

A Swing in the Forest

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Abstract

This young adult novel investigates girlhood and coming-of-age through a supernatural lens. The novel follows an anxious preteen protagonist named Paul (short for Paulina). Paul's parents sign her up for a summer-long arts camp where she develops an unhealthy obsession with one of her counsellors, Gabriel. When her best friend, Nora, joins her at the camp, Nora thrives with the artsy kids while Paul remains isolated and can't seem to fit in, causing a rift between the two girls. Paul notices strange behaviour from Gabriel and begins to suspect that he might not be who he says he is. She gathers evidence to figure out what's really going on with him and to win her best friend back—she needs Nora and their friendship to solve this. Lycanthropy is used to explore themes of communication, isolation, mental health, liminal spaces, gender and queerness, domestic violence, the climate crisis, feminism, and the uncomfortable transformation of puberty.

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Tuesday

There was a swing in the forest. It wasn't *in* the forest really, just at the edge of it. Right before the part where Paul wasn't allowed to go. Her mom called it the ravine.

"Paulina's going to camp at that old house by the ravine," Paul's mom told someone on the phone, a fan blowing the sweat around her face while she sat at the kitchen table, "close enough for her to bike over so we don't have to drive her."

Two of the trees had saggy branches that got tangled up together and you could sit on them, if you were little like her, and you could swing. So she swung. This was Paul's favourite part of camp so far.

The house sat up on a hill at the edges of the forest and a parking lot. Well, not a forest, exactly. The ravine. A creek right in the middle of the city. Crumbling concrete hill down one side and soft dark green, cluttered with trees and slimy moss-covered rocks down the other. It was the biggest house Paul had ever seen, and the counsellors told the campers that a family used to live in it. It became offices and a community centre and a venue for things like weddings after that because it was so beautiful, they said, and it was nice that people didn't have to go so far out of the city to get to such a pretty place close to nature. It felt like a museum or something, so it was hard for Paul to believe that it used to be someone's home. There were offices upstairs and in the basement, and on the main floor there were three big empty rooms full of dust and sun. To get to the house, she had to go up a long, windy driveway, and it took a while on the way up in the morning, but she didn't even have to pedal her bike to go down on the way home. Just watch for the cracks and holes in the concrete.

“What will we do the rest of the time?” Paul sighed at her mother. Paul wasn’t looking forward to more days of group singing exercises and get-to-know-you games with overly enthusiastic teenage counsellors and the other eleven- to fifteen-year-olds. The kettle shrieked on the stove—it sounded like a train, more of a deep moan than a whistle.

“Art stuff, Paul, like dancing and music and things like that. And drawing, I think,” her mom clicked off the stove with one hand while pouring Cheerios into a bowl with the other.

“But I’m really bad at drawing.” Paul’s mother placed the bowl on the table in front of her child and Paul stared down at the dry bowl. “And singing.”

“That’s okay, they don’t care if you’re bad, honey. It’s just something fun to do.” Her mother scooped a big spoon of instant coffee into a mug, poured in the steaming water from the kettle.

“Okay.” Paul tried to pour milk from the very full milk carton into her bowl and spilled some on the table. She brought the carton back to the fridge and stretched her fingertips to grab a sheet of paper towel from the roll on the windowsill above the sink while her mother scrolled on her phone.

“Did you know your cousins are going to an overnight camp up north? I don’t know how Rachel is paying for that.”

“No! What do they do at overnight camp?” Paul imagined roasting marshmallows and eating as many as she wanted.

“I don’t know, honey, stuff in the woods.” She scrolled. “It’s three weeks out there. I don’t think you’d like it.”

Paul shovelled a large spoonful of Cheerios into her mouth. She didn't think she was good at artsy things. Nora was good at drawing, so that was her thing—Paul's thing wasn't that. She didn't know what her thing was exactly, but she liked watching Nora draw and seeing her drawings when they were finished. She just didn't like doing them herself because she wasn't nearly as good as Nora. Nora's parents signed her up for sports camp this week.

Paul finished the bowl of Cheerios, dripping milk down her chin and wiping it off with her sleeve. She creaked the door of the dishwasher open, found a spot to put her bowl in the bottom rack, and clicked the beige and black door closed. The pattering on the window got louder and Paul looked out to see the rain picking up. "Momma," she said.

"I know. Your dad had to take the car for work today, sweetie. Do you want me to walk with you and we can use the umbrellas?"

It was only the second day of camp, but Paul longed for the swing from the first day. She didn't get to spend that much time on it the day before, but every minute felt special. She stared through the drips out the basement window at the soggy vines and trees during journalling time. The kids were supposed to draw by themselves and not talk to anyone while the camp counsellors stared at their cell phones. The kids weren't allowed to use cell phones, but Paul didn't have one anyway because she was only twelve and her mom said she had to be in high school before she would even think about getting her one.

There was a drop in the forest just beyond the swing, and Paul wished she could look out further over the mossy green as she swung. She tried to imagine what the forest creatures did at night when she and the loud campers weren't there. She could see a

squirrel leaping across the slippery branches, but she knew the other creatures didn't come out until it was dark, and there were no people watching. Paul could relate to that. She preferred being alone too. The swing seemed less fun after the other kids found out what she was doing. She held a broken yellow crayon in her hand and kept an eye out for the creatures anyway.

At the end of the day, Paul looked out the screen door for her mom but didn't see her when the other kids got into cars with their parents to go home.

"Is someone coming to get you?" Gabriel, the leader of the counsellors, floated into the doorway, the thin fabric of his wrinkly grey shirt billowing behind his back and arms. His eyes sparkled baby blue from close up and Paul had never seen such blue eyes before. They were the probably the prettiest eyes she'd ever seen, she thought. She stared at the line between his eyebrows that formed as he struggled to think of something.

"Remind me of your name?"

"It's Paulina. But you can call me Paul, I like it better."

"That's a sweet name," his eyebrow line disappeared, and the freckles smoothed across his forehead. "Is someone coming to pick you up, Paul?"

"I don't know, I don't think so." Paul checked the parking lot once more and didn't see anyone standing out there. Her dad wouldn't be done work until late at night, so she knew there was no chance of seeing his van.

"Did you want to use the phone to call anyone?"

Paul stared for a few seconds longer. She didn't want to call her mom but Gabriel was staring and waiting, his eyes so blue they looked like sea glass. He probably wouldn't

let her go by herself without calling someone. All of the other campers were almost gone and she heard the counsellors giggling outside. “I guess I can call.”

Gabriel led Paul to the kitchen where there was a beige phone hanging on the wall next to a closed door. There was a laminated sign on the door that said “PRIVATE” in big red letters on white paper. Gabriel opened the door and stepped through. He turned back and said, “You can use this one. I’ll be back in a minute,” and he walked through the door, pulling it shut while Paul snuck a glimpse of the long hallway on the other side.

She picked up the phone and dialled her dad’s cell number, knowing he probably wouldn’t answer. The buttons were beige too and had little scoops inside them that fit her fingers perfectly. She dialled slow, feeling each one. There were brownish grey stains on each button, but the stains didn’t move when she swiped them.

The phone rang twice. “Jeremy speaking.”

“Dad?” Paul twirled the beige cord in her fingers.

“Paulina?” He paused. “Where are you calling me from?”

“I’m at camp but it’s over now.”

“Oh. Sweetie please don’t call me while I’m at work unless it’s an emergency.”

“Sorry.” She felt a sick feeling in her stomach. She wasn’t expecting him to answer. He usually didn’t when she called him from home.

“It’s okay. I’ve got to go. See you later tonight.”

“Bye.” The phone clicked and Paul hung it back up in its holder. Gabriel wasn’t back yet. She looked around at the clean kitchen, at the dark beige tiles on the floor and the light beige on the counters. The walls were painted beige too. She spun around and only saw beige until her eyes caught the first item that wasn’t beige—the fridge. The

fridge was white with a dark brown handle. She walked up to it, empty of magnets except for one orange magnet in the shape of a half-peeled clementine holding up a calendar. It was open on the July page and the top half had a picture of some trees. Green and brown. There was nothing written on any of the dates except for a big red X in one box—Wednesday. That was tomorrow. What’s so special about tomorrow? Paul wondered if Gabriel had an important dinner tomorrow, or maybe a special lunch planned for campers. Her hand lingered on the handle of the fridge, and she began to slowly lean her weight back to pull it open and just as the suction of the door released she heard the door behind her creak open:

“Paulina, campers aren’t allowed to use the fridge, I’m afraid.” Gabriel pushed the fridge door shut firmly from above. His arm hairs curled around his wrist, poking out of his flowy sleeve. Even his curly arm hairs were pretty. Paul craned her neck to look up at him. She looked back at the hallway door and noticed he left it open. He walked back over to close it with his free hand, a bag of dried green leaves or herbs of some kind in his other hand. “Did you talk to your parents?”

“Yeah, my dad can’t come get me. So he said I can just walk home.”

Gabriel frowned at her.

“I have an umbrella. It’s not that far.” She wasn’t lying about that part, it was only about a ten-minute walk and she knew the way—she biked it by herself the day before.

“Is that weed?”

“No, it’s tea,” Gabriel said slowly. The dark curls balanced on the top of his head with his light eyes made him look like a baby angel. “Okay, well you can stay as long as

you need to, Paul,” he said as he filled up a pot of water and put it on the stove. “Just as long as you’re out before dark.”

Wednesday

Paul woke up on Wednesday morning to sun shining in her eyes. She squinted them open and then shut them again. She remembered it was Wednesday, the day that Gabriel had an X on the fridge calendar. It also meant there were only a few days left until the weekend, and she might be able to have a sleepover with Nora on the weekend. Nora’s parents always drank a lot of wine and giggled and made lasagna for dinner when Paul slept over. Paul liked this ritual because it meant they got full and tired pretty quickly so Paul and Nora could sneak off and be alone to talk about camp. Paul needed to tell Nora about Gabriel and the red X, but first she had to find out what it meant. She shot up out of bed, energized, and ran out of her room. She padded down through the first bend in the stairs and then galloped the rest of the way down.

“Mom!” she yelled. “Can I sleep over at Nora’s this weekend?”

Paul’s mom jumped a bit, the glass of the coffee percolator on the stove clinking as she wrestled with it. Paul felt bad for scaring her—she didn’t usually call her “Mom,” but she needed to be taken seriously because this was important. She needed to see Nora after this week.

“Sure, honey, that’s fine. As long as her parents are okay with it.” She continued fiddling with the percolator. Paul had never seen her mom use the percolator before.

The sun sparkled at Paul through damp trees as she rode her bike to camp, and she wished she hadn't broken her sunglasses at the end of the school year. She rolled through puddles and her butt got a bit wet on the way, but it was warm out so her shorts dried fast.

The teenage counsellors guided them through a morning stretching routine and then they painted rocks they found on the grounds during art time. She didn't see Gabriel at all in the morning. She wondered if maybe he was getting a special lunch for the campers ready, considering the red X, but then lunchtime came and they ate their packed lunches—still no sign of Gabriel. Paul sat on the stone steps that went down to a lower level of the lawn and ate the crackers and orange cheese and a box of apple juice that her mom packed. There was a path near the back of the lawn through some bushes and trees and she saw some of the counsellors duck through it at the beginning of lunch and then re-emerge a bit later. She thought she should be allowed to go there too, but she didn't see any other kids do it. After lunch they had some free time to play outside. Paul watched the trees while a crowd of kids took turns swinging on her swing.

After the lunch break, they wrote in their journals in the basement. Paul didn't know what to write so she wrote about how the day was filled with the same stuff they did the first two days of camp, just with different activities and no Gabriel. And no swinging—not for her, anyway. She didn't want to write anything bad about the other campers hogging the swing in case someone snooped in her journal.

Paul was anxious for the calendar event to happen. She couldn't write this in her journal either, though, just in case the counsellors read them and found out that she knew something was happening. But she needed to know why it was there. If it wasn't a special lunch, maybe it had nothing to do with camp. Maybe Gabriel had a dinner planned for

tonight. Maybe for the counsellors? Or maybe he had a date. Paul chewed the end of her pen and tried to imagine a girl prettier than Gabriel sitting at a fancy dining table with him—a dark red tablecloth in a dark room, red lipstick on the lady, each holding a crystal glass of champagne that you could see their teeth through while they stared at each other—but it was hard, he was so pretty. She had to talk to Nora about it.

After journaling, the teenage counsellors rounded up the kids into the biggest empty room.

“Okay, campers! We’re going to break into smaller groups for a theatre exercise. Since Shelley and I are on our high school’s improv team, we thought it would be fun to try that today,” said counsellor Katie, her green eyeshadow beaming at her friend beside her at the front of the room.

