



# The Bright-Bucket Girl

Cleo gripped the handle of her bright yellow sand bucket until it made a red line across her palm. Beyond the playground gate, children whooped as they raced around the climbing frame. Cleo was five, and she had come with Mum to play. She wanted to play with the other children, too. But from beside Mum's bench, the game looked like a rushing river with no stepping-stones.

Cleo had curly brown hair tucked behind one ear and wore her red-and-white striped jumper over blue leggings. Her little green shovel knocked against the side of the bucket. Clack. Clack. Mum sat nearby with her book open on her knees, but she looked up when Cleo looked up.

"Would you like me to come with you?" Mum asked.



Cleo nodded, though her feet stayed where they were. Together they walked as far as the painted hopscotch squares. A girl tossed a beanbag high. A boy shouted, “Quick, quick, quick!” Everybody darted after it. Cleo lifted one foot toward the first square, then the beanbag bounced right past her toes. She jumped back so suddenly that her bucket swung forward and landed upside down on her head.





For one surprised second, Cleo could see only yellow. Then Mum lifted the bucket away. A few children giggled, not meanly, but Cleo's cheeks still felt hot. She gave a tiny laugh because the bucket must have looked silly, then carried it back to the bench. "That game is too quick for me," she said.





At the swings, two children were taking turns to push each other. Cleo watched the empty swing rise and sweep back, rise and sweep back. She thought she might ask for a turn. But the children were counting louder and louder.

“Twenty-two! Twenty-three!”

The swing’s seat swooshed close enough to stir Cleo’s curls. Her asking words folded themselves up and hid behind her teeth.





Cleo walked along the edge of the playground with Mum beside her. She did not want another rushing game. She wanted something small enough to understand. Near the sandbox, she saw a girl kneeling by herself. The girl had made a round heap of sand and was carefully patting its sides with both hands. Beside her lay a blue plastic shovel and a small red flag on a stick.

The girl tipped dry sand from her hands onto the top of the heap. It slid down at once. She tried again, and the sandy top crumbled again. Cleo looked at her bright bucket. She looked at the girl's castle. One person. One wobbly tower. One thing that might help.

Cleo's tummy gave a nervous little flip, but she stepped into the sandbox. "Would you like my bucket?" she asked. "We could turn it over for a tower." Her voice came out soft, yet it reached the girl.



The girl looked up and smiled. “Yes, please. I’m Inez.” Cleo filled the bucket with damp sand from a darker patch near the edge. She pressed it down with her green shovel, then tipped the bucket over. Both girls held their breath as Cleo lifted it straight up. A neat yellow-bucket-shaped tower stood there, tall and firm.





“It worked!” Cleo said. Inez planted the small red flag at the top. Then Cleo used her shovel to make a path from the tower. Inez made another path. Soon two children who had been playing near the slide came to watch. Cleo’s heart thumped, but this time she knew what to say. “Do you want to make paths to our castle?” she asked. “Or flags?”

The children fetched sticks, smooth pebbles, and fallen leaves. One made a bridge over a shallow moat. Another tucked a leaf flag beside Inez’s red one. Cleo showed a boy how to press damp sand into her bucket, and he made a second tower, a little crooked but very grand.

Mum was still on the bench, close enough to wave when Cleo glanced over. Cleo waved back with her sandy hand. The noisy playground had not become quiet, and the running game was still racing past. But beside the castle, there was room for careful hands, small voices, and a bright yellow bucket that was no longer hiding her head.





When it was time to go, Cleo set the bucket beside the castle for one last look. Its rim had made two strong towers. Its shovel had drawn three winding paths. “See you next time?” Inez asked. Cleo picked up her bucket, smiling. “I’ll bring it,” she said.





Good night.



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## After the story



### **WHAT THIS STORY IS ABOUT**

Cleo finds a gentle way to join playground play when she helps Inez build a sandcastle. With her bright yellow bucket, she discovers that careful teamwork can make room for new friendship.

### **TALK ABOUT IT AFTER READING**

After reading, ask which moment felt the warmest or bravest today.

### **AND TOMORROW...**

On Cleo's next playground visit, she notices an empty patch beside the castle space and wonders what kind of bridge it needs.





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7 minutes of reading



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