Yia-Yia’s Dance
Laurie Halse Anderson

My Yia-Yia, my beautiful grandmother—she dances like a ribbon, like a smooth, sun-glinting, wind-tossed ribbon.

Yia-Yia was born in a tiny village in Greece. Her four brothers, her grandparents, and all the aunts, uncles, and cousins danced around a bonfire long into the night when she was born. Her mother and father had waited many years for a girl child. Their love for her was as deep as the sea. Her father took her outside to the happy relatives when she was only one hour old. She opened her eyes. She watched the firelight and smoke curl up to the stars that hung above their village.

(3) Just as she was learning how to walk, the family packed up everything they owned and crossed the ocean in a ship. The sailors taught her how to dance to the music of a pipe, while seagulls sang overhead.

When she got bigger, she twirled and whirled on her way to school in the morning. She snapped her fingers and clicked her heels on the way home in the afternoon. There was always work to be done at her house—floors to scrub and pots to wash and clothes to iron and schoolwork to finish late into the night at the kitchen table. She held a tune in her heart and tapped out a beat with her toes, so the time passed quickly by.

(5) Back then my Papou stood tall and strong. He fell in love with the way Yia-Yia’s black hair glowed in the candlelight of their church. He talked to each one of her four brothers and her father and then her mother to get permission to sit next to her on the stoop and drink lemonade. They ate sweet cakes she made with her slender hands. When he asked her to marry him he had a spot of honey on his chin.

At their wedding, her feet barely touched the ground. The voices of the singers and the perfume of the incense coiled around her heart and made her eyes wet. Wearing their wedding crowns, she and her beloved walked three times around the altar and became partners for life.

Later came babies—my mom, my Aunt Helena, and my Uncle Costas. Yia-Yia danced with them all so they wouldn’t fuss. She played old records and whispered stories of a faraway village. With a baby in her arms, she hummed the tunes of far away. She high-stepped her way from the kitchen to the laundry room, from the grocery to the church. She tied back her long hair with scarves of blue and green.

When the children grew older she taught them the right steps: chin up, back straight, eyes clear and steady. She kissed Papou on the chin when he came home in the evening, tired from the mill. She pulled him to the soft chair and served him thick coffee and figs while dinner cooked.

(9) Uncle Costas married Aunt Tessa, and Aunt Helena married Uncle Roy, and my mom married my dad. Then came the grandchildren—roly poly grandchildren who loved pastries and cookies and a spinning grandmother who hummed.

(10) These days the best place to see my Yia-Yia dance is at the church festival. The guitar music rings in my ears, and the salty-sweet tastes of Greece fill my mouth. Yia-Yia and Papou sit at the end of a long table. They watch the young people dance in graceful lines that snake in and out of the room. They smile at their friends and wave to their children and grandchildren, but Yia-Yia does not dance . . . until the band plays the sailor’s song. She takes the snow white handkerchief from Papou’s jacket pocket and slides the scarf from her hair. Everyone in the room stops to watch her.
She dances. Her arms glide like the wings of a swan. Her feet stomp and her legs leap, harder and higher than the youngest girl. Her proud face is strong like the faces in the paintings in the church. The music grows louder, and her children and grandchildren cheer. She throws back her head. Her dark, silver-streaked hair comes alive like a moonless night lit by shimmering silver stars. And it curls in the air like the smoke rising from the village bonfire.

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1. What can the reader tell about Yia-Yia and Papou when they sit at the end of a table? (paragraph 10)
   A. They prefer to keep to themselves.
   B. They are usually the last to arrive at the festival.
   C. They are the most respected people in the family.
   D. They have the best vantage point to watch the dancing.

2. Based on the sentence in paragraph 5, “Back then my Papou stood tall and strong,” what can the reader most likely infer?
   A. Papou no longer dances.
   B. Papou has grown frail over the years.
   C. Papou and Yia-Yia have grown apart.
   D. Papou prefers to be remembered as young.