Shelley chimed in: “Yeah, so improv is short for improvise, which means you make it up on the spot. So we’ll give each group a scene which will start with two people, then everyone will take turns swapping out—”

“—when you see an opportunity to jump in and replace another actor, you just say ‘freeze!’ and then you can tap them on the shoulder and swap out, and then continue the scene that way. Got it?”

Paul was confused and had never done theatre before. They gave them numbers to break the campers into groups of five.

Paul was matched up with two loud boys. Each syllable they spoke was followed by the feeling of Paul’s stomach dipping, urging her to leave the room. She didn’t know how to be as loud as them. She didn’t want to, but she had a feeling she was expected to.

Counsellor Katie put her hand up and made the shape of a dog with her fingers, the middle two pressed together in a snout and two ears on the end. “This is the quiet coyote,” she yelled. “If you see this, I want you to copy me and put up your hand with the quiet coyote and be ready to listen.”

All of the loud kids silenced their chatter and put their hands up in the shape of the coyote. The room became quiet with a sea of dog heads floating above the heads of the group.

“Okay, we’ll give you your setting first, then you can start in your groups,” Katie spoke into the room.

“Why don’t we set this first one at the mall? I repeat, at the mall,” Shelley stated. Shelley and Katie winked at each other as the volume in the room grew louder again.

“Okay, can we just start?” one of the boys said loudly, thumbing his friend’s shoulder.

The other two kids in the group were standing together but not talking. “Sure,” one of them said, “we’ll freeze and sub you out then.”

The two boys started immediately clutching invisible purse straps over their shoulders, pitched their voices up high and pretended to be girls. Paul was frozen. Her eyes traced a pathway to escape, but she couldn’t move. She could run to the bathroom—but she’d have to come back eventually unless she pretended she was sick. Or she could say she needed to step outside, it was too hot in there—but maybe then they’d all just want to go outside and follow her out to continue this horrible game. There was no escape.

A girl in the group with her hair tips dyed green said, “freeze!” and tapped one of the loud boys on the shoulder. She deepened her voice and pretended to be a man impatiently waiting for his wife to finish her shopping. Paul let her eyes circle the room again as inconspicuously as possible to find the quickest route out.

The other kid in the group with brown hair tapped out the other boy, and the two children in the scene both put on deep voices, commiserating about their wives taking a long time in the shops.

“I wish I was having a cold one in the backyard with the boys, you know?” said the brown-haired child.

“I hear ya, bro. I can already smell the barbecue. Burgers on burgers on burgers.”

Paul wished she could remember their names. She forgot all the kids’ names. She felt a tap on her shoulder.

“Hey, it’s your turn. Wanna go up?” one of the loud boys said to her.

Paul felt like she might throw up. She shook her head fast.

“Oh. Okay. Do you mind if I go back in then?”

She shook again, grateful, but felt a bit dizzy. The boy ran up and tapped the green-haired girl.

“Honey, I’m just about done. I just want to find a new pair of heels for our date tomorrow!”

Shelley slowly appeared at Paul’s side, arms crossed. She surveyed the scene with her head cocked to one side. She looked at Paul: “Have you been up yet?”

Paul shook her head and wished she could disappear.

“Oh, well, you should have a turn! Go tap out Luca.” She jutted her head towards the boy who’d just gone up.

Paul felt her face get red and the insides of her clothes get sweaty. She felt hot. She looked up at Shelley’s kind face.

“Go on!” she said sweetly.

Paul’s feet moved without her brain telling them to, dragging the rest of her body into the scene, and she slowed them down as much as she could. She couldn’t see a way out of this. She wanted to run. Instead, she tapped Luca’s shoulder once, then twice. Luca stopped mid-sentence, turned to Paul, and walked back out into the circle. The kid with the brown hair said:

“So, did you find anything good at the food court?”

Paul was frozen.

“I ate a giant pretzel, but I could’ve eaten ten more. At least that’s one good thing about the mall!” The child chuckled, placing their hand on their belly, bending their knees, and throwing their head back. They seemed to notice that Paul was still not moving or speaking. They whispered, “Are you going to say anything?”

Paul stared at them.

“Should we change the scene a bit? Is there something else you’d rather do?”

Paul shrugged. They both stood frozen.

The girl with the green-tipped hair tapped Paul’s shoulder, and relief washed over Paul from her ears all the way down to her toes. The girl started talking about picking up girls in food courts, and Paul made her run for the hallway.

She hurried into the bathroom to wait until the other kids left before getting her stuff together to bike home. She clicked the door closed and locked it with the old iron lock. She leaned against the door and saw the top of her head in the mirror—it was too high up for her to see her face in it. The cream-coloured planks of wood on the door dominated the reflection and made her feel especially small. She washed her hands in cold water to make it seem like she was doing something productive in there, and when she heard the high-pitched chatter settle down, she left the bathroom. All the shoes from the door were gone, except for one adult pair. The counsellors must have left too. She heard fuzzy radio noises coming from the kitchen and she walked towards them without thinking. She pushed the door open and saw Gabriel standing over the stove in a grey bathrobe. The steam from whatever he was boiling on the stove billowed around him as he hummed along to the song on the radio, one she didn't recognize.

“Hi.” Paul noticed Gabriel's curls pointed in all different swoopy directions on his head and she wondered if he just woke up.

Gabriel turned his head slightly, “Oh hey, Paul.” He turned back and continued stirring something in a small metal pot. “Are you waiting for a ride today?”

“I biked.” Paul stepped closer. “What are you making?” The smell was overwhelming, the whole kitchen damp and earthy.

“Just some tea.” The radio stopped playing the song and changed to a woman talking about the weather: more rain tonight. Gabriel turned off the stove and lifted the dented pot, splashed every drop of the contents into a big brown mug. “I'd offer you some but I don't think you'd like it.”

“That’s okay.” The smell got stronger and it didn’t smell like anything she’d ever want to drink. “I should go home now.”

“See you tomorrow, Paul.” He lifted the mug to his nose and breathed in the steam while he walked, opened the door to the private hallway and drifted through, his robe snagging across the wood of the door as it closed behind him.

Paul’s bike rolled down the driveway almost automatically. Her route was memorized and went by faster each time. She zigzagged through the side streets to stay out a little longer in the sun before the rain came. She came to a railway track and the amber light was blinking. The roar of the distant train sounded like a kettle coming to a boil. She thought off the smell of Gabriel’s tea, the steam of it. Paul stood frozen for a moment, blinked as the train roared past. She’d watched him tip his face into the steam of his cup and breath in that funky smell. She’d remembered the calendar—turned to look at it and saw that it hadn’t changed. The X remained in place today with no further details.

Thursday

Paul’s mom was still sleeping on Thursday morning, but the overnight rain had stopped so Paul ate her Cheerios and hopped on her bike to head to camp. Puddles dotted her route—nothing she couldn’t handle. She got to the grounds a bit early and noticed there were no cars in the parking lot. The house looked quiet and still, like there was no one alive in it yet. Instead of going in right away, she locked her bike up and took a walk around the grounds. She found the path at the back of the lawn that the counsellors went

through. Paul was short enough that she didn't have to crouch to get under the branches. The ground was still soggy from the rain and the sun couldn't get through the thicker branches. Her foot fell into a mucky puddle, and when she looked down, she saw a large groove filled with water. It looked like a giant footprint, maybe from a really big dog or a dinosaur or something. Paul knew there wasn't anything that big in these woods. She looked over to where the swing was, empty and shiny with rain.

Paul walked over and let her hand slide down one of the wet vines of the swing. It was so damp, and her pants would definitely get wet if she sat on it, but she knew this might be the only opportunity she would have alone with the swing all day. She hung her backpack on a low branch so it didn't get wet on the ground, sat on the squishy seat of the swing, and felt instant dampness through her pants. She heard a squelching noise as she hiked herself back, preparing to push and lift off over the mossy edge. She twitched her head around to see if any of the lights reflecting off the leaves were actually fairies or other creatures, but she just saw dewy growth. Paul felt the contents of her stomach move as she lurched forward on the swing. Her hands slipped, and she gripped the wet vines harder. She kicked her feet out to extend her reach as far as possible, then pulled them back in, pointing her toes to send herself back. She kicked again back and forth a few times and tried to reach her toes to the overhanging leaves even though she knew they would never touch. Her pants became more sodden with each motion, and she felt wetness in new places with every kick. She twisted to make eye contact with a passing squirrel as it ran by and briefly paused to look back and watch her before continuing with its business. She felt herself slip on the seat, so she gripped tighter and tried to slow down, scraping her feet along the grassy base of the special spot. As she planted her feet

firmly on the ground, she heard a rustling and saw, out of the corner of her eye, a bush near the house swaying. She turned to look, but the rustling stopped as fast as it started. The bush became still again—nothing else was moving. Paul sat in the dampness for a minute and kept watching the spot. But whatever it was had passed.

Paul heard cars start to pull up into the driveway and let loud kids out onto the grounds and into the house. She grabbed her backpack off the hanger and slung it over one shoulder before wiping at the wetness of her pants and stepping through the sticky grass towards the house.

They flowed through their morning movement routine and there was no sign of Gabriel again. Paul sniffed when she walked near the kitchen door to see if she could smell his weird tea, but she couldn't smell anything other than the old house. They ate lunch inside because it was too wet to sit in the grass, so Paul sat by the window and watched her swing, soggy and unmoving.

After lunch, the kids sat as an audience facing one of the bay windows while the counsellors made them go over some of their favourite themes and conversations that came out of yesterday's improv session. Kids could volunteer to go up and try to re-enact parts of it that they liked best. Paul didn't volunteer, and no one pressured her to, but she remained nervous about the possibility until the very end. Relief spread over her again when Shelley asked for one last pair of volunteers, and they chose the final two—the loud boys from Paul's group. Paul didn't have to go up: it was confirmed now. She saw movement from the hallway. She turned and saw that it was Gabriel, wrapped in a grey blanket and holding a steaming mug of tea, watching the final scene. Paul noticed the bags under Gabriel's eyes were darker and saggier than the day before. After standing at

attention for the whole day to lead activities, the counsellors' bodies finally eased when they saw him, and they found seats in the audience.

From her knees on the side of the room, Shelley yelled, "Freeze!" The boys kept going, their routine getting louder and more exaggerated. Campers in the audience laughed louder as the boys stumbled around with their invisible shopping bags and demanded more, more, more clothes and shoes. "Freeze!" Shelley said again. Again, the boys didn't freeze.

"Hey!" Gabriel barked at the boys. "She said freeze!" he bellowed.

Paul looked up at Gabriel, his pretty freckled face now red, teeth bared. His eyes narrowed and veiny. The line between his eyebrows grew deeper. She'd never heard him get this loud, and she had never seen him angry before. The pressure in the room rose as the campers and counsellors alike tensed under Gabriel's snarl. The loud boys froze—they both looked like they were going to cry—and sat down on the floor with the other campers.

Gabriel turned and walked back down the hall towards the kitchen, the steam from his tea trailing behind him.

"Okay, time to pack up. Have a good night, everyone!" Shelley stood and clapped as the other campers started their chatter again and ran to pack up their things and launch out the door to their waiting parents.

Paul dumped her bike in the driveway when she got to her house and ran inside. She picked up the cordless phone from its dock on the table next to the couch her mom was asleep on, tiptoed out of the living room, and ran up the stairs to her bedroom. She

hopped belly first onto her bed and dialled the number for Nora’s parents’ house, the movements of her fingers on the number pad memorized. She squeezed the phone between her ear and shoulder and rocked back and forth in anticipation while the phone rang, and rang, and rang. Finally, Nora’s mother picked up.

“Can I talk to Nora, please!” Paul said as fast as she could.

“Sure, Paul. One sec,” the phone shuffled, “NORAAAA! Phone!”

Paul could hear Nora’s feet tumbling down the stairs. Nora must have known it was Paul on the phone because Paul was the only person that called her.

Panting, “Hello?”

“Hi, Nora! My mom said I can sleep over at your house this weekend. So . . . can I sleep over?”

“Let me ask my mom.”

Paul could hear the muffled exchange in the background, kicked her feet against the side of the bed.

“She said yes,” Nora gasped back into the receiver. Paul knew she would say yes.

“I have so much to tell you! How is camp?”

“It’s fine. I’m really bad at soccer.”

Paul laughed—she already knew that Nora was terrible at soccer: she’d seen her play at gym class in the spring. Or rather, she saw Nora standing on the field in the schoolyard, sometimes crouched down examining clovers, while the other kids played soccer around her. She was the weak spot on the team, so they didn’t keep her on for long. Paul knew Nora was awful at sports—anything that involved running or getting in there, Nora couldn’t do. She much preferred sitting alone with her sketchbook or talking

to Paul. Paul was better at the running and getting-in-there parts, as long as it didn't involve talking. She wasn't great at the teamwork part, necessarily, but she could steal the ball from another kid and score a goal easily. She was much faster than the other kids in their grade. She practiced being fast and took pride in being the fastest. Maybe that's why she and Nora got along so well—they both liked being alone. As long as they were alone together, everything was fine.

