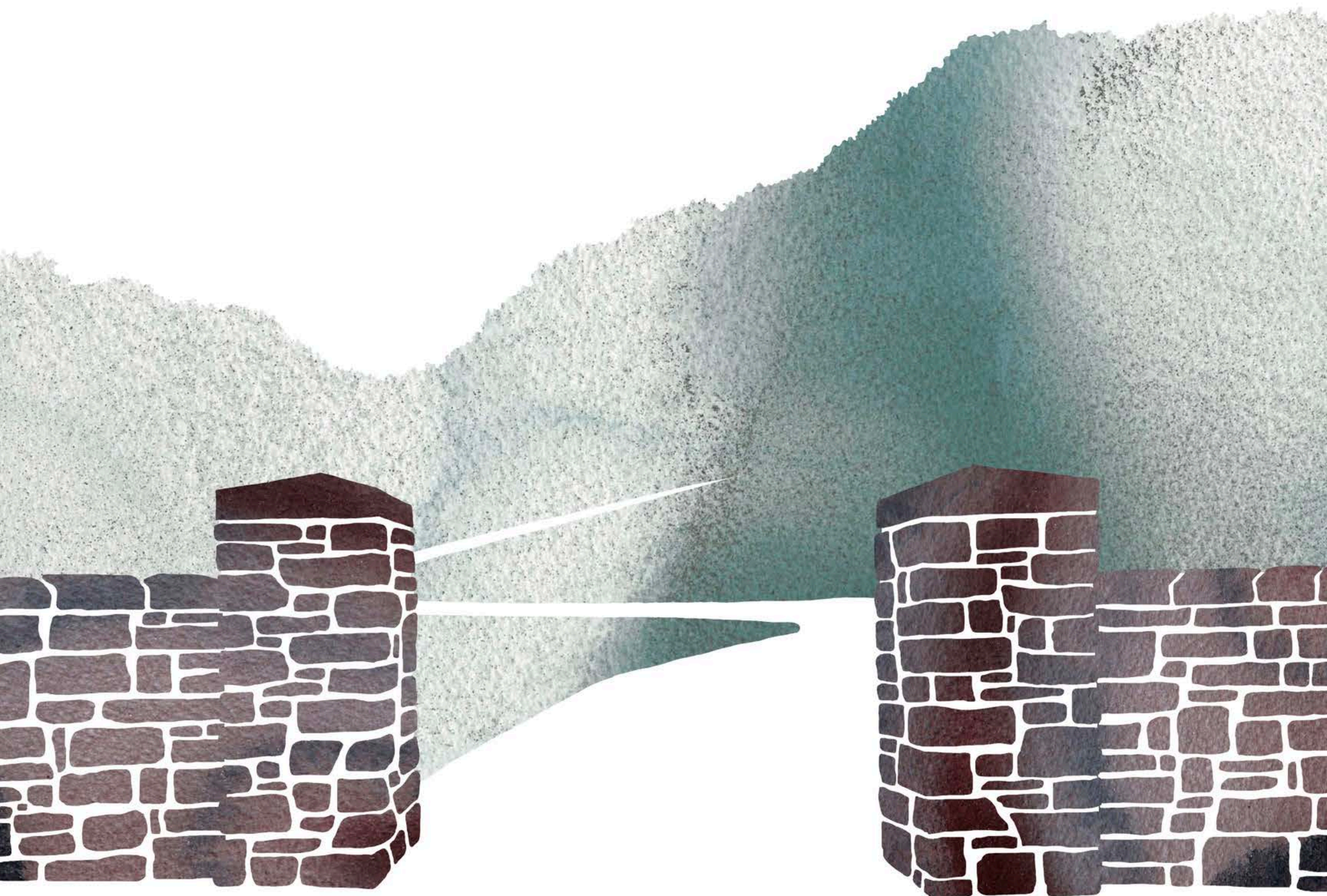
one day kimmie let it slip to her parents that she had made a new friend. kindly but seriously they explained to her that scratching words into wood benches was not a very nice thing to do. she recognized her mistake, but felt so sad knowing that she must stop writing to her friend. she was especially sad that they had never even gotten to meet in person. now, they never would, she thought.



The next day, Kimmie slowly made her way up the path to the old bench with her dog by her side. Her eyes were at her feet, and she tried to dawdle as much as she could. She really didn't want to have to say goodbye to Monica. She was concentrating so hard on the ground that when she finally rounded the corner, she didn't notice that there was someone else on the landing. The other girl seemed just as startled to see her! Kimmie stopped as to not get any closer. Even at a distance, she realized the girl was crying. Kimmie felt sad for her. "Hi, I'm Kimmie. What's your name?" The other girl's eyes widened. "Oh!" she gasped. "You're Kimmie? I'm Monica!" Kimmie couldn't believe it! Her friend -- who she was finally seeing for the first time! "It's you!" she beamed. Monica noticed Kimmie's dog, and exclaimed "And hi to you too!" The girls both laughed together. "But why are you crying?" Kimmie suddenly remembered to ask. Monica pointed towards their bench. Kimmie followed her gaze, but all she saw was the same old, wooden bench. Then she realized what was different. "All our messages! Where are they? Monica shook her head, still in disbelief. "I came up here as usual to write you a note and was so sad when I realized all our messages were gone. I was worried I would never be able to talk to you again."



The two friends walked parallel to each other, keeping their distance, as they left the bench, rounded the corner, and started back down the hill and over the grass. They talked and talked. They laughed as Kimmie's dog tried to get close enough to nudge Monica. They talked about their bench, their virtual school, their siblings, and their maybe canceled summer plans. They talked all the way until they made it to the entrance of the park.



"Well. Bye kimmie," Monica said sadly. "Bye Monica," said kimmie. They didn't know what else to say. They knew that they no longer could scratch messages into the bench. They didn't know if they would be able to see each other again. So, slowly, they each started to walk home. Kimmie reached the front door of her apartment building in just a couple of minutes, as it was right across the street from the park. Before opening the door, she turned around to wave goodbye to Monica. Turning, her mouth dropped open at what she saw. At that very moment, Monica had also turned to wave goodbye, and she was standing in front of the apartment building directly across from kimmie's! The girls both burst out laughing. They lived across the street from each other and they had the whole time! They waved, and then each went inside her own door.



That night as Kimmie thought about Monica and their bench, she wondered about many things. Even though she now knew that she shouldn't have done it, she was happy that scratching into the bench had led her to her new friend. Something bothered her though. The bench hadn't been painted, but somehow all their messages had disappeared -- as if it was an entirely different bench. How lucky that today, after weeks of not running into each other once at the bench, they found each other there. She smiled as she remembered that her bench friend lived right across the street from her. Someday soon, she hoped, she would be able to see her again. Kimmie pondered upon these things, but not too hard, for she soon drifted off to sleep.



sometimes things just happen.
Whatever it was about Kimmie and
Monica's bench that had brought
them together, magic or not, they
knew it was special. And they also
knew that their friendship was
special, and that it would last

forever.

