

Chapter 1

Eleven

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A PRE-READING

1. *Think Before You Read*

Answer the following questions:

1. Have you ever been disappointed by your birthday? How did you feel about your birthday when you were a child? Did your birthday make you feel older?
2. Do you remember being embarrassed by a teacher when you were a child? What happened?
3. What are some things a child might do in a situation where an adult, who has more power, is being unfair to him or her?

2. *Picture Focus*

With a partner, talk about the picture. What do you think is happening?

3. *Story Preview*

Read the preview of the story and, with a partner, try to guess the meaning of the words in **bold** print.

Today is Rachel's eleventh birthday. As Rachel knows, when you're eleven, you're not just eleven. For example, sometimes you can feel like a dumb ten-year-old or like a **scared** five-year-old. Mrs. Price, Rachel's teacher, has found an ugly, old red sweater. Mrs. Price says that the sweater belongs to Rachel. When Rachel tries to tell Mrs.

Price that the sweater isn't hers, Mrs. Price says this is **nonsense** and puts the sweater on Rachel's desk. Rachel can't do anything, and she feels very unhappy, even though it's her birthday. Rachel can't even **pretend** that she's not unhappy. She wishes that she could be **invisible** or far away.

4. *Using the Vocabulary*

Fill in the blanks below with the **bold** words from the Story Preview above. Then, with a partner, compare your answers.

Children love to make up stories and _____ *pretend* _____ they are other people or animals. Some children even have a(n) _____ friend. The fact that no one else can see this friend doesn't make the friend seem less real to the child.

Sometimes, bad dreams can make children feel _____. When children tell adults they are afraid, the adults should take what the children say seriously; they should never treat it as _____.

5. Making Predictions

From the Story Preview, try to predict what will happen. Which of the following predictions do you think is the most *probable*? Circle your choice or give an answer that you think is better.

1. Rachel will be able to explain everything to Mrs. Price.
2. Mrs. Price will listen to Rachel.
3. Rachel will become more unhappy and cry.
4. Rachel will keep the sweater.
5. Rachel will have a good birthday.
6. _____

Journal Writing Write your predictions in your journal. Explain the reasons for your predictions.

IDIOMS AND EXPRESSIONS

kind of partly, in a way
right away immediately
that's enough stop it

getting mad becoming angry
hold in control or not show (*feelings*)
it's too late because of what has or hasn't happened, the situation can't be OK now

6. Literary Term: First Person Narrator

“Eleven” has a **first person narrator**. This means that the story is told in the first person by the main character, Rachel, rather than in the third person, as many stories are. The first person narrator refers to him- or herself as “I.” Because Rachel tells the story, we see what happens through her eyes. We get a clear sense, not just of what Rachel says and does, but also of how Rachel thinks, how she feels, and what she wishes for. We get to know Rachel.

Focus As you read “Eleven,” ask yourself what you know about Rachel.

B THE STORY

About the Author

Sandra Cisneros (1954–), the only daughter in a family of seven children, was born in Chicago. Her Mexican-American heritage, of which she is proud, is evident in many of her short stories. Cisneros has had a successful and varied career. In addition to being a poet and fiction writer, she has worked as an arts administrator and has taught students who had dropped out of high school. She has written four books of poetry and two books of short stories, *The House on Mango Street* and *Woman Hollering Creek*. In many of her short stories, such as “Eleven,” Cisneros creates a view of the world through the eyes of a child. The language of these stories is simple and direct, but their ideas are serious and important.



Eleven



5 What they don't understand about birthdays and what they never tell you is that when you're eleven, you're also ten, and nine, and eight, and seven, and six, and five, and four, and three, and two, and one. And when you wake up on your eleventh birthday you expect to feel eleven, but you don't. You open your eyes and everything's just like yesterday, only it's today. And you don't feel eleven at all. You feel like you're still ten. And you are – underneath the year that makes you eleven.

Like some days you might say something stupid, and that's the part of you that's still ten. Or maybe some days you might need to sit on your mama's lap because you're scared, and that's the part of you that's five. And maybe one day when you're all grown up maybe you will need to cry like if you're three, and that's okay. That's what I tell Mama when she's sad and needs to cry. Maybe she's feeling three.