Paul heard the door slam downstairs and heard her dad yelling. "I've gotta go. I'll see you tomorrow?" She hung up the phone and ran to her bedroom door to make sure it was mostly closed but left it open a crack. She heard her mom yelling back but couldn't tell what she was saying. She pressed her ear to the crack. She heard her dad yell "stupid bitch," heard him stomp to the door, heard him slam it closed. Paul pulled her ear away from the crack as she heard her mother flick on the radio.

Friday

Paul woke up but didn't want to open her eyes. They were extra crusty today. She felt more sleepy than usual and didn't know why. She wondered if maybe she'd had a nightmare, but she couldn't remember what happened in it. She cracked her eyes open to see the baby blue of her bedroom walls, blue smudges on white where the wall met the ceiling. White desk- and bookshelf-shaped clouds inside, but the baby blue sky out the window was clear. Paul jumped up to a seat. She remembered it was Friday—the last day of the week before her sleepover with Nora. The brown alarm clock on her nightstand told her in red numbers that it was five minutes before she had to leave for camp. She hopped out of bed and put on a blue dress with bows on the shoulders and a pair of shorts

underneath. She ran downstairs, grabbed the box of Cheerios from the counter where it usually was, and shoved some into her mouth and some in a Ziplock bag which she stuffed in her backpack. Her dad's car was gone, and her mom must've been sleeping. She remembered she'd need a lunch, so she grabbed another bag, filled it with more Cheerios, and two granola bars from the pantry. She slung her backpack over both shoulders and whipped out the door and onto her bike.

When she got to camp, most of the kids were already there running around in the yard. She rolled her bike over to the fence, the wooden pickets leaning sideways into a tree. There was enough space for her to thread her lock through the slats and her helmet straps and lock up next to the parents' cars. She still had a few minutes before camp started, so she took out her bag of Cheerios and snuck behind the building to get to the wooded area.

The ground began to get squishier under her feet as the concrete and patio stones fell away, and the trees, shrubs, and moss grew thicker around her. The canopy darkened her surroundings and muted the yells of the children nearby as she munched on her Cheerios. The crunching felt loud in the trees. Paul turned and walked backwards, then spun around to walk forwards again—she was surrounded by green. It felt cool and damp in the darkness and she thought maybe she could stay there all day and maybe no one would notice. She knew the swing was nearby, but she couldn't figure out how to get to it from this side of the house, the woods heavy against the back of it. She would just have to keep following the back wall of the house, her finger tips grazing the brick, and go down a hill at some point, but she had a feeling she would be able to find it. She saw bright orange out of the corner of her eye, breaking the spell of green and brown. A butterfly

floated past her and continued down her planned path. She followed it, and then another appeared, then another. She felt a thrill, walking with the butterflies, like they accepted her. They sailed silently and probably didn't mind that she wasn't saying anything. They headed along on their soggy path, Paul and her new friends. Maybe she should figure out some names for them. The butterflies suddenly lowered and carved to the left. They settled on a tall purple plant and became still, one butterfly each on their own cluster of flowers. The leaves weren't very pretty, but the flowers were. Paul noticed the plants covered a wide area. It had taken over some of the shrubs and created a butterfly oasis. Maybe this could be Paul's oasis too. She heard rhythmic clapping, muffled, through the trees—the signal to start camp. Paul sighed and knelt into the wet ground next to the plants. The butterflies didn't move. Maybe they trusted her now. Paul caught an overwhelming scent—earthy and burnt. She sniffed the flowers on the plant next to the ones inhabited by her new friends and all she could smell was the burnt earth. Nora would know what this plant was. Paul decided to pull some off to bring to their sleepover and ask. She chose a spot on the plant that wasn't being used by the butterflies and ripped off the end—some flowers, some stem, and a few leaves so Nora could help her identify it. She pulled her backpack around and opened up her notebook, stuck the clipping between two pages somewhere in the middle, and closed it up with her elastic band. She got up and hurried back the way she came.

When Paul emerged from the woods she saw Gabriel, shining and bright, heading to where the campers were set up in a circle with the counsellors. They were clapping in rhythms based on ones the counsellors came up with, the sound played once by a teenage counsellor's hands then echoed by sixty smaller hands all at once. Gabriel squeezed into

the circle and joined the kids in their echoing claps. Paul dumped her bag next to the house and joined in a bit further down from Gabriel. He radiated energy that he didn't have the day before, as if he had been recharged.

Saturday

Paul's mom and dad were still burrowed in their bedroom when she woke up, the door closed to keep the cool in from the window air conditioner. Paul pawed her way down to the kitchen as quietly as she could and shovelled handfuls of dry Cheerios from the box into her mouth. She had slept in, and Nora said she could come over whenever she wanted. It was already ten-thirty and she still had to get dressed. She crawled up the stairs on all fours as fast as she could, carpet scratching her palms. She snapped her bedroom door shut, twisting the handle to avoid a loud click. Paul didn't have an air conditioner in her room, so she put on a fan that her dad brought home from work and left on her desk one day. She moved slowly in the heat, opened her dresser, and fished out a pair of shorts—beige with big pockets—underwear, and her favourite orange tank top. Her mom said the colour of the shirt was coral, but her dad said that was not the right word for it, so Paul kept calling it orange. She pulled them on and looked in the mirror. Her hair was a bit greasy so she put it in a ponytail. She took her camp stuff out of her backpack and packed pyjamas, new underwear, and a different tank top back into it. She already had a toothbrush at Nora's house. She crept back downstairs and left through the back door. Her mom knew she was going, so she didn't wake them.

Paul looped around the side of the house to get her bike from the backyard but quickly spun back when she realized she forgot something—the plant cutting. She didn't know why she felt like she needed to show Nora the plant. Something about the energy, the smell of it. She slipped in through the side door and tiptoed back up the stairs. Her parent's bedroom door was open a crack now, and she could feel the cool air slipping out. She lingered for a second, then heard a large body turn over, the creak of the mattress and the shuffle of the sheets. She heard her dad let out a breath. Paul held still, quiet as the quiet coyote. Silence again.

She moved into her bedroom and opened up her notebook from camp—the pressed plant matter still there where she tucked it. She closed the book and stretched the elastic band around it to keep it shut tight, slipped it into her backpack, and snuck back outside.

Paul had to push herself to make it up the unreasonable hill to Nora's house. She only lived a couple of blocks away, but Paul had to cross a busy street to get there. She pushed her body up off the seat of the bike to put all her weight into each pedal one by one up the hill, panting as she passed the halfway mark. She'd found she had to give up much sooner at the beginning of the summer. She made it about two-thirds of the way up the hill before she couldn't make herself pedal anymore, so she climbed off the side of the bike and walked the rest of the way. Nora's house was almost at the top. She panted through the last few sidewalk squares before letting the bike fall onto Nora's front lawn. She kneeled next to it to catch her breath. Then she pulled herself and her bike up, rolled it down the driveway, and unlatched the gate to the backyard. She let the bike fall on the grass. Nora's parents had two big dogs, Arnold and Shadow, and they both ran up to Paul,

barking. They were clearly excited after not seeing her for a whole week. Paul scratched both of their heads at the same time like she always did, one hand for each dog head. They both stared at her and brought their faces as close to hers as possible, a string of drool hanging from Arnold's mouth. Nora's parents always cleaned the dogs' poop right away so there was never poop around in the yard, except in the far corner where the grass didn't grow anymore. They had an above-ground pool with a deck built around it. The dogs were allowed in the pool, so the water was permanently thick and soupy with fur. The smell of wet dog was always around.

After scratching the boys for a while, Paul stood up and headed to the back porch. Nora's mom was sitting on a dark brown wooden Muskoka chair. She read a newspaper with a cup of coffee steaming out of a clear glass mug and a French press with more coffee in it on the small brown table beside her. The sunlight coming through the wooden slats of the overhang illuminated the coffee steam.

"Oh hi, Paul!" She looked up from her paper. "How's camp going? Have you made some new friends?"

"It's fine." Paul thought about the other kids at camp, how loud they were and how little she spoke to anyone at all. Except for Gabriel. "I don't know if I like it that much."

"Nora didn't have a great time at hers either. How long is yours on for again?"

"It's all summer."

"I wonder if we can get her in for next week," she began nibbling her nails. "Then you two can be together at least, that might be more fun." Nora's mom studied Paul with her head tilted to one side, one leg crossed over the other, her floral robe draped over her

pyjamas. Paul felt her heart beating quicker—she didn't want to seem too excited in case Nora's mom changed her mind.

“That might be fun, yeah,” Paul said, her voice shaking.

“I'll see what we can do,” she said, and turned her attention back to the newspaper and her nibbled-off nails. “Nora's inside, dear.”

“Thanks!” Paul ran inside through the open back door and went straight up the stairs to Nora's room, where she knew she would be. They had window air conditioners in both bedrooms upstairs so Nora's room was cool. The door was open a crack and Paul pushed it open all the way. “Your mom said maybe you can come to camp with me!” Paul halted in the doorway.

Nora was reading a comic book in bed. She looked up and squinted at Paul, put on her glasses, then looked at her again without squinting. “Really?”

“Yeah! Wouldn't that be awesome? She said you didn't have a good time at camp.”

“I didn't. It was horrible.”

“I know. The soccer.” Paul sat on the end of Nora's bed.

“It was more than just the soccer. Everyone was so—I don't know. I don't think I fit in there.”

“I don't think I fit in at mine either. But I think you will. And if you're there, it'll be way more fun for me too.” Paul looked at her lap. She imagined Nora having a great time and getting along with everyone at her stupid camp. She was already jealous that Nora got along with everyone and Nora hadn't even been at the camp yet. “I just don't know what to say to people or what's supposed to happen next sometimes.”

“Yeah, I know what you mean. But you’re really smart, Paul. As soon as you say something I’m sure everyone will like you.” Nora blushed. She always managed to sneak a compliment in that made Paul feel a bit better.

“Do you wanna go swimming?” Paul thought about the sparse packing job she did and the emptiness of her backpack. “Oh no! I forgot my bathing suit.”

“You always forget your bathing suit.”

“I know. Can I wear your green one?” Paul loved Nora’s green bathing suit. It made her feel like a mermaid. They both put on Nora’s bathing suits and went outside into the heat.

Nora’s mother had moved her chair into the sun and was baking in it. She had put on round white sunglasses and it looked like she may have been napping behind them. Her coffee sat unfinished on the table, not steaming anymore.

Paul and Nora climbed the stairs onto the pool deck and sat together at the edge of the pool, letting their feet swish around in the murky water. They always swam in it anyway, even though the dog fur was unavoidable and kind of gross. The dogs saw the girls by the poolside and they both ran up to the deck and leapt into the pool, sending splashes of water all over the girls.

“Why do your parents let the dogs in the pool again?” Paul whispered, trying to push the wet fur off her skin.

“Well, they want them to have fun lives. And they love going in the pool. It wouldn’t be fun for anyone if we tried to keep them out.”

“That’s true, I guess.”

The girls slid into the pool. Two groaning swamp monsters, they chased after the dogs who barked and swam from one end of the pool to the other. Then the dogs started chasing the girls back one by one. Paul felt like they were really being chased by swamp monsters. They screamed louder.

The dogs got bored and hopped out of the pool, sauntering in unison to a sunny spot on the grass to pant and bask in the heat with their freshly sopping fur. Having the water to themselves, the girls became a new duo: a mermaid and her human best friend. Paul was the mermaid, of course, because of Nora's green one-piece sparkling on her body. Nora began using her two human legs and feet to climb the sun-bleached pool steps.

"Wait! I haven't left the water before," Paul said. She held on tight to her human friend's waist. "I don't know if I can go out there."

"It'll be okay. Let's just give it a try and we'll see what happens."

Paul let go and slipped back into the murky depths, let herself dip to just above her chin. The water smelled bad. Nora twirled on the deck, the water spraying around her making wet circles on the wooden deck. "I've never been that far from the water before," Paul sighed. Nora continued to dance.

The girls dried off and went inside. Paul remembered the plant cutting in her notebook. She sat on the green carpet of Nora's bedroom and dug around in her backpack.

"I have to show you something," she said when Nora came back from the bathroom.

"Are you sure you want me to come to your camp with you?"

“Yes! Of course I do. I don’t know how I’m going to get through the rest of the summer without you.” Paul opened her notebook to find the page with the leaves and flowers—it propped the page open a bit so it was easy to find.

“Are you sure? Maybe you’ll have more fun without me.” Nora pulled all of her hair together on one side and braided it as it dripped onto the carpet.