3. “Then came the grandchildren—rolly poly grandchildren who loved pastries and cookies and a spinning grandmother who hummed.” (paragraph 9)
   What does the above sentence best accomplish?
   A. It creates a playful tone.
   B. It relates conflicting ideas.
   C. It describes time as being unending.
   D. It distinguishes the characters from one another.

4. Which word best describes the author’s view of her grandmother?
   A. affectionate
   B. mysterious
   C. conflicted
   D. troubled

5. Which statement would Yia-Yia most likely make?
   A. I wish I still had the love and support of my family.
   B. I dance to express the happiness I have felt throughout my life.
   C. I am glad I took advantage of the opportunities I had to get ahead.
   D. I raised my children to be independent and take care of themselves.

6. The narrator uses a simile to compare her grandmother’s dancing to
   A. music
   B. firelight
   C. a ribbon
   D. the wind
7 Yia-Yia’s life can **best** be described in which way?

A happy and satisfying  
B challenging and hard  
C daring and adventurous  
D wealthy and comfortable

8 How does paragraph 3 affect the plot in this passage?

A It expresses the first time Yia-Yia heard music.  
B It shows that conflicts often remain unresolved.  
C It describes an important change in Yia-Yia’s life.  
D It contradicts a statement made earlier in the passage.
Describe a way in which Yia-Yia is different at the end of the passage. Describe a way in which she is the same. Provide two examples from the passage to support your response.
Pencil Pirates

Linda K. Zoeller

Grab a pencil and take a look. Would you hire armed guards to protect it? Can you think of a reason why a country would create special laws to prevent the smuggling and stealing of pencils? In fact, can you imagine that punishment for breaking such laws could result in years of hard labor or expulsion from your country? Well, sharpen that pencil. Do you see the lead? People once considered graphite in pencil leads to be just that special.

(2) It all started over 500 years ago after a wet and windy storm. In Borrowdale, England, villagers watched as sheets of rain and the howling wind tore across their valley. When the sun finally broke through, the shepherds led their sheep out into the fresh, clear morning to graze and found trees pulled up by the roots. Patches of black peppered the ground where the trees once stood. No one had a clue what the black stuff could be. At first people thought it was coal, only it wouldn’t burn. Then shepherds saw that it left smudges on everything it touched, so they began marking their sheep with the material.

Sheep marking turned out to be only the first use. Soon the material called wad by the locals, and today known as graphite, began being mined by local businesspeople. They found uses for it in a variety of products, from medicines to cannonball molds. And by wrapping sheepskin around a chunk of graphite, they created pencils.

The value of graphite grew. Thieves looked for ways to steal it either from the mine or while it was being transported to other parts of England. They profited by selling it to people in foreign countries. In order to end this thievery, the English government made the mine state property and passed strict laws against stealing or smuggling the rock. Soldiers guarded the mineral as it traveled in stagecoaches from Borrowdale to London.

In Continental Europe, famous for its drawings, paintings, and statues, artists clamored for the new pencils. The rods of lead that had been used left only a thin, light line. This new tool provided a soft medium for drawing, but the sheepskin-covered chunks seemed awkward in the artists’ skilled hands. They needed to change the design. An artist carved a groove into a piece of wood and rested a slab of the graphite in the slit. Then the graphite was polished until it lay smoothly and evenly with the surface of the wood. A second piece of wood glued on top finished the pencil. This design improved the pencil for use in creating delicate drawings. But even great artists make mistakes, so they learned to rub out the graphite with breadcrumbs—the first erasers.

People in Borrowdale studied the new pencil design and created a business making wad pencils. Since only the Borrowdale graphite worked in pencils, local craftsmen were determined to lock up the pencil-making trade. But a Frenchman named Nicholas Jacques Conté ruined things for the Borrowdale pencil-makers.