Because the way you grow old is kind of like an onion or like the rings inside a tree trunk or like my little wooden dolls that fit one inside the

other, each year inside the next one. That's how being eleven years old is.

35 You don't feel eleven. Not right away. It takes a few days, weeks even, sometimes even months before you say Eleven when they ask you. And you don't feel smart eleven, not until you're almost twelve. That's the way it is.

40 Only today I wish I didn't have only eleven years rattling inside me like pennies in a tin Band-Aid box. Today I wish I was one hundred and two instead of eleven because if I was one hundred and two I'd have known what to say when Mrs. Price put the red sweater on my desk. I would've known how to tell her it wasn't mine instead of just sitting there with that look on my face and nothing coming out of my mouth.

55 "Whose is this?"

Mrs. Price says, and she holds the red sweater up in the air for all the class to see. "Whose? It's been sitting in the coatroom for a month."

60 "Not mine," says everybody. "Not me."

"It has to belong to somebody," Mrs. Price keeps saying, but nobody can remember. It's an ugly sweater with red plastic buttons and a collar and sleeves all stretched out like you could use it for a jump rope. It's maybe a thousand years old and even if it belonged to me I wouldn't say so.

70 Maybe because I'm skinny, maybe because she doesn't like me, that stupid Sylvia Saldívar says, "I think it belongs to Rachel." An ugly sweater like that,

all raggedy and old, but Mrs. Price believes her. Mrs. Price takes the sweater and puts it right on my desk, but when I open my mouth nothing comes out.

80 "That's not, I don't, you're not . . . Not mine," I finally say in a little voice that was maybe me when I was four.

"Of course it's yours," Mrs. Price says. "I remember you wearing it once." Because she's older and the teacher, she's right and I'm not.

85 Not mine, not mine, not mine, but Mrs. Price is already turning to page thirty-two, and math problem number four. I don't know why but all of a sudden I'm feeling sick inside, like the part of me that's three wants to come out of my eyes, only I squeeze them shut tight and bite down on my teeth real

hard and try to remember today I am eleven, eleven. Mama is making a cake for me for tonight, and when Papa comes home everybody will sing Happy birthday, happy birthday to you.

100 But when the sick feeling goes away and I open my eyes, the red sweater's still sitting there like a big red mountain. I move the red sweater to the corner of my desk with my ruler. I move my pencil and books and eraser as far from it as possible. I even move my chair a little to the right. Not mine, not mine, not mine.

105 In my head I'm thinking how long till lunchtime, how long till I can take the red sweater and throw it over the schoolyard fence, or leave it hanging

■ ■ ■
"Of course it's yours,"
Mrs. Price says.
■ ■ ■

on a parking meter, or bunch it up into a little ball and toss it in the alley. Except when math period ends Mrs. Price says loud and in front of everybody, “Now, Rachel, that’s enough,” because she sees I’ve shoved the red sweater to the tippy-tip corner of my desk and it’s hanging all over the edge like a waterfall, but I don’t care.

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125 “Rachel,” Mrs. Price says. She says it like she’s getting mad. “You put that sweater on right now and no more nonsense.”

130 “But it’s not –”

“Now!” Mrs. Price says.

This is when I wish I wasn’t eleven, because all the years inside of me – ten, nine, eight, seven, six, five, four, three, two, and one – are pushing at the back of my eyes when I put one arm through one sleeve of the sweater that smells like cottage cheese, and then the other arm through the other and stand there with my arms apart like if the sweater hurts me and it does, all itchy and full of germs that aren’t even mine.

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150 That’s when everything I’ve been holding in since this morning, since when Mrs. Price put the sweater on my desk, finally lets go, and all of a sudden I’m crying in front of everybody. I wish I was invisible but I’m not. I’m eleven and it’s my birthday today and I’m crying like I’m three in front of

everybody. I put my head down on the desk and bury my face in my stupid clown-sweater arms. My face all hot and spit coming out of my mouth because I can’t stop the little animal noises from coming out of me, until there aren’t any more tears left in my eyes, and it’s just my body shaking like when you have the hiccups, and my whole head hurts like when you drink milk too fast.