“Don’t be silly, Nora. Look at this.” She held the off-white pages open close to her best friend’s lap.

“What is it?”

“I don’t know. But the butterflies were all over it. And—I have to tell you something.”

“What?” Nora studied the leaf and purple flowers, tried to touch them but Paul snatched the notebook away.

“I think there’s something weird about one of the counsellors.”

“Why is he weird?”

“He’s not weird, exactly. He’s really nice. And he’s very pretty.”

“So do you like him?”

“Well, I don’t know. He had an X on his calendar on Wednesday and I don’t know what it was for.”

“It could’ve been anything.”

“I know. But he was acting weird that day. Like he was tired. And he was making this weird tea that stunk up the whole kitchen, and this plant kind of smells like it!” She pushed the open pages of the book towards Nora’s face.

Nora scrunched up her nose and eyebrows. “It smells like nothing. It smells kind of nice, actually.”

“Well, I could smell it in the woods. It was all over the bush—”

“What do you mean, ‘in the woods?’”

“Just, the house has some woods behind it.”

“And you went into the woods? Did you go with the other kids?”

“No.”

“So you went by yourself?”

“Yeah. So what?”

“I’m just a bit worried, that’s all. I didn’t know you were wandering around in the woods by yourself at this camp. I don’t think I’d be doing that.”

“It’s fine, they’re safe.”

“How do you know?”

Paul sighed. “It’s fine, Nora, don’t worry. I won’t be going in the woods by myself anymore once you’re there because you can come with me!”

“I don’t think so, Paul.” Nora hopped onto her bed and opened up her comic book to the page she left off. She placed the purple bookmark on the bed beside her.

“Nora, I’m serious though. There’s something weird going on and I need you to help me figure out what it is.”

“I don’t know how I’m going to be able to help. I don’t know these people.”

“Yeah, but you will.”

Monday

Paul and Nora sat cross-legged in the grass together for the opening circle. The other kids screamed and ran in while Paul and Nora braced themselves for the incoming energy levels. Paul felt like she had a new shield to help her endure the other campers. She felt braver somehow, like they had a bubble around them protecting them from everything Paul struggled with at the camp. The other kids, the group activities, the art she wasn't good at. She wasn't worried about those things anymore because she had Nora now. She could get through anything.

The counsellors didn't speak—they got the campers' attention with the quiet coyote and began the day singing the song they always started camp with. Paul hated singing the opening song and Nora didn't know it yet, so neither of them sang. They looked at each other and giggled while all of the other campers sang along with the counsellors. Paul saw Gabriel dance his way into the circle out of the corner of her eye and his voice rang like wind chimes as he joined in the song just in time for the end.

“Campers! We have a new little artist joining our ranks this week,” Shelley announced after they finished the song and gleamed at Nora. “Everyone please welcome Nora!”

“Hi, Nora,” the campers sung slowly. One kid screamed out of time with the others and everyone giggled. Paul turned to look at Nora next to her and saw her face burning bright red. Nora always blushed when she was nervous.

“And just in time, because this morning we're going to be starting a new group art project! We'll be creating a series of sculptures together to showcase at our final presentation at the end of camp. We're going to start today by breaking into groups and

brainstorming ideas based on some of the themes we've been exploring in our work over the past week."

Paul felt an elbow against her arm and tilted towards her friend again.

"This sounds so cool!" Nora whispered. Paul noticed Nora's face had transformed from a nervous burn to an excited glow.

"I knew you'd like it," Paul elbowed back.

"I'm going to give everyone a number to break you into groups." Shelley began going around the circle tapping every child's head and saying a number. Paul knew this meant she wouldn't be in the same group as Nora. She didn't want them to be wrenched apart so early in the day, but she didn't see a way around it unless she scurried a few places over in the circle.

"Two," Shelley tapped Nora's head, interrupting Paul's plan. "Three," she tapped Paul's.

Paul felt her bubble dissolve around her as she watched Nora run over to group two, counsellor Eddy's hand raised high in a peace sign to signal them over. Paul thought maybe on the lunch break she could try to show Nora the swing. She looked over again at group two and saw Nora had already taken her sketchbook out of her backpack and was showing the other kids her plant drawings.

The campers spent the whole morning working in their groups. After brainstorming, the kids went inside to work in the room with the art supplies to start mapping out ideas. Paul didn't have any ideas to contribute, so she snuck off to the washroom a couple of times to avoid having to talk. She looked over at group two a few times and saw Nora was the star

of the group—she was always talking, and the other kids were always listening, staring at her, some even with their mouths hanging open. Paul knew her best friend was brilliant. She knew she should be happy for her, but something about this image made her feel uneasy. She wanted Nora too, wanted her best friend to herself. She thought Nora’s presence would be helping her get through this camp, that they’d be a team and endure the days together, but Paul was stuck in group three just as alone as she was the previous week. She looked over again and saw the kids in Nora’s group had grabbed a big piece of paper from the giant pad and placed it on the floor, and Nora was talking and drawing an outline of something while the other kids continued to watch.

Paul thought maybe she should try to participate in what her group was doing. She slid over on her knees to where all the other kids in group three sat. They each had a couple of empty toilet paper rolls—some kids were drawing faces on them, some gluing pipe cleaner and making little creatures with antennas and googlie eyes. One kid, Sam, handed Paul a cardboard tube and Paul rolled it around in her hands, not sure what to do with it. She felt like crying and she didn’t know why. She wondered where Gabriel had disappeared to.

Lunchtime came and Paul found her bag in the pile of bags, took out the cheese and crackers and ham slices that her mom packed.

“Paul! Some of the other kids are going to eat lunch in the field through the bushes there,” Nora pointed to the wooded area behind the house. “Wanna come?”

“I dunno, I usually like to sit on the stairs.”

“Are you sure?” Nora looked concerned, like she knew Paul was upset but didn’t understand at all why Paul might be upset. Paul was pleased that she was getting her message across without having to explain, and decided that Nora should figure the rest out for herself, too.

“Yeah, it’s all right. My stomach is kind of hurting anyway.”

Nora’s eyes sank to the ground. “Okay, well come join if you change your mind. They’re really nice.”

Paul looked over at the kids—staring, waiting for Nora. “That’s okay.” She walked away from Nora to her spot on the stairs. She could see Nora walk over to the other kids, watched them running with their lunch bags through the break in the bushes and into the secret field beyond the trees.

Tuesday

Paul waited outside her house for Nora’s mom to pick her up and drop them both off at camp. She was nervous to see Nora after how she treated her on their first day together. She thought maybe she should try harder today—she couldn’t lose Nora. The dark blue van pulled up in front of her house and the sound of the dogs’ claws on the inside of the car window made Paul jump.

“Hi Paul!” Nora’s mom rolled down the passenger window and beamed at Paul, while Nora stared out the front and didn’t make eye contact. “How was your first day back? Nora said she had a great time!”

“Yeah, it was great.” Paul slouched into the back seat with the dogs, scratching their ears and letting them climb on her lap and lick her face, while she stared at the deep scratches on the inside of the door.

Nora’s mom dropped them off and let the dogs out to run with the kids. Arnold made a dash for the side door to go into the house, but Anna promptly told Nora’s mom that dogs weren’t allowed inside. The morning started with art again, so the campers were rushed into their art groups right after the morning song. Paul sat and watched the kids in her group make a swarm of toilet paper roll bugs. Different coloured furry antennas spiked and tangled among the creatures, it was hard to tell where one ended and the other began. She didn’t know how many they had so far, but they multiplied rapidly.

“It’s a commentary on humanity as an infestation on the earth. We are parasites,” said Rain, who continued to optimistically hand Paul a fresh roll every so often. Paul’s unused rolls collected in a pile beside her.

At lunchtime, Paul dug around for her bag and Nora approached her again.

“Hey, we’re going to—”

“I don’t want to hang out with your stupid camp friends, Nora.” Paul shot.

“What’s wrong with you?”

“I just don’t understand why you’re abandoning me,” Paul couldn’t look at her best friend.

“I’m not abandoning you,” Nora pleaded. Her pink and yellow tie-dye T-shirt hung off of her small frame. “I was going to ask if you wanted to come and eat lunch with us.”

“I’d love to eat lunch with *you*, Nora, I just don’t want to hang out with those guys,” Paul gestured at the children standing by the trees, lunch bags in hand, waiting for Nora to join them. Paul felt herself getting mean and knew the other kids were probably wondering what was going on, but she didn’t care. “I thought you were on my side. We’re supposed to be best friends.”

“We are best friends. I don’t know why you’re upset, they’re really nice and I think you’d like them too if you just talked to them for five seconds.”

Paul felt like crying again. She didn’t know why Nora didn’t understand why she was upset. She breathed out hard. “It’s fine, Nora, go eat lunch with your new friends. Have fun.” Paul continued digging for her bag in the pile against the spiky shrubs.

Nora hunched over, defeated. She turned and walked to the waiting campers, leaving Paul to find her own lunch spot and sit alone again.

After lunch, the counsellors said they needed to start learning some songs for the big show. They presented the instruments they had on hand, and had campers raise their hands when they saw one that they wanted to play. Nora stood on the lawn with her new group of friends without speaking to Paul, who was aching to escape again. She was running out of options, so she said her stomach hurt and went inside. Paul was headed in the direction of the bathroom when she heard music coming from the kitchen. She redirected her path down the dark wooden hallway towards the crack of light coming through the brown kitchen door. She heard someone humming along to the radio and

pushed the door open. Gabriel stood over the stove, swaying back and forth and stirring a pot of something that smelled garlicky, tomatoey, and fresh—like something Nora’s parents might cook.

“Hi,” Paul said, but she was barely audible over the music. “Helloooo,” she spoke again, raising her voice.

Gabriel glanced behind him, shocked. “Paul! What are you doing in here, shouldn’t you be in music right now?” He checked his watch.

“Yeah, I’m not really feeling well. My stomach,” Paul lied, touching both hands to her stomach.

“Oh no. Did you want some camomile tea?” Gabriel reached up on one of the shelves above the stove and waved at a jar of dried-up yellow bits. Paul looked up and saw a crowd of clear glass jars with different shades of dried plants in them. She wished she could ask Nora what they were.

“That’s okay.”

“I’m going to have some, anyway. Let me know if you change your mind.” He pulled a smaller pot down from the hooks above the stove and poured some steaming water from the kettle on the other burner into it, shook out some of the contents of the jar into the pot. “Is everything all right? Aside from your stomach,” Gabriel’s long eyelashes fluttered back down to his stovetop concoction. “I noticed you sitting by yourself at lunch today. I thought you’d be spending lunches with your friend from school. Her mother mentioned you two are very close.”

“Yeah, we were, I guess,” Paul swallowed.

“I know it can be hard to make friends sometimes. Do you find that difficult?” Gabriel clicked off the stove as the contents of the pot steamed up towards the kitchen vent.

“I guess,” Paul stared at the beige tiles on the floor. She traced her eyes along a crack stretching out from her foot towards the sink.

“It’s normal to feel alone sometimes, Paul. It’s hard to put yourself out there, especially in situations with lots of new people and things you’re not used to, like this one. I feel like that sometimes, too.” Gabriel’s round eyes glowed at her from across the kitchen, shining a greenish colour for a second like they were caught in a bright headlight. Steam rose around him from the sauce and the tea, shrouding him in a dreamlike cloud, making him look even more like an angel floating in to give her the answers she had been waiting for. He walked towards her and put one hand on her shoulder, his other hand holding tight to his tea mug. The steam cloud followed him and found its way to Paul, wrapping around her head like a snake.

“I think I need to lie down,” Paul said, feeling a bit dizzy all of a sudden.

“You can lay on the couch in the back room. Did you want me to call your mom?”

“No, that’s okay. I’ll be fine.” Paul let Gabriel guide her to the room with the couch and lots of windows. He covered her in a worn-out green blanket, cozy enough to comfort her but thin enough to not make her feel too warm in the sunny room, and closed the door behind him, leaving Paul alone. She pushed the blanket off and rolled onto her back where she fell asleep in a sunbeam.

Wednesday

Nora's mom drove by Paul's house on the way to grab a morning coffee before dropping the girls off at camp, Nora staring out the window on the other side of the car as though she didn't even notice Paul was there. Paul told her she'd like to ride her bike to camp that day instead. It was supposed to be nice out again and Paul missed feeling the cracked pavement roll by underneath her. She missed her alone time in the morning and didn't want to be stuck in the car just to be ignored again. Paul set off early so she could swing before the day started. She knew Gabriel lived at the camp, but she was curious about what he did in the mornings when no one else was there.

