

The Secret Life of Mossy Stones

By Maya Meadowbrook

The afternoon sun hung low over the stream bank, casting long shadows across the woods and grass.

Maya moved slowly beside the water, watching the ground carefully. The stream had changed since the spring rains. The water ran clearer now, and damp leaves had collected between the stones along the bank.

She was hoping to find a red-backed salamander.

Maya had read about them in one of her nature books. These small salamanders liked cool, damp places beneath stones, logs, and fallen leaves. They had no lungs. Instead, they absorbed oxygen through their skin, which meant they needed moisture to survive.

That alone made them interesting to Maya.

She knelt beside a cluster of gray stones covered with patches of soft green moss.

Her father had taught her an important rule about looking beneath rocks.

“Lift the stone toward you,” he had said. “Then whatever is underneath can move away from your hands.”

Maya placed her fingers along the edge of a flat stone and slowly tilted it upward.

A whole world appeared beneath it.

The soil was nearly black and smelled of wet leaves, earth, and mold. Tiny roots crossed the surface like pale threads. Several pill bugs hurried toward the nearest crack.

Maya smiled.

Pill bugs were among her favorites.

Pill bugs look a little like beetles, but their backs are covered with overlapping plates. Some kinds curl themselves into a tight ball when disturbed. That’s why some people call them roly-polies. But they really are crustaceans, distant relatives of crabs and shrimp.

They can also move surprisingly fast. One pill bug ran on its many tiny legs, barely visible beneath its body. It quickly disappeared under a curled brown leaf. Another stopped for a moment, then hurried after the first.

Beside them, a yellow-brown centipede walked through the loose soil. Its legs moved in a smooth wave.

Maya leaned closer.

The stone had kept the soil underneath cool and damp even though the afternoon sun was warm. Moss along the top held moisture like a sponge.

A small beetle larva rested near one edge of the stone. A tiny snail slid along the rock, leaving a silver line behind it.

Maya could have watched for a long time.

Then she noticed something red beneath an oak leaf.

She stopped moving.

Only the tip was visible at first. Maya carefully shifted her head to one side.

A narrow, dark salamander lay beneath the leaf. A reddish stripe ran along its back.

Her heart jumped.

A red-backed salamander!

It was smaller than she expected, no longer than one of her fingers.

For a moment, Maya simply watched.

Then the salamander twisted sharply.

It twisted again.

Something was wrong.

Maya moved closer.

A thin piece of green net was tangled around the salamander's middle. One end was caught beneath a root, holding the animal in place.

The salamander tried to move forward, but the loop tightened.

"Oh," Maya whispered. "You're stuck."

She sat back and thought.

Normally, she would not touch a salamander. Their skin was thin and delicate, and the oils and salts on human hands could harm them.

But leaving this one trapped in the net was not an option.

Maya carried a small pair of blunt-tipped scissors in the pocket of her nature bag. She kept them for cutting string and collecting plant samples.

She took them out.

First, she dipped her fingers and the scissors into the cool stream water.

Then she gently lifted the wet leaf away.

The salamander twisted again.

“Easy,” Maya whispered.

Whenever she could, Maya held the plastic instead of the salamander. The knot was tighter than it had first seemed.

One strand crossed beneath the animal’s belly.

Maya slipped the blunt tip of the scissors beneath the plastic.

She stopped.

Too close.

She pulled the strand slightly away from the salamander’s body and tried again.

Snip.

One side of the loop opened.

The salamander suddenly wriggled forward.

Maya quickly moved her hand.

For a second, the little animal remained completely still.

Then it slid into a narrow crack beside the stone and vanished beneath the damp leaves.

Maya let out the breath she had been holding.

She picked up the green plastic.

It looked like the kind of net that gardeners use to keep birds from eating their crops. Most of it was brittle and faded.

She folded it carefully and tucked it into her pocket.
Then she looked again at the damp soil beneath the stone.
The pill bugs had disappeared.
The centipede was gone.
Only the tiny snail remained, moving so slowly that it seemed almost motionless.
Maya lowered the stone carefully.
She tried to place it exactly where it had been before.
She tucked the moss back against the soil.
The dark little world beneath the rock disappeared.
From above, the stone looked ordinary again.
Maya sat on her heels for a moment and looked at the stream.
A person walking past might notice the water, the grass, or the tall trees.
They might never think about what lived beneath one stone.
But Maya knew now.
Pill bugs moved through the damp leaves.
Centipedes hunted in the soil.
Snails traveled slowly across cool rock.
Beetle larvae rested beneath the moss.
And somewhere nearby, a tiny red-backed salamander was hiding safely in the shade.
Maya stood and brushed the dirt from her knees.
She took three steps toward home. Then she noticed another mossy stone.
She stopped. For a moment, she considered lifting it.
Then she smiled and kept walking.
There would be another day for that.
The woods had plenty of secrets left.