

CHAMELEON

Written by
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In this animated short film, an anxious sixth grader auditions for the jazz band on her first day of middle school. When everything goes wrong, she learns that trying to fit in only limits her own potential.

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EXT. WAYSIDE MIDDLE SCHOOL - DAY

Dewy grass. Cloudy skies. A loooooong line of cars.

It's morning drop-off at Wayside.

A large sign near the front doors reads: "WELCOME BACK 2 SCHOOL BULLDOGS!"

An old grey minivan is stopped in front of the sign. There are six peeling alumni magnets on the back.

The car pulls away, leaving a young girl standing in front of the school.

She has a backpack slung over one shoulder and a guitar case over the other. Her left shoe is untied.

She's ARI MORALES (12), and she can't wait for today to be over.

FRANTIC JAZZ MUSIC STARTS PLAYING.

INT. SOCIAL STUDIES CLASSROOM - DAY

Ari sits at the back of social studies class. Her guitar case rests against her chair.

MR. ROBINS points out the Tigris and Euphrates rivers on a map.

Ari doesn't hear him. She only hears that JAZZ MUSIC.

Her right leg is bouncing. Her pencil is drumming softly on the desk.

Her eyes are fixed on the clock. 8:14 AM.

INT. CAFETERIA - DAY

Kids line up for school lunch. Ari brought a brown paper bag.

Conversations swirl around her, but she only hears jazz.

She looks at the clock again. 12:20 PM.

INT. MATH CLASSROOM - DAY

MRS. DAVIS is writing two fractions on the board, side by side. She draws a plus sign in between them.

Ari's fingers rap on the desk. Her ears are elsewhere.

2:34 PM

INT. SCHOOL HALLWAY - DAY

A crowded after-school hallway. Kids slam their lockers shut and hurry to meet up with friends.

Ari holds her guitar close to avoid hitting anybody with it.

She pushes down the hall against the flow of students rushing to the exit.

There's a clock on the wall. 2:54 PM.

The frantic jazz grows louder.

INT. MUSIC HALLWAY - DAY

The walls are covered in music-themed posters, from mnemonic devices for reading sheet music to cartoon instruments telling kids to practice.

There are six chairs outside of a closed office.

The chairs are all occupied. Five eighth graders and Ari. Everyone has an instrument--guitar, saxophone, trumpet, etc.

The eighth graders seem relaxed. A couple of them have their instruments out to practice.

Ari is not relaxed. Her leg is still bouncing. The jazz is still playing.

A boy next to her, MICHAEL RIGSBY (14), leans over.

MICHAEL

1	Try not to tap your foot like that when you're in there.	1
---	---	---

Ari stares at him.

MICHAEL

2	And don't move around. You should be able to keep time in here.	2
---	--	---

He points to his head.

MICHAEL

3	That way--	3
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The office door opens and MRS. VINCEY (40s) steps into the hall. She has a clipboard in hand.

The jazz music STOPS.

So does Ari's breathing.

Mrs. Vincey glances at her clipboard.

	MRS. VINCEY	
4	Michael?	4

Michael hurries to his feet. He has an electric guitar and a big amplifier.

	MICHAEL	
5	Yes, ma'am.	5

	MRS. VINCEY	
6	Come on in.	6

He lugs his equipment into the office. Mrs. Vincey follows him inside and closes the door.

Ari takes a deep breath and stops her leg from bouncing.

INT. MUSIC HALLWAY - LATER

Three empty chairs; three remaining. Ari sits with the two remaining eighth graders.

One of them has a saxophone out. They're playing the main melody of Herbie Hancock's "Chameleon."

They're really good.

Ari looks down at her finger tips. Calloused, small, shivering.

INT. MUSIC HALLWAY - LATER

Ari is the last one waiting. Through the door, she can hear inside Mrs. Vincey's office.

They're playing "Chameleon" on piano. It's loud and flashy and impressive.

Ari takes a shallow breath and holds her head in her hands.

The office door opens. A student steps out, followed by Mrs. Vincey.

MRS. VINCEY

7 Ariana? 7

Ari lifts her head up from her hands and nods. Mrs. Vincey smiles slightly.