Paul walked through the trees around the house after locking up her bike but she didn't see any butterflies this time. She found her way to the swing and spent a few minutes looking out over the lush greenery, quiet and still at this time of day. She looped back into the house and creaked the door open as slowly as she could. She heard talking coming from somewhere in the house, a low mumble. She tiptoed towards the kitchen and noticed the sound was coming from the opposite direction. She continued down the hall and pushed open the dark wooden door.

The kitchen was empty, and Paul noticed the amount of shiny metal in the room this time. It must have been dulled by the room's lack of light in the afternoon, but just then the morning sun shone off the sides of silver pots and pans. Sitting on the stove, stacked on shelves, and hung from hooks all over like wind chimes. Paul imagined a gust of wind coming into the kitchen through the open window and all of the silver pieces clinking against each other, glistening in the light and singing loud enough this early in the morning to wake up a sleeping Gabriel. The silver blades clung up against a magnet on the wall behind the counter, dappled sun dancing right up to their pointy bits. Paul

turned to the fridge and saw the calendar, the red splotch on it glaring out at her. Next Wednesday's box held another red X in the middle, one week from today.

"Paul, is that you?" Gabriel had opened his hallway door silently and drifted into the kitchen. He squinted in the sun and rubbed his right eye hard. She wondered if he heard the tinkling of the pots chiming in her head. "You shouldn't be in here."

"Sorry," Paul said, and heard the counsellors starting the morning song outside. She turned around and marched back down the hall towards the door where she'd taken off her shoes as fast as she could get there.

Once separated into their individual groups for the day, Paul picked at blades of grass, snipping each piece halfway down with her thumb and pointer, one nail pressing into the fleshy part of the other finger, then pulling the two halves of the severed half-blade apart to make two long pieces before tying them together and losing them in the grass next to her.

She tiptoed into the big room during lunch. Her toes brushed a dust bunny that must have floated out from the corner of the room. She toed it—but it wasn't dust. Maybe someone's hair, she wondered. She heard campers screech outside as they chased each other with sticks and felt a warm gust blow in. The bunny rolled. She crouched to examine the clump, rubbed it between her fingers. It felt gritty and reminded her of picking dog fur off of herself at Nora's house.

The campers sat in a circle. Their eyes pinned to each other as the pitches of their giggles grew higher and higher. The sound pinged around as if in a steel drum, clinking from child to child. Paul's eyes tried to follow the chiming laughs until she landed on Nora. She couldn't keep her eyes moving along after catching onto her. Nora didn't look at her, but it didn't seem like she was trying to avoid eye contact to be stubborn. Nora's eyes were crinkled up, being pulled from camper to camper around her as they shot what Paul could only assume were jokes at her. They all adored her. Every other camper worshipped everything Nora did, and it seemed as though their daily goals were to see who could make her laugh more. Nora didn't have time to look back at Paul. She probably didn't even know she was there. Nora probably didn't remember who Paul was anymore. Paul looked at her friend, just ten feet away, and felt their distance. She had broken something between them and Paul knew it was unfixable, she knew they would never be friends again. Not like they were, anyway. Paul felt her stomach convulsing, forcing her chin to crinkle uncontrollably. She looked at the sky and willed herself not to cry. Not in front of Nora and the other campers. Not that Nora would notice. None of them would. She was simply a ghost to them, a useless blob, an invisible presence taking up air.

The campers broke into their groups and since Paul's group didn't notice whether she was there or not, she went back inside. She tiptoed past the dining room and heard the counsellors meeting: "Oh my god, did you see what Sally made yesterday? It looked like a penis but I couldn't say anything..." "No!" "Yeah... I don't think any of the other campers noticed." "Uh, yes they did. How could they not?" "True... what should we do!" "Just leave it, it'll be in the show. We can let their parents talk to them about it." "Or they'll just complain to us!" An eruption of giggles.

Paul placed her hand on the chipped wooden frame of the French door that led into the room where Gabriel took her for a nap. She peered through one of the glass panels—no one had cleaned up her nap spot. Maybe no one had even been in there. She picked at the white paint on the door frame before gently pushing. A loud creak skipped through the hall and she froze, looked behind her. No one seemed to notice, so she pushed again, more slowly this time.

The fake frosted glass stickers on the lower windows lit up in the dull sunlight. The room was spotless, other than the blanket piled on the tiny day bed. The line of sunlight sliced in from the upper part of the window, slashing down the wall towards the floor. She noticed a glint, a small sparkle at the end of the light stream, hidden just under the lip of the bed. She crouched and the shadow revealed another clump of fur. Or was it hair? Paul touched this one and noticed it felt like fur too, except there were some shiny black hairs in it. The other fur clump didn't have these. She suddenly thought she could smell something—it smelled like Gabriel's tea, like the steam washing around her. Strong, but without the steam this time. Paul rolled the fur between her fingers and wondered if what she was doing was gross. She left the clump on the floor and curled up into a ball in the blanket pile. She was so warm and before Paul knew it she was asleep.

“One, two, three, eyes on me!” *Clap, clap, clap*. Paul jolted awake. *Clap, clap, clap*. She rubbed her burning eyes and when she opened them she watched dust mites float through a sunbeam coming in through the big window. *Clap, clap, clap*. Her stomach grumbled and she thought it must be about time for lunch. On one corner of the wall, the sun projected the shadows from the leaves and Paul watched them dance. She watched

mottled spots on the grey-white wall changing from darker greys to blues to greens as if under an enchantment. Rich teals and deep-sea blues, shadows swimming as if sea creatures swirled by above her head, up and over and luring her back into a dream. Paul heard the door crash open—Charlie thrust into the room and Sam elbowed in behind him.

“Sorry, is this your lunch spot?” Paul muttered, reeling in the big orange blanket and trying to spin her way out of it.

“That’s okay,” Charlie said. “Do you wanna eat with us?”

Sam jabbed Charlie in the side and Charlie bent in half.

Paul took this to mean they would prefer that she get out of their way. “No worries, I can go.”

“Sam, don’t be a dick,” she heard Charlie whisper as Paul squeezed out of the little room.

“What? She’s weird.”

“What’s her name again?”

Paul imagined she was invisible as she slipped through the halls as quietly as possible on a mission to rescue her lunch bag. She flattened her body against the wall and slid her hands along the nubby grooves. No one was there, but if someone had joined her in the hallway, they surely wouldn’t have seen her with these advanced stealthy travelling tactics. Her feet slid down the shiny wooden steps as she glided into the little room with the bags. Everyone had already grabbed their lunches and Paul’s bag was the last one there. No rescuing necessary—no one wanted to steal her lunch. She reclaimed her bag and walked out of the building, arm swinging.

Paul found her spot on the stone steps undisturbed—the cool stairs in the shade made for a perfect lunch spot. She could see the other campers below in their groups—some sitting in circles, some running around after probably eating their lunches very quickly or not eating at all, too eager to play with each other in the precious free time they had to roam around the grounds together and do whatever they wanted. Paul pulled out the two pieces of bread she had packed for herself and ate them one by one. She didn't have time to put anything into a sandwich, so she ate the soft slices plain.

Thursday

The next day was the same—Paul slipping off into the sunny room for a nap while the other campers worked on their art, creating shiny worlds and stories that Paul wasn't part of. She napped the morning away again since she couldn't sleep in on camp days. No one asked questions or looked for her. This worked well for her—this way, she could be alone. As she tucked into the orange blanket speckled with pilling, she felt a pang in her stomach at the thought of Nora out there with the other kids. Nora, her best friend who she hadn't spoken to in days despite the fact that they were on the same grounds, in the same building, often even in the same room. She swallowed the lump that was Nora, closed her eyes, and watched the stars float behind her eyelids before quickly drifting to sleep.

Paul performed her sneaky lunch bag manoeuvre again, and again her bag was the only one left to retrieve. She teleported to her place on the stairs again and sighed open her lunch bag. She pulled out her container and plucked out a salty cracker, grabbed a slice of Swiss and ripped it into four pieces. She layered one quarter of a slice of cheese

onto the greasy beige disc and bit into it, savouring each morsel, each bite smaller than the last. She watched the other kids from up above and no one watched her back.

The next morning, the pattering of rain woke Paul up. It sounded like long nails tapping on her window, and when she squinted up at it, she could only see a smeared reflection of her bedroom looking back at her, dripping from all angles. She knew this meant she shouldn't bike today, but she didn't want to get a ride with Nora and her mom, so she'd have to leave early to make sure she had enough time to get there on foot.

Once Paul arrived at camp, she promptly fell back asleep to the sound of the rain clinking on the dramatic windows of her napping room. By the time she woke up, the tinkling was gone, and the sun had begun to poke out at her. Paul leapt up to fetch her bag and made her way out to the stairs to see if they were dry enough to sit on while she ate her lunch. She sat down and felt a bit of dampness on her butt, although she didn't see any water there. It was too late to give up now, so she continued her ritual, opened up her lunch bag, and fished out her container of dry Cheerios. There weren't any kids sitting on the grass below—probably still damp, she thought—but some kids ran around faithfully. Two young girls took turns swinging on Paul's swing and Paul knew they would regret having wet shorts for the rest of the day, but it seemed they couldn't resist. The joy on their faces, the kindness of their sharing, taking turns with each other.

Paul felt a shadow arrive beside her. She didn't turn, heard a voice: "Paul, can you stop sitting by yourself. It's getting pathetic." Nora's voice seeped out of the shadow but Paul didn't look up. Maybe she wasn't real—maybe it was imaginary Nora trying to lure her into embarrassing herself.

"Go away," Paul said without looking.

The shadow faded away and the yells of the kids below grew muted, muffled. Almost as if Paul was disappearing for real this time.

Paul felt her legs and arms getting sweaty under her duvet. This was why her mom always told her to make sure her bed was made, otherwise the sheets would get pushed down night after night and then she'd sweat and roll around in her sleep as she does, and her duvet would become gross. It didn't fit in their washing machine, so once it became sweaty, their means of washing it became limited. Paul would just have to live with a stinky and slightly damp duvet for a while. Paul could feel this happening, anticipate the scolding, her mother's rage-filled eyes burning into her.

Her bedroom door opened.

"Paul?" Her mother spoke gently. "Are you awake?"

"Mmmmm," Paul groaned.

"It's warm in here," Paul's mother pushed the door open wider with her arm full of clean, folded towels. Paul felt her mother's eyes looking around at her mess of a bedroom. "I made pancakes. Come down if you want some." She disappeared down the stairs, leaving the door open. Likely to let some air in because it stank, Paul thought.

Paul felt the pull of the bed like little fingers clinging to her, trying to guide her back down into the warm coziness. She resisted the tingling and pulled herself up—first onto her elbows, and then to a seat, leaning back onto her hands. She sighed and breathed in the syrupy sweetness coming from downstairs. The smell of pancakes tugged her along.

As Paul walked down the stairs, gripping the edge of each carpeted step with her toes, she heard her mother humming along to the radio. She never sang along with the radio, and Paul wondered what the hell was going on. The water running from the sink played along with the sound of her mother's voice and the radio as her mother shuffled from side to side, hips swinging. Paul felt like she was interrupting something. She dragged a chair out at the table.

"Oh, hi Paul, you're up," her mother abruptly stopped singing and dancing.

"It smells really good," Paul said, as she climbed onto the chair, her feet still dangling, too far to reach the floor, "the pancakes."

"Thanks, I put blueberries in them."

Paul eyed the gooey blue oozing from the pile of pancakes on the counter and felt a salty sting in her mouth.

"I'm going to be late for camp," Paul said.

"Maybe we can eat these together and then I can walk you. I'm sure they won't mind if you're a bit late today." Her mother winked. "Are you okay with that? It's just one day."

Paul wondered what had gotten into her mother. "I think that's okay, but I want to bring my bike so I can bike home after." She stood up and moved to get plates, forks, and knives to set the table for them, trying not to seem too eager and relieved at the idea of going in late to camp. She pulled the syrup from the refrigerator door and placed it at the centre of it all. "Did Dad have any?"

"No, he had to leave early this morning." Paul's mom scraped at the frying pan to peel the final steaming pancake off the pan and placed it at the top of the pile of cakes.

“Are we going to save him some?”

“Not if we eat it all first,” she said with a smirk.

Paul smiled, and the two of them sat down and doled pancake after pancake onto their plates.

The dew from a low-hanging tree dripped onto Paul’s face as she rolled her bike up the road and onto the grounds of the camp. Her mother turned back to head home before going up the driveway because she said she didn’t want to embarrass Paul in front of the other kids. Paul locked her bike and felt extra dew sprinkle down onto her—more than usual. Paul thought she would ask Nora about this when she saw her next, but then remembered she couldn’t do that. The knot in her stomach tightened as she longed for her best friend—to be able to talk to her and ask her questions again. But Paul knew this could never happen.