(7) Conté pulverized the soft, shapeless graphite found all over the world—thought to be useless in terms of pencil making—and mixed it with clay. He then placed the mixture in a furnace. The resulting material could be used to make pencils. Not only did this process produce a material to replace the wad pencils, it improved pencil leads—resulting in pencils of varying hardness.

What difference does hardness make? Check out your pencil. Do you see a number? If the number is a four, the pencil lead leaves less graphite on the paper than if the number is a two. A hard pencil makes a lighter line. Teachers usually request number two pencils so they can easily read your answers. Artists use harder pencils for different effects in their drawings.

About the same time Conté developed the new pencil lead, rubber replaced breadcrumbs as erasers. It took 80 years to learn how to attach the rubber to the pencil. But with that knowledge, the modern pencil had arrived, and an industry was born.
Americans use over 2.8 billion pencils every year. Manufacturing that many pencils requires large factories, but the production processes used today are not much different from those used in earlier times. Workers mix graphite and clay, then toss the material into giant drums. The powder still goes into a furnace, but now the material passes through several stages of drying, wetting, and crushing to form a paste. The paste runs through metal tubes to form thin spaghetti-like rods—the pencils’ lead.

Take a look at that pencil one more time. Does it look like the Continental European design of two pieces of wood glued together? Modern pencil-makers still use that old technique. They have improved upon it, though, because pencil manufacturers must make billions of pencils. Now they use woodworking tools on large blocks of wood so that they are able to produce eight pencils at a time rather than one.

Modern pencil-making begins with machines that carve grooves into cedar blocks. Workers then drop eight lead rods into the slits and glue the two blocks of wood together. Cutting machines shape each side of the wood to make a smooth circle or sharp angles. With the edges shaped to meet the final design of the pencil, the wood is separated into eight pencils. Finally, machines apply layers of paint to cover the wood seams. A hot metal stamp burns a number on the side to indicate the pencil lead’s level of hardness, and a metal band around one end of the pencil secures a rubber eraser.

Soldiers no longer need to guard today’s pencil leads, and no one tries to smuggle a pencil anymore. But just think, if billions of pencils are used each year, and one pencil can write over 45,000 words, maybe the real value of a pencil lies in the ideas, the pictures, and the math it helps create.


10 Why was Nicholas Jacques Conté’s new process such an important step in the history of pencil making?

A It produced the first pencils with built-in erasers.
B It could be used to make pencils that varied in hardness.
C It was much faster than the process used in Borrowdale.
D It did not require as much raw material as earlier processes.

11 What type of mark would a number 4 pencil make?

A light
B dark
C smeared
D permanent

12 What is the most likely meaning for pulverized as it is used in paragraph 7?

A heated
B carved
C melted
D crushed
13 What is ironic about the excitement over the invention of the pencil 500 years ago?

A  Today, pencils come in many colors.
B  Today, the pencil is taken for granted.
C  Long ago, inventions were considered evil.
D  Long ago, new inventions were created every day.

14 According to the passage, what is more valuable than the graphite used to make early pencils?

A  pencil leads that vary in hardness
B  newer innovations, such as ballpoint pens
C  words and pictures that are made using pencils
D  other minerals that are mined along with graphite

15 In paragraph 2, the word peppered gives the reader an image of the ground being

A  wet with dew
B  filled with holes
C  coated with rocks
D  covered with black spots

16 Graphite is also used to make which item?

A  pens
B  erasers
C  medicines
D  sheepskins

17 Which is a theme of “Pencil Pirates”?

A  People always try to make money any way they can.
B  Even everyday things can have an interesting history.
C  It is hard to know the whole truth about historical events.
D  Early pencil making was very different from the modern way.
Different kinds of pencil leads are identified by numbers that indicate the hardness of the lead. Identify what kind of lead is most commonly used in schools. Explain what it means when a pencil lead is hard, and provide an example of why someone might choose a pencil with a harder lead.