8 MRS. VINCEY
After you. 8

INT. MUSIC OFFICE - DAY

It's cluttered in a nice way. Sheet music is scattered over a desk. The piano is covered in colorful sticky notes. Handwritten music is scrawled on a whiteboard.

Mrs. Vincey sits down in the desk chair and gestures to a stool next to her.

Ari sits down and starts to unzip her guitar case.

9 MRS. VINCEY
You should know we don't usually
take sixth graders. 9

Ari nods.

	ARI	
10	Yes ma'am. I know.	10

Her hands are shaking terribly. She can hardly pull the guitar out of the case. When she finally gets it loose, she knocks a nearby music stand. Sheet music flutters to the ground.

ARI

11 I'm--I'm sorry-- 11

She leans over to try to pick up the papers. They shake violently in her quivering hands.

Mrs. Vincey smiles.

12 MRS. VINCEY
It's alright. No amp today? 12

Ariana's mouth moves uselessly before she can find the word:

13	No.	ARI	13
----	-----	-----	----

Mrs. Vincey shrugs.

14 MRS. VINCEY 14
No worries.

She fishes around her desk for sheet music, which she places on the music stand in front of Ari.

The song is "Chameleon."

15 MRS. VINCEY 15
Start with the head, and we'll go
from there.

Ari stares at the sheet music.

And realizes she doesn't have a pick.

16 ARI 16
I'm sorry, I just--

She reaches back into her guitar bag for a pick. Finds one. She can barely hold it in her shaky fingers.

17 ARI 17
Ok, sorry.

18 MRS. VINCEY 18
When you're ready.

Ari looks at the sheet music. She slides a finger on her guitar to the sixth fret.

No, it should be the fourth. She repositions quickly. Looks back at the paper.

No, it's the sixth fret. She was right the first time.

She slides it back up. Plays a note--

TWANGGG.

She hit the wrong string. She quickly mutes it.

Her hands are trembling.

19 ARI 19
Sorry, let me just...

She tries again. Plays the first note way too soft, the next note way too loud. The string buzzes.

Ari has tears in her eyes.

She drops her pick.

Her face is burning. Her eyes are raining. Her hands are vibrating.

20 MRS. VINCEY 20
You're ok.

Ari isn't so sure. She fishes around on the ground for her fallen pick, but her eyesight is blurry.

21 MRS. VINCEY 21
Do...you want to try to improvise?

Ari finds her pick and sits up. She can't bring herself to meet Mrs. Vincey's eyes.

22 ARI 22
No that's okay. I'm sorry I--

But Mrs. Vincey has stood from her desk chair. She moves over to the piano.

23 MRS. VINCEY 23
You know what a two-five is?

Ari nods as Mrs. Vincey sits on the bench. She plays a minor chord, then looks at the clock as she hits a major chord.

24 MRS. VINCEY 24
We've got three minutes left. I'll play these chords until then.

She hits the minor chord again.

Ari wipes her nose on her sleeve as Mrs. Vincey plays the major chord again too.

25 MRS. VINCEY 25
You can play too, if you want.

She keeps alternating the two chords while Ari snuffles and collects herself.

She leans over on the stool to look at Mrs. Vincey's hands.

26 ARI 26
(barely a whisper)
What key?

Mrs. Vincey smiles slightly.

27 MRS. VINCEY 27
What key is the song in?

Ari glances at the sheet music and nods. She plays a couple soft notes and looks at Mrs. Vincey.

Mrs. Vincey is looking at the piano.

Ari plays a few more notes. They're nervous, tentative, but in key.

	JERRY (V.O.)	
28	Isn't the point of that thing to be heard?	28

INT. MESSY LIVING ROOM - DAY

It's a Morales family gathering. Cousins, aunts, uncles, grandparents.

Wrapping paper and tissue paper are strewn all over the floor.

"HAPPY BIRTHDAY ARI!" is scrawled on a poster that hangs lopsided on the wall.

A yellow lab named BOGEY rummages around the mess looking for dropped bits of food.

Ari sits in the corner, clutching her shiny guitar closely. The box it came in lies to the side.