The counsellors started their clapping game—*clap, clap, clapclapclap*—to get everyone’s attention. The campers moved into the circle and Paul moved slow, dragging her feet into the circle.

“Okay campers! We’re going to break straight into our smaller groups now for music rehearsal. You know the drill. It’s nice out now, so let’s all stay outside while we can, please. Tigers, you’re in the field; goats in the forest; pandas on the stairs; and wolves in the parking lot. Clap if you heard me—”

Clap, clap, clapclapclap.

Paul wasn’t sure if she could escape rehearsal again today. It would be especially noticeable if she was the only camper wandering inside the building, especially since she

had already drawn extra attention to herself this morning because she was late. The wind was warm, but it still gave her goosebumps. Ro, the tallest kid in her group, walked by and brushed Paul's arm but didn't say anything, and Paul got the feeling that they were herding her over to where the rest of the goats were—headed into the forest.

It wasn't fall but the part of the forest they rehearsed in was covered in dead leaves. The ground was plastered with them—brown and soggy like oatmeal. Shane and Travis and Andrew—the loud boys in her group—took turns being the loudest.

Shane called, "*Coo, coo*. I'm an owl!"

"That's the weirdest owl I've ever heard," said Travis.

"You've never heard an owl before, don't be stupid, Trav," Andrew snapped.

Travis looked nervous and Paul reflected his nervousness from a few feet away. Shane began to brush together a pile of crunchy leaves, revealing more soggy ones beneath.

"Please don't call each other stupid," Counsellor Anna sighed. She looked sleepy today. Paul wondered how she'd lead the group in singing if she couldn't even get the boys to stop being mean to each other.

"I didn't, I just told him not to *be* stupid," Andrew defended himself.

"Okay," Anna exhaled. "Does someone want to start us off? Ro?"

Paul turned and saw Ro with their hand raised. Ro began singing the opening note and they sounded like a chorus of cherubs just on their own. She wondered if Anna would be okay with Ro performing a solo for their entire section of the show.

Paul tried to stand in a position that didn't grab attention. Definitely not bursting out the front of the group like Andrew, and not even right behind him, but not too far

back, either. Shane bumped into her—“Sorry,” they both said—before sauntering up to Andrew and handing him a stick from the bouquet of sticks he had foraged.

“It’s a microphone,” Shane said, before handing a second one to Travis.

Travis tapped his new mic. “Check, check,” he said. “One, two, three.”

Anna glared at Travis, and Ro’s eyes darted to him for a moment. Clearly the boys didn’t think anyone would mind the interruption.

“Okay,” Anna shot a look at the loud boys, who shrieked and giggled upon being acknowledged. “Do you boys want to join in with Ro now?”

Not being one of the boys, Paul took this as an opportunity to shift slightly so her shadow fell behind Ro’s. Maybe Anna wouldn’t notice that she had failed to call her out, too. Each boy chimed in, their voices falling into place behind each syllable that Ro sung, a domino of tiny voices. Travis continued to use his stick microphone.

Paul dodged as Anna’s head moved from side to side, peering around either side of Ro.

“Oh, Paul? I didn’t see you back there. You missed your cue, girl.”

A sharp gasp, “Sorry.” She didn’t start singing.

Anna swung her eyes from side to side, impatient. “Uh... you can just start now, Paul.”

“I feel kind of sick. Can I go to the bathroom?”

“Paul, do you know your cues? Do you actually have to go to the bathroom?”

Paul felt herself start to get sweaty.

“This is the third time you’ve *felt sick*”—Anna exaggerated when she said this—
“at rehearsal this week.”

“Sorry.”

Anna rolled her eyes. “Go. But please come straight back after.”

Paul ran towards the house. She wasn't sure how many more times she could get away with this. Anna seemed like she might be onto her. But if Anna actually believed Paul was sick, Paul could justify staying away for as long as she wanted.

She hurried towards the big wooden door, let her hand slide up to feel the grooves but moved slowly enough that she didn't get a sliver. The doorknob didn't work so she didn't have to twist to push the door open. She stepped inside and slipped off her shoes. Where there would normally be a pile when everyone was inside, there was none—all animal groups in their outdoor rehearsal dwellings. She slipped down the hall and towards the bathroom door. It was closed, the dark wood a blockade shutting her out and causing a slight rush of anxiety before realizing there was another washroom upstairs. She sidled towards the slippery staircase and slid each foot up slowly. Reached the small upstairs bathroom, the wooden door an echo of the downstairs one but this one open, inviting her into its blue-tiled haven. She had never been inside this bathroom—the downstairs one was always available when she needed it. She moved inside the calm room, then closed and locked the door with the black iron lever lock, finally safe.

When Paul emerged from the protection of the bathroom, she heard the rumbling of kids in the house downstairs. It must be lunch time. She didn't know how that much time went by—she didn't think she was in there that long, but she must've been hypnotized swimming through the rivers in the tiles. The slide of the shiny railing down the staircase guided her back down to the first floor and let her off gently. She glanced

left towards the crowd of kids below, then right, where Gabriel stood looming in the darkness of the hallway.

“Paul, can I speak with you please?”

Paul felt her stomach drop, both from being scared and excited about what Gabriel could possibly want to talk to her about. “Sure.”

She followed through the archway and down the hall, into the warm light coming through the door of the kitchen. Anna and another counsellor, Sandy, stood by the counter eating out of their Tupperware containers. When they saw Gabriel and Paul, Anna gave Sandy a nervous look and led them both out the door and squeezed past Paul and Gabriel down the hallway towards the sound of the rest of the children.

“It’s been brought to my attention that you’ve been consistently leaving your rehearsals.”

Paul froze. Anna must’ve told on her. Or maybe it was one of the boys. “I wasn’t feeling well today.”

“I understand that. I hear that you’re regularly feeling unwell.” She felt Gabriel’s blue eyes bore into her. “It’s becoming a concern.”

Paul felt her toes begin to tingle and leaned on the dark wood of the hallway walls. She noticed the blue of Gabriel’s eyes began to glow, or maybe she was imagining it.

“Is everything okay?” She couldn’t tell if he looked mad or worried. Maybe both. Probably mad, though. Why wouldn’t he be if she was constantly trying to escape?

“I...” Paul couldn’t speak, looked around for an escape but she couldn’t run. Everyone could see her. She felt his eyes again pulling her down, pinning her feet to this place like claws digging into her. “I don’t know.” She felt her eyes well up.

“It’s okay, we don’t have to talk about it if you don’t want to, Paul.” Now he looked concerned.

“I’m sorry,” Paul tried to catch her breath, tried to hide from the prying eyes and ears of the children and counsellors just a few steps away from them, playing and eating and giggling in the next room, chatting in the hallway waiting for the bathroom, looking over to see what was going on. She felt the grooves of the wood on the wall under her fingers. She tried to breathe in slow, then count to three, then breathe out slow, just like Nora had taught her once. Nora, somewhere in the crowd or maybe outside, not caring about her supposed best friend even in crisis. Nora had new friends now, Paul reminded herself. She felt the panic begin to rise again and lost the breath she was just starting to catch. She felt a hand on her shoulder.

“Let’s go into the kitchen,” Anna said, guiding Paul’s small frame down the hall and away from the chaos of the kids. Gabriel nodded at Anna and stayed in the hall while the two girls sifted past the bathroom lineup of glaring eyes to get to the kitchen door.

Anna closed the kitchen door and walked briskly to the stove where she picked up the shiny silver kettle, snapped off the lid, and filled it up at the sink before placing it back in its place and flicking the stove on to set it to boil. Paul felt the warmth of the kitchen settling into her face, calming her eyes and chest. To her right, the counter was clean. The sink was empty, too, and the drying rack towered over her with wet Tupperware containers, plates, heavy mugs. Drops from the clean dishes dripped onto the

beige tile of the counter, making the beige look like a darker beige where the water pooled.

“Do you want some tea? We’ve got lots,” she gestured at the shelf above the stove full of unlabelled jars of different dried herbs and flowers in varying colours.

“Uh...”

She watched Anna pluck the jar with filled with dried yellow flowers down and open it up. She spooned some crispy flowers out and into a brown clay teapot.

“Chamomile?” Anna said. “It might make you feel better. It always makes me feel better.”

“Sure,” Paul breathed. She wasn’t sure why Anna was being nice to her after she’d skipped rehearsal again. She watched Anna’s small hands click off the gas stove, lift the whistling kettle off the burner, and pour the steaming water into the teapot full of flowers. Paul watched as the steam turned yellow and slithered towards her, the sweet smell of chamomile filling the room and washing a wave of calmness over her.

“So, Paul. Do you want to talk about anything? You can tell me whatever you want, I won’t tell anyone.” Anna leaned her elbows on the island in the kitchen, the yellow steam swirling around and blending with her light curly hair. The sight made Paul feel a little dizzy. Anna smiled from one side of her mouth and Paul didn’t know what to say.

“Well...”

“Is everything okay at home?”

“I guess,” Paul lied.

“Okay. What about with friends? Do you have close friends you can confide in? People who can support you?”

Paul opened her mouth and then closed it again. When she thought about the idea of speaking Nora’s name, she felt her throat close up. Anna must’ve noticed because she tilted her head and her eyes even got softer than before, if that was possible.

“It’s okay, I know this is a hard age. I struggled with friends when I was your age.”

“Really?” Paul had a hard time imagining Anna struggling with friends. She was so cool and seemed to move through life effortlessly.

Anna nodded.

“How old are you?” Paul asked.

“Sixteen.”

Paul had a vision of twelve-year-old Anna, curly hair frizzy and untamed, struggling to speak to the other kids and have her best friend abandon her for kids who had more in common, were more up to their standards, were cooler than her. Paul found herself breathing heavier and quicker, panicking at the thought of Anna struggling like she was. She felt Anna’s hand on her shoulder.

“It’s okay.” Anna grabbed a teal mug and poured some of the steaming golden liquid into it, handed it to Paul.

Paul wrapped her hands around the ceramic and let the heat fill her up, slithering through her hands, up her wrists and arms, and through her whole body. It filled her with calmness, aided by the overwhelming smell coming up into her nose through the mug.

“I think this will help you feel better,” Anna said.

The front door to the house was ajar when Paul got home and she pushed it open easily after dumping her bike in the backyard, happy to not have to dig her key out.

“Mama!” She looked around at the empty front hall, silently judging the dust in the corners, the gaping holes in the old soft wood of the floorboards. “Mum?”

Paul walked through the front hall and towards the kitchen. Her mother’s socked feet appeared, the bottoms of the white dirtied to a brownish grey. “Hey Momma, do we have chamomile tea—” She stopped as she watched her mother sopping up a puddle on the kitchen floor with a rag, tossed it into the pile of wet rags on the floor next to her.

Used her sleeve to sop up the wet on her face. Grabbed another dry rag from the clean rag bucket.

“Hey Mama,” Paul said. Her mother didn’t look up. Paul looked to her right and saw sharp, pointy fragments of brown ceramic, green swirls of paint on some of the pieces—the remnants of her mom’s favourite teapot. “What happened?”

“Don’t worry, Paul. I’m just cleaning this up,” her mom answered. She sniffed hard and wiped her nose with her sleeve before tossing another soaked rag into the pile and continuing to sop up the puddle with a new one.

Paul examined the rest of the room for clues. She wondered where her dad was. Maybe her mother dropped the teapot, but why wouldn’t he be here helping her clean up? Her mom’s favourite mug—the blue one with the brown duck painted on the side—sat on the counter next to the sink, while her dad’s favourite mug—the black one that said “World’s Best Dad” on the side in orange, purple, and green fonts—sat on the kitchen island.

“Paul, really, you can go upstairs if you want. I’m fine.” Her mother turned her glistening face up to Paul for a moment and Paul noticed a small cut on her cheek before she quickly turned back to work on the floor.

Paul hadn’t been doubting that her mother was fine, but now she wasn’t sure. She furrowed her brow more than it had ever been furrowed before—so much so that she thought she could feel her eyebrows touch each other in the middle—then she turned towards the stairs.

“Where’s Dad?”

“He’s not home,” she shot back.

Friday

When Paul turned the corner down the stairs from the wavy-tiled bathroom where she had spent yet another music session, blissfully hiding away with no one pestering her about her mental well-being, a doorway appeared where there wasn’t one before. Paul didn’t question this change in the structure of the house and proceeded through the door, which lead to the room she napped in, the one with many windows that let lots of sun in, but there was no sun today, only clouds, and the room looked dark, so dark that it could even be nighttime, that she couldn’t see into the corners, that she thought she saw a shadow, heard a low rumble, a growl, thought she saw the corner shadow shift, and then the rain began to pound harder and harder on the windows, and the shadows of the raindrops bouncing into the room with force, dark grey landing hard on grey, sliding down the walls like nails.