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165 But the worst part is right before the bell rings for lunch. That stupid Phyllis Lopez, who is even dumber than Sylvia Saldívar, says she remembers the red sweater is hers! I take it off right away and give it to her, only Mrs. Price pretends like everything’s OK.

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175 Today I’m eleven. There’s a cake Mama’s making for tonight, and when Papa comes home from work we’ll eat it. There’ll be candles and presents and everybody will sing Happy birthday, happy birthday to you, Rachel, only it’s too late.

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I’m eleven today. I’m eleven, ten, nine, eight, seven, six, five, four, three, two, and one, but I wish I was one hundred and two. I wish I was anything but eleven, because I want today to be far away already, far away like a runaway balloon, like a tiny *o* in the sky, so tiny-tiny you have to close your eyes to see it.



C AFTER READING

1. Understanding the Story

With a partner, answer these questions.

1. Where does the story take place?
2. Who is the narrator (the person telling the story)? How old is she?
3. Why is the day special to the narrator?
4. Why does Mrs. Price give Rachel the sweater?
5. What does the sweater look like?
6. What does Rachel plan to do with the sweater during lunchtime?
7. Why doesn't she do what she planned? What happens instead?
8. How does Rachel finally get rid of the sweater?
9. How does she feel at the end of the story?
10. According to Rachel, how is growing older similar to an onion or a tree with rings?

2. Vocabulary Comprehension

Choose the word from the following list that best completes each sentence below. Do not use the same word more than once.

alley	skinny	spit	raggedy
itchy	invisible	toss	pretend
scared	lap	hiccups	squeeze

1. A(n) lap is a strange part of the body because you have it only when you are sitting down.
2. To get juice from a lemon, you have to _____ the lemon.
3. Children often get _____ when they hear stories about ghosts and monsters.
4. The red sweater wasn't comfortable because it felt _____.
5. The red sweater looked old and _____.
6. People who don't eat much are often _____.

7. With a microscope we can see many tiny things that to our eyes seem _____.
8. Rachel wanted to _____ the sweater over the fence.
9. In cities, some buildings have a(n) _____ between them.
10. The water we have in our mouths is called _____.
11. One way to stop _____ is to drink water and hold your breath.
12. Rachel couldn't _____ that she felt OK.

3. *Word Forms*

Complete the chart by filling in the various forms of the following words taken from “Eleven.” An X indicates that no form is possible. Use your dictionary if you need help. **Note:** There may be more than one possible word for the same part of speech.

VERB	NOUN	ADJECTIVE	ADVERB
wish	<i>wish</i>	_____	_____
scare	_____	_____	X
X	sadness	_____	_____
X	stupidity	_____	_____
X	loudness	_____	_____
smell	_____	_____	X
itch	_____	_____	X

Work with a partner. Fill in the blanks in the story below with the appropriate words from your completed chart. Change the form of the word if necessary.

Tina says, “I want to be a famous singer someday.” Tina _____ she could be famous right away, and she works very hard. Tina is a good singer, and her friends hope her _____ will come true.

4. Grammar: Contractions

Contractions are shortened forms of one or more words, made by leaving out letters. An apostrophe replaces the letters left out. Here are some common kinds of contractions with examples from the story:

- Noun or pronoun plus a simple present form of the verb *be*

Example:

You open your eyes and **everything's** just like yesterday.

- A form of *be*, *do*, *have*, or a modal (such as *can*, *should*) plus *not*

Examples:

The sweater's full of germs that **aren't** even mine.

You **don't** feel eleven at all.

I **can't** stop the little animal noises from coming out of me.

- Noun or pronoun plus *will*

Example:

When Papa comes home from work **we'll** eat it.

- Noun or pronoun plus present form of auxiliary verb *be* (*am*, *is*, *are*) or present or past form of auxiliary verb *have* (*have*, *has*, *had*)

Examples:

I'm feeling sick inside.

She sees **I've** shoved the red sweater to the tippy-tip corner of my desk.

That's when everything **I've** been holding in since this morning . . . finally lets go.

