

Maxime's Mountain

Maxime was ten years old. He didn't talk much, but when he did, his voice was soft, almost like a secret. Most of the time, he was silent—not because he had nothing to say, but because it was easier to keep everything inside, as if his words were locked away in a box he didn't dare open. He feared disturbing others or not being understood.

He always nodded when asked, "Everything okay?" Even when he had a tight knot in his stomach. Even when his thoughts were spinning so fast it felt like forgetting how to breathe. Even when all he wanted was to stop pretending.

He wasn't trying to be brave. He just didn't know how to say, "I'm scared," or "I don't get it," or "I'm tired of always smiling." He worried his fears were too small to matter or too tangled to explain. Sometimes, he'd start a sentence in his head, only to freeze, already picturing the confused or mocking reaction. So he stayed quiet.

He got good at pretending: a polite nod, a forced laugh, a soft "it's nothing." But hiding his feelings made him feel like he was hiding himself.

Then one day, his workbook disappeared. Forgotten on a bus. A small mistake for most—but for Maxime, it felt like the ground crumbling beneath him. His heart raced. His thoughts spiralled.

What if the teacher is angry? What if everyone thinks I'm careless? What if they laugh?

At home, he answered lightly, but his voice shook. That night, he buried himself under the blanket, eyes squeezed shut. But the fear didn't shrink—it grew. Like a stone you keep in your pocket: small at first, but heavier over time until walking feels impossible.

Then came other small things: a word he didn't understand but pretended he did, a test he avoided revising for, a classmate's angry glare after a ball went astray. Playground noise that made his ears buzz. A rumour whispered in his direction. An argument overheard at home.

Individually, none were mountains. But stone after stone, they piled up. Until Maxime felt like he was carrying them all.

One Thursday, the class went on a nature walk. While others skipped ahead, Maxime trailed behind. Not from tiredness—but because something inside felt too heavy. His arms hung stiffly by his sides, his gaze fixed on the ground.

A lady with grey hair and calm eyes walked beside him. She didn't ask questions at first. Then, after a pause, she said: "You're watching the ground like it might whisper to you."

Maxime didn't answer, but didn't pull away.

"I used to carry mountains of thoughts," she added. "Until they crushed me. You know what helped? Putting each one down. Like a stone. Want to try?"

Maxime hesitated. But slowly, he nodded.

They stopped under a tree. He picked up a small rough stone.

"This is for the lost workbook," he whispered.

Then another: "For the noise in the canteen."

And another: "For the fear they'll realise I don't always understand."

Six in all. Each one lightened something inside. When he stepped back and looked, it wasn't a mountain. Just a small pile. Real. Manageable.

"They don't look as big now," he said.

"Because you faced them," the woman smiled. "You don't have to carry them all alone."

The next day, when the teacher asked about the trip, Maxime raised his hand. A small, quiet hand.

"I learned that you can put your thoughts down. Like stones."

Curious and kind eyes turned toward him. He stepped out, gathered a few pebbles, and placed them along the blackboard.

"These are things that weigh me down," he explained. "But they're lighter here."

Later, a classmate approached with a small stone of her own.

"I have pebbles too," she said. "Can we make a place for them?"

Together, they asked the teacher. She said yes.

They made a small wooden box near the window. Maxime drew stars and stones on it. They called it the Thinking Stone Corner.

Anyone could place a pebble there—no words required. Sometimes a drawing. Sometimes a sigh. Sometimes silence.

The box slowly filled: round pebbles, crumpled papers, even feathers. And something shifted. The classroom had a place for unspoken things. A quiet space for heavy thoughts.

Maxime hasn't changed overnight. He still has quiet days. Days when thoughts return and the mountain follows close behind.

But now he knows the signs. He can feel the first stones in his pocket—and knows he doesn't have to carry them. He can place them down, say just enough, breathe again.

He has pebbles. Words. A box. A teacher who listened. And a class that understood.

And above all, Maxime now knows this: Being afraid doesn't make him weak. Speaking up doesn't make fears grow. And sometimes, the smallest stone placed on the ground is the first step to walking lighter.