A soft thud on her bedroom window woke Paul. She looked up and thought she saw a wet butterfly stuck to the glass, wings spread in an unnatural arrangement. It gathered itself and unattached its body from the house, then flitted away. The rain continued tapping on the window as if nothing had happened. Paul hauled her body upright against her bedframe to look out the window and saw that her dad's car was still not there. She got up, brushed her teeth and hair, and changed into her clothes for the day—orange leggings that were an inch too short, a blue T-shirt with pink and purple stars printed on the front, and a yellow hoodie on top. Her mother's door was closed, and Paul tiptoed down the stairs, but she knew the noise wouldn't wake her mother up today. She reached up to open the cereal cupboard, looked at the area of the spill from yesterday, and noticed that all of the tea and shards of pottery were cleaned up—there was no trace of them. They were all out of Cheerios, so Paul grabbed her dad's raisin bran instead and sprinkled a bit of sugar on top with her dry spoon before pouring milk from the carton over her bowl. She dipped the spoon into the sweet milk and slurped slowly as the bran flakes became mushy, chewing the tough raisins, but still she ate every spoonful. She checked the fridge and saw that her mother hadn't packed anything for her lunch, so she grabbed the whole block of marble cheese and the box of crackers from the cupboard, thinking she could ask Anna if she could borrow a knife to cut it up at lunchtime. Maybe Anna would even help her, and maybe she'd make her more chamomile tea, too. Paul breathed in and could almost smell the floral steam of the tea. She breathed in again.

Nora's mom had given up on offering Paul rides since Paul always said no, and Paul didn't feel like walking, even in the rain—she couldn't find the umbrella anyway—so she zipped up her raincoat and biked to camp. Her bike didn't have splashguards, so

every single puddle soaked her butt. She felt the wetness spread up the back of her pants and even the bottom of her shirt underneath her jacket. Luckily, she brought another pair of underwear and leggings in her backpack, but she had forgotten to put them in a plastic bag, so she could only hope that each splash from the puddles she couldn't avoid didn't soak through her bag and reach her dry clothes.

Paul pushed slowly through the downpour, wave after wave of rain beating down on her, slowing her progress as she slogged through the side streets. She arrived at camp sodden from the waist down. The only dry part of her pants was the waist, thanks to her raincoat, the elastic part of her orange leggings a lighter orange than the exposed legs of the pants.

She knew she was late, so she hastily locked up her bike, trying to tuck it under a bush for shelter but the rain was ruthless, and her bike seat would be drenched on her ride home later, fat drops clinging to the seat waiting to dampen her dry pair of pants after camp ended.

She walked into the building and the campers were cramped into the big room all together, silently working on individual journalling exercises on the floor. Paul felt herself breathe out in relief. She quickly changed her wet pants in the downstairs washroom and silently joined in, grabbing her journal and some coloured pencils from Sandy, who was sitting at the front of the room, silently staring at her.

Paul tried to draw the image from her dream, writing point form notes to describe it along the margins—a shadowy creature, hiding in the dark corner of her bedroom, the low growl—but she wasn't sure what it'd look like, so she just drew a shadow blob, her bedroom items around it. Nothing was recognizable. A floating bed. A disproportionately

large nightstand. She spent a lot of time drawing the details of the treasures on her bookshelf—her porcelain piggy bank and the designs painted on the sides, each stuffed animal: dog, bear, cat, bluebird, another dog, a triceratops. She tried to get the colours right, confidently moving up to the front of the room to request a colour swap from Sandy the counsellor.

The morning passed quickly, and Paul didn't have to speak to anyone. Sandy announced lunch and Paul spotted Anna, smiling at the kids around her and moving towards the kitchen. Paul grabbed her bag from the front of the room and followed Anna.

“Um... Anna?”

Anna looked behind her over Paul's head, then looked down. “Oh, hi, Paul! What's up?”

“I was wondering if you could help me with something in the kitchen?”

“Sure!” she said, turning away, but Paul had glimpsed Anna's slightly uncomfortable expression. She noticed Gabriel, his energy drawing her attention, slip silently up the stairs behind them.

Paul followed Anna down the hall, watching the dark florals of her shawl float behind her as if in the wind, as if it was being lifted by ghosts. Anna pushed open the unlocked door to the kitchen and the light from the window came streaming into the hall, blades piercing the translucent shawl florals, igniting the pinks and greens and blues. There must have been a break in the clouds.

“What is it you need?” Anna twirled, placed her hand on the butcher block, and Paul's eyes were pulled there.

“Uh, I have cheese and crackers but no knife. Can I use one?”

Anna's brow lifted. "Sure. But you don't need to ask me to use a knife, Paul."

Anna reached up to the magnetic knife holder on the wall, picked a shiny blade out of the collection of shiny blades. The blue sleeve of her T-shirt ruffled down her arm as she lifted it to reveal a purple butterfly tattoo on her shoulder and deep scratches around it. Some looked crusty and scabbed and some looked fresh, like they were just bleeding this morning. The sun pitched off of the knife blades and into Paul's eye before settling on the ceiling as Anna placed the knife on the counter in front of them.

Paul eyed the blade. "It's really sharp." Paul was nervous to pick up the knife. Her mother didn't let her use sharp knives, and she worried that Anna was being too trusting, had more confidence in Paul's abilities than she was able to deliver.

"That's okay. You're a big girl." Anna pulled her sleeve back down over her tattoo and scratches.

"My mom doesn't let me use big knives..."

Anna rolled her eyes. "Okay, I'll cut it up for you. But next time you have to do it yourself." She grabbed a wooden chopping block that looked like it had been sliced straight from a tree out back. "Watch carefully now."

Paul smiled. "Do you... think we could have some more tea?"

"Sure." Anna flicked on the gas stove, seeming to know there was already water in the kettle sitting on top of it. The flame rose up. Anna stood on her toes and picked the jar with the yellow chamomile flowers off the shelf above the stove, opened it up, dumped an unmeasured amount into the teapot on the counter. Anna flicked on the radio and began humming along to the song, started putting away the dry dishes from the dishrack—stacked plates upon plates into the cupboard above, blue and green bowls with

small cracks in them next to them. Paul smiled and grabbed some cheese and a cracker and shoved them into her mouth. She spun around, crunching, the beige of the room somehow lit up warmer than before, a rosy-peach hue emerging from the streaming sun and Anna's hums. She kept spinning until she reached the fridge and saw the calendar again—the next red X coming up early next week. She took another bite of cheese and cracker.

“Um, Anna?” Paul squeaked.

Anna continued humming. She mustn't have heard Paul. Paul looked back at the calendar, walked closer to it. Anna stopped humming.

“Anna, do you know what this red mark is for?” Paul spoke louder this time.

Anna shrugged. “I mean, that's the full moon. But other than that I'm not sure.”

They both stared at the calendar. “I'm not sure who put that there, actually.”

“I thought maybe Gabriel,” Paul said.

“Maybe.” Anna tilted her head. She grabbed one of Paul's crackers and a slice of cheese and ate the whole thing in one bite.

Paul looked over Anna's head to the shelf of herbs above the stove. There were maybe fifteen, twenty different jars, each one slightly different than the rest. Paul wondered what they all were.

“We might have a full moon party for the counsellors on the beach that night,” she said, winking. “No kids allowed, though.”

Paul felt herself flush red, turned her face to the floor. She waited while Anna went back to humming, flicked off the stove when the kettle whistled, and poured the hot

water into the teapot. Anna washed the pile of dishes in the sink while Paul sat at the island and waited for the tea to steep.

After lunch ended, everyone broke into groups for singing rehearsal. Paul snuck up the stairs towards the bathroom with the river tiles. The door was closed when she got up there, so she waited. She heard the toilet flush and heard the iron lock unlatch from the inside. Gabriel emerged, his eyes bringing the light from the window out into the hall with him, beaming down at Paul.

“Oh,” Paul shrunk, “hi.”

“Hey Paul. You feeling okay?”

“Yes.” She ran into the bathroom and closed the door. She waited until she heard Gabriel’s feet tap away before locking it.

She heard another sound—many more, smaller feet making a different sound from Gabriel’s. A bunch of kids running up wooden steps. They were yelping while charging up the stairs, howling.

“Awooooo,” she heard a voice that sounded like Nora’s. Her shrill voice, one Paul had heard every day since she was three years old and knew so well, stood out from the chorus of howls. Her best friend’s voice pulling at her insides. It must be the wolves—the group Nora was part of. The rain started again at the end of lunch, so they must have been coming upstairs to rehearse since it was too wet to go outside. Paul looked out the dripping bathroom window, the wet leaves dancing outside. She closed her eyes and her vision filled with darkness, dripping. She leaned her back against the locked door and let herself slide down until she felt her butt hit the cold tiles below. The growls and howls

surrounding her, getting closer and closer, her heart rate picked up as she saw a figure emerge from the darkness behind her eyelids, out of the trees and sopping darkness, its teeth dripping dark liquid—a huge grey shadow, a wolf with burning blue eyes.

Paul began to breathe fast and heavy. She realized she needed to talk to Nora, but she couldn't talk to Nora, because Nora wasn't speaking to her. The howling grew louder and louder, and Paul covered her ears with her hands. She tried to breathe in and out, counting to five each time. Then she did it again, watching the drops spill down the window over dark clouds.

After the sessions died down, Paul heard the wolves scamper down to the first floor to meet for their closing circle. Paul slowly lifted the iron lock up and over the latch, eased the door open soundlessly. She slipped down the stairs and realized everyone would be able to see her come down, so she waited at the top of the stairs for the closing circle to finish. She heard Katie saying something to the campers, but she didn't follow what the words were.

When they all clapped and the noise rose to an uncontrolled level, Paul snuck down and tried to spot Nora in the room. She saw Nora already had her coat on and bag over her shoulders and was walking towards the door where all the shoes were. Nora took off her sneakers, slipped her rainboots on, and popped outside before Paul could catch up to her. Paul grabbed her coat and bag and put her shoes on and ran out before she was dressed, the fat drops of falling rain soaking her T-shirt.

“Nora!” Paul called but Nora didn't answer. She wavered. “Nora?”

Nora turned around, looked confused. “Paul?”

“Nora,” Paul ran towards her.

“What is it?” Nora’s face was cold.

“Nora, we have to talk.”

“You want to talk now? After ignoring me for a week and a half?” She rolled her eyes and started to turn around.

Paul grabbed her best friend’s shoulder. “Nora, wait. I have something really important to tell you,” she pleaded, her face and hair dripping.

“What do you want?”

Paul looked around her and there were campers everywhere, running past them, loitering by the door. Counsellors guided people out with umbrellas. Gabriel, his blue eyes glowing, stood by the door waving at parents.

“I can’t tell you now.”

Nora rolled her eyes again and tried to turn around a second time.

“Wait!” Paul hesitated as Nora turned back around and waited. She tried to tell Nora with her eyes how important this was. “Can we have a sleepover?”

“No, Paul. We can’t have a sleepover.” Nora turned and walked towards her mom’s van in the parking lot.

“Okay,” Paul said to no one as Nora walked away.

Nora’s mom waved at Paul, gestured at the van. Paul pointed at her bike locked up under the bush and Nora’s mom tilted her head, waited as if to ask if Paul was sure. Paul shook her head no—she didn’t want to push it with Nora. She needed to find a way to make Nora to take her seriously.

After dinner, the old phone rang through the house from downstairs in the kitchen, and Paul leapt to her feet from bed to run down and answer it. When she saw the phone, she remembered Nora's dismissal from earlier and realized it was unlikely that it was her calling. She held her hand in front of the receiver on the wall before answering, letting it ring once more. She lifted the heavy plastic to her ear.

"Hello?"

"Did you say something to my mom?" Nora's voice came through the other end.

Paul felt her stomach sink. "No. Of course not."

"Are you sure?"

"What would I have said to her?" Paul pleaded.

"Okay, fine," Nora sighed. "She made me call you."

"Oh." The feeling in Paul's went from nervous to a little nauseous. "Why?"

"She thinks we should have a sleepover tomorrow."

"Do you want to?" Paul asked.

"Not really. But you can come if you want to."

"Okay."

"Do *you* want to?" Nora asked.

Of course I do, Paul thought. "Sure, I guess I could," Paul said.

"Okay. See you tomorrow." Nora hung up.

The dial tone buzzed in Paul's ear and she hung the receiver back on its spot on the wall. This was her chance to win Nora back.