- Past modals that include *have* (such as *should have*, *could have*, *would have*)

Example:

I **would've** known how to tell her it wasn't mine.

5. Application

Complete the following sentences from the story with the contraction for the words in parentheses. Then, with a partner, reread the story to find nine other sentences with contractions. List the sentences on a separate piece of paper, providing blanks and the full words in parentheses, as in the sentences here. Then give your sentences to another pair to complete. (To avoid using the same sentences, you can work with one half of the story and the other pair can work with the other half.)

1. _____ *That's* _____ (That is) what I tell Mama when _____ *she's* _____
(she is) sad and needs to cry.
2. I _____ (would have) known how to tell her it
_____ (was not) mine.
3. _____ (It is) maybe a thousand years old and even if it belonged
to me I _____ (would not) say so.
4. Maybe because _____ (I am) skinny, maybe because she
_____ (does not) like me, that stupid Sylvia Saldívar says, "I
think it belongs to Rachel."
5. " _____ (That is) not, I _____ (do not),
_____ (you are) not . . . Not mine," I finally say.
6. The red _____ (sweater is) still sitting there like a big red
mountain.
7. This is when I wish I _____ (was not) eleven.
8. _____ (There is) a cake _____ (Mama is) making
for tonight.
9. _____ (There will) be candles and presents and everybody will
sing Happy birthday, happy birthday to you, Rachel, only _____
(it is) too late.

D THINKING ABOUT THE STORY

1. *Sharing Ideas*

Discuss the following questions with a partner or in a group:

1. Do you agree with Rachel's idea that, no matter how old we are, we always have all the ages we have been inside of us? Why or why not?
2. If you were Mrs. Price, how would you have handled the situation with Rachel?
3. Why do you think Phyllis Lopez at first didn't say the sweater was hers?
4. How does Cisneros make us understand how Rachel feels? Give examples from the story of descriptions and language that helped you understand Rachel's feelings. Is the story believable – that is, do Rachel and her situation feel real to you?

2. *Reading Between the Lines*

Reading between the lines is an expression for understanding ideas that are not specifically stated. When you read between the lines, you infer things, that is, you figure things out from what the author does tell you.

Circle the letter of the answer that best completes each of the following sentences:

1. Rachel wishes she were 102 because
 - a. at that age school and teachers like Mrs. Price would be in the distant past.
 - b. at that age she wouldn't have an 11-year-old inside her.
 - c. at that age she would have many older ages inside her.
2. In the end, when Phyllis has the sweater, Mrs. Price pretends everything is OK because
 - a. she doesn't want Rachel to be upset.
 - b. she doesn't want to admit she made a mistake.
 - c. she doesn't want her class to be late for lunch.

3. *Analyzing the Story*

Look back at the Literary Term on page 6. What have you learned about Rachel as a result of her telling her own story? How much of this would you know if the

story had a third person narrator, who could only tell you what Rachel said and did? Look at the story again and then make a chart like the one below and add examples to each category.

INFORMATION YOU LEARN FROM RACHEL AS NARRATOR	INFORMATION ANY NARRATOR COULD GIVE YOU
<p>Rachel’s ideas: <i>you have other ages inside you</i></p> <p>Rachel’s feelings:</p> <p>Rachel’s wants and wishes:</p> <p>Rachel’s way of looking at the red sweater:</p>	<p>Rachel’s words: <i>“That’s not, I don’t, you’re not . . . Not mine.”</i></p> <p>Rachel’s actions:</p>

Pair Discussion With a partner, compare answers. Do you think you learned much more about Rachel because the story is told in the first person? Why or why not?

4. Writing

Choose one of the following writing assignments:

1. Write a summary of the story in two to three paragraphs. Be sure to include all the important events.
2. If you were Rachel, what would you have done? To answer this, write a dialogue between Rachel and Mrs. Price. Begin your dialogue with:
Mrs. Price: Of course the sweater’s yours. I remember you wearing it once. Continue the dialogue any way you want.
3. What sense do you have of Rachel from reading this story? Write a description of Rachel – how she looks, what she’s like as a person, what her family is like, what she wants to do in the future – based on the information in the story and your imagination.