She delicately thumbs at one of the strings, holding her ear close so she can hear it over the din of talking adults.

But JERRY MORALES (42) has other plans.

	JERRY	
29	I said, I didn't get you that thing to be quiet, did I?	29

Ariana's wide eyes show the hint of a smile. She plucks the string a little harder.

	ARI	
30	I dunno.	30

	JERRY	
31	Allow me.	31

He reaches over and SLAMS a hand against the guitar strings. They ring out loud and dissonant. He laughs.

	JERRY	
32	That's music. Your turn.	32

Ari cracks a slight smile as she prepares to strum--

INT. MUSIC OFFICE - DAY

She hits the minor chord at the same time as Mrs. Vincey.
Loud, confident.

Then she returns to playing notes, audibly this time. But she's tight--playing straight up and down a simple blues scale. Correct, but unimaginative.

	BENJI (V.O.)	
33	Where's the <i>flavor</i> , Ari?	33

INT. MESSY KITCHEN - DAY

BENJI MORALES (14) is stirring sauce in a pot on the stove.
He's just tasted a bit of the sauce from his pinky.

Bogey is younger than before, a puppy, rooting around the kitchen floor for scraps.

Ari is younger too, around 10. She stands at the counter, fidgeting nervously as she watches Benji.

	ARI	
34	No good?	34

	BENJI	
35	Did you follow the recipe?	35

	ARI	
36	Yeah.	36

Benji smacks his lips and sighs.

	BENJI	
37	No wonder it's so boring. I don't think mom ever follows the recipe.	37

He opens the spice drawer.

	BENJI	
38	Don't make it good. Make it <i>sing</i> .	38

INT. MUSIC OFFICE - DAY

Ari runs up the blues scale, but at the top she bends a note and lets it ring out.

Then she mutes the string before plucking the bent note and easing it back down.

Mrs. Vincey glances over from the piano for a moment.

Ari bites her lip as she plays. She starts to tap her foot, but quickly looks down, notices it, and stops herself.

Her playing falters slightly.

	LANA (V.O.)	
39	You're holding back, aren't you?	39

INT. RECEPTION HALL - NIGHT

A wide, spacious dance floor, filled with dozens of wedding guests performing a line dance.

Jerry is in the middle of the madness, trying his best to keep up with the moves.

Ari is even younger now, around 8 years old. She's sitting at a table with her mother, LANA MORALES (38). They're watching the dance floor.

But Lana has noticed Ari's foot tapping to the beat.

	LANA	
40	You want to get out there?	40

Ari shakes her head no. She looks up at her mother with concerned eyes.

	ARI	
41	I don't know the dance.	41

Lana laughs.

	LANA	
42	You think your dad knows the dance?	42

They watch Jerry as he turns the opposite direction from everyone else.

	LANA	
43	Don't worry about what other people want you to do, Ari.	43

She looks Ari in the eyes.

	LANA	
44	What do you want to do?	44

Ari lets the question hang in the air for a moment. Then she looks at the dance floor.

She stands up--

INT. MUSIC OFFICE - DAY

Still playing, Ari stands up from the stool. Her eyes are closed, her posture is relaxed. She sways with the music.

She knocks the music stand over but doesn't notice. Or doesn't care.

Her playing is now confident, unique, and beautiful.

Mrs. Vincey follows the change in energy, adding more rhythm and flair to her piano playing.

The two are in perfect sync.

MONTAGE - VARIOUS

We still hear the jam session as we watch:

- 8-year-old Ari dancing wildly with her mother in the middle of the crowded dance floor.
- 10-year-old Ari laughing with Benji as they toss spices and herbs into the pot.
- 12-year-old Ari grinning as she wails on her new guitar with Jerry cheering her on.

END MONTAGE

Ari's foot is tapping and she's moving with the music. Mrs. Vincey watches her, smiling, before glancing at the clock:

	MRS. VINCEY	
45	Here's the tag!	45

Ari nods, and together they play the final notes of the song in lockstep.

The last note rings out, bouncing around the walls of the small office.

Mrs. Vincey looks at Ari with a quiet sense of admiration.

Ari opens her eyes and smiles, for the first time all day.

FADE TO BLACK.