Saturday

A dewy drop slipped on Paul's hand from the birch tree in Nora's front lawn. She was a bit early, maybe, but Nora had said "come by tomorrow" on their brief phone call the night before, and it was tomorrow. She could hear the dogs in the backyard, so she knew someone was awake. She slipped her way through the gate and into the backyard, leaned her bike gently against the fence. Before her hands came off the bike, Arnold was up on his hind legs licking her face, globs of drool smearing dangerously close to her eye. She wiped it away with her sleeve and scratched behind his ears as he rolled over onto his back for belly rubs and Paul knelt to get a good angle for the scratches. Shadow stood a little bit behind, waiting patiently. Both dogs overexcited and maybe uneasy after not seeing her for a while—two whole weeks. Paul put out her free hand and scratched Shadow's head too while Arnold's lolled. Both dogs closed their eyes and bared their teeth in pure bliss—with their heads and bellies being scratched, nothing else mattered to them, Paul thought. Except maybe food. Their mouths hung open and their giant canines, browning at the top and yellow at the tips, pointed out. Paul wondered what it would be like to have such big teeth. She imagined crunching into an apple with ease, effortlessly tearing chunks off a long taffy rope without worry. Biting through a jawbreaker without breaking her jaw or any teeth, just shooting sugary flecks all around for her fellow dogs to lick up and enjoy around her. With the tip of her tongue, she felt her own human girl canines—small and dull.

She heard the loud scrape of the back door sliding open.

“Paul, is that you?” Nora’s mom squinted out over the back porch and both dogs ran toward the house—it was their breakfast time, just after their morning pee. “Nora told me you’d be over later.”

“Yeah, I’m a bit early,” Paul said. “Sorry.”

“That’s okay, my dear. Why don’t you come in, I was just going to start making some breakfast.” She disappeared inside and left the sliding door open.

Paul pulled herself up and headed towards the kitchen, a feeling of something pulling her back. Nervous about having these interactions after so long, after her behaviour at camp and her treatment of Nora.

Nora’s mom opened the fridge and pulled out a Tupperware container full of plain, cooked chicken. Both dogs sat next to the fridge looking up at her, backs straight, drool pouring in streams from their mouths. A puddle formed beneath them, one for each dog, but Nora’s mother didn’t seem to mind. She pulled at the chicken with two forks and placed thin, threadlike pieces evenly into the two bowls. Then she reached under the counter and put one scoop of dry dog food into each bowl. She turned and placed the bowls in the dog eating area and Arnold and Shadow dove into their breakfasts. She washed her hands with dish soap.

“I was thinking bacon and scrambled eggs. What do you think?” She winked at Paul.

“Sure, that sounds good.” Paul felt her taste buds fire up. She loved Nora’s mom’s scrambled eggs and it had been so long since she’d eaten them. She tried not to get too excited and kicked her feet back and forth from atop a barstool at the kitchen island. The barstool swayed with her with each kick.

“I hear you and Nora have had a bit of a tough time at camp.” She didn’t make eye contact with Paul as she flicked on the stove and the oven and collected her breakfast items—frying pan, metal bowl, whisk, eggs, milk, feta cheese, salt and pepper, a baking sheet, and a package of bacon.

“What did she say?”

“Just that you two haven’t been talking much.” She quickly glanced at Paul as she spread the slices of bacon one by one onto the baking sheet. “We don’t have to talk about it if you don’t want to.”

“That’s okay.” Paul didn’t know what she wanted.

“It sounds like Nora has made lots of new friends. Have you been finding that too?” She placed the baking sheet full of raw meat into the oven as the dogs drooled next to her. Then she cracked six eggs into the mixing bowl, crumbled in some feta.

“Yeah, I think she has.”

“I mean have you made new friends?” She poured milk into the bowl and cracked in some salt and pepper, then whisked the contents together.

“Sort of,” Paul lied.

“Oh, that’s good. This camp is such a wonderful opportunity to express yourselves and find like-minded people. I’m so happy you two are enjoying it. Thank you for suggesting it.”

“Yeah, no problem.” Paul picked at a chipping piece of wood on the bottom of the wobbly barstool. She wondered if she should let her mom know that Nora’s mom said thanks. She wondered if her mom would care.

“Are you excited for the show?” Nora’s mom poured the mixture from the bowl into the sizzling pan on the stove.

“I don’t know.”

“Nervous?” She grabbed a wooden spoon from next to the stove and began pushing the egg mixture around in the pan, unsticking it from the bottom.

“Yeah.”

“That’s okay. Stage fright is normal. It’s going to be a big show. It’ll be fun though, I’m sure. Especially since you’ll be doing it with friends.”

Paul fidgeted again. She sort of wished she hadn’t lied but also didn’t want to have to say the truth out loud. Maybe Nora would correct her mom after Paul left.

“Is everything okay?” Nora’s mom stopped pushing the wooden spoon around the pan.

“Yeah,” Paul lied again. “Is Nora up, do you think?”

“I don’t know, she’s been really tired this week. She might want to sleep in. You’re welcome to check.”

“Okay. Thanks!” Paul kept a close eye on the stage of the bacon and eggs—watched closely as Nora’s mom checked the oven—before running towards the stairs.

Paul let her toes slip up the familiar slope of the steps, pitched to one side on the way up. She slid one hand along the rippled wall on the stairway’s left side, let her other hand glide up banister on the other side. She reached the door with the magazine cut-outs of botanical prints pasted along the centre line, left open a crack to let the hallway light in, and pushed it open the rest of the way.

Paul observed the early morning light from the window falling on her best friend, if she could still call her that. Her eyes crusted over with sleep, not yet broken open for the day. Her thin blanket kicked off to one side, sheets stuck between her ankles, unconcerned because there was no cold to get in through the summer heat, her window air conditioner sputtering to pull what it could out of the air.

“Nora... ?” Paul whispered.

Nora didn't budge.

Paul didn't want to wake her, but she knew she had to try.

Nora's eye twitched and Paul froze. Nora shifted back into her sleep without opening her eyes—the movement gone just as fast as it arrived. Her face had settled into a new patch of light, green splitting through the stained-glass hummingbird hanging from her window. It spun in the light and the colour danced up and down Nora's cheek. Paul couldn't help but notice her best friend was beautiful. The face she knew so well seemed new while still feeling familiar. She missed being close to her every day.

Paul approached the bed and poked Nora in the shoulder lightly.

“Nora? Nora!”

She poked again and Nora scrunched her eyebrows.

“What!” Nora said, angry.

“Sorry. Your mom told me to wake you up,” Paul lied. “She's making breakfast.”

Nora sighed. “What time is it?”

“Eight forty-five.”

“You're kind of early, aren't you?”

“I couldn't sleep anymore.”

“I could...” Nora rolled over and covered her face with her blanket.

“Sorry,” Paul said again. Nora was silent.

Paul left the room quietly and slipped back downstairs where she could smell the bacon, surely almost ready. When she walked through the kitchen door, the salty warmth hit her in the face—a giant plate of steaming yellow eggs on the table, another plate on the counter next to the stove, waiting to be filled with the bacon just out of the oven. Nora’s mother didn’t notice Paul come in, continued humming along to the radio on low.

“It smells amazing,” Paul said.

Nora’s mother jolted around. “Oh, thanks, Paul. Any luck upstairs?”

“No, I think Nora’s really sleepy.”

“Ah. She usually is on the weekends.”

This was new—it must be because of camp. Normally, Nora was awake when Paul was.

Paul glared at the eggs. The pile on the table was filled with feta cheese, and the stack of bacon on the counter grew as Nora’s mother stacked the slices one by one. Paul couldn’t wait to eat them, she was so hungry.

“Is that bacon?” Paul heard Nora say from behind her. She slumped into the kitchen, her baggy unicorn shirt hanging down over one shoulder.

“Well good morning, sleepy head,” Nora’s mom said. “Your friend is here.”

“I know, Mom.” Nora glared at Paul.

Paul looked away and noticed the dogs, silent, waiting patiently for a piece of bacon to drop.

“They’re so good,” Paul said.

“Who?” Nora’s mom looked at Paul, then at the dogs where Paul was looking. “Oh, yes, they are very good boys,” she said in her dog voice, smiling at them, and the dogs appeared to smile back at these words of affirmation—their love language, after food and scratches. Nora’s mom picked up the slice of bacon at the top of the pile, ripped it in two, and threw the pieces down to the dogs, who grabbed their respective pieces and ran out of the room to eat them in private.

Nora crossed her arms and sighed impatiently. “When are we eating?”

Paul looked at Nora, worried at the tone. She didn’t know how she could be so mad when her mom was making bacon and eggs. Nora didn’t return the eye contact and continued glaring at her mother for some reason.

Paul found herself behind the house at camp. She swam through the bushes, burrs prickling at her sleeves, pulling them up and scratching at her arm. She saw a sparkle in the corner of her eye and turned, thinking it might be the butterflies, but there was nothing there. Another sparkle out of the other eye and she turned again to find nothing. She heard a rustle coming from the bushes to her left, she thought, maybe saw the leaves wiggle, so she spun and couldn’t find them, and then there were bushes all around her and she spun again and didn’t know which direction the house was anymore.

“Paul?” she heard her best friend’s voice.

“Nora! Nora? Where are you?” Paul followed a new path through the bushes in the direction that the voice was coming from. “Nora! I’m coming!” She didn’t hear her

call again. She saw a sparkle from down below this time, but when she looked down there were still no butterflies, but small, wet tufts of fur stuck along the bushes on the sides of the path, packs of bristle growing larger as she walked.

She didn't know where she was, but she knew she would be arriving where she needed to be soon. The fur was clinging to branches everywhere now, more fur with every step. Then the path began to widen until it opened up into a clearing.

“Paul!” she heard her best friend again, finally. Louder now. She sounded desperate this time, scared, frantic.

“Nora! I'm here!”

Paul looked around the clearing, but she didn't see Nora. Instead, she heard muffled noises, someone trying to speak. In the middle of the clearing, she saw the back of a large creature covered in fur—bald spots along its body where tufts had been scraped off, matted parts hanging from it, bloody scrapes along its limbs, ears pointing to the sky. In the middle of the clearing, the creature hunched over something. The animal, or whatever it was, appeared to be struggling to hold its prey still. The beast's face turned down, legs bent in a lunge. It appeared to be devouring something, someone. Hairy limbs bending at unnatural angles, fighting to hold a body down, teeth plunging, biting, swallowing fresh, red pieces of meat whole.

Sunday

Paul woke up covered in sweat. Her pajamas were damp and clammy, and she shivered even though it was so hot out and under the blankets. She looked up from the floor, the pile of blankets where she slept in Nora's bedroom damp too, just like her. She peeked up

onto the bed and saw Nora's face curled down into her chest—asleep, her best friend looked just like she remembered her. Calm, happy, not mad at her. She hadn't seen Nora's calm face in weeks, and she lingered on it for a minute, taking it in before she inevitably woke up. Her eyelashes clumped together with sleep, her bangs pointing in every direction but the ones they were supposed to—Paul knew Nora hated when they did this, would only allow it in sleep—her mouth a little bit open, shoved into a pillow, not bothered by the dampness of the drool puddle that had collected there in the night. Paul knew she may not see Nora this way ever again.

Paul pushed herself up slowly and grabbed her backpack, lifted it off the floor as quietly as she could. She tiptoed out of the slightly open door and towards the bathroom where she stripped off her sticky clothes, sopped up sweat on her stomach with the T-shirt, and then shoved them into her bag. She dug out the clean, dry clothes and pulled up the leggings over her hips, wriggled into the T-shirt. She splashed water on her face, brushed her hair and her teeth, circling the eye teeth—did they look pointier than usual?

She heard a scratching at the bathroom door—quiet at first, then harder, faster. Had she woken up Nora?

“Hello?”

She heard a whimper and the scratching stopped. She held her breath and listened for footsteps leaving but she didn't hear anything.

“Nora?” she whispered, but didn't hear anything. “Nora?” she said louder, pressing her ear to the door. She heard fast breathing and her heart beat faster, and her own breathing sped up, too. Was Nora mad at her? Her hearing sharpened and the breathing outside the door stopped. She knew she had to look but the thought of it made

her breathing harder, her heart beat even faster than before. She felt light and foggy, like she might pass out. She turned the doorknob as slowly as she could—when she heard the squeak she moved even slower—and pulled the door a hair’s breadth at a time. She heard the breathing outside the door start up again—faster, faster now. She stopped, took a deep breath, and kept pushing.

Outside the door, a long tongue greeted her, and the excited eyes of Nora’s dog. He whined again, the low groan before the louder demand, like when he was about to bark.

“Shhhhh!” Paul said, relieved. It was just the dog. She knelt and scratched him behind both ears—exactly what he wanted. She let out a heavy breath, heard the refrigerator creak back to life downstairs. No one was awake yet.

Paul sat with her feet hanging off the end of the bed while Nora stayed in her sleeping spot, sat up cross legged with her back up against the pillowy headboard, flowery duvet covering her lap.

“I think there’s something going on,” Paul said.

“What?”

“I... don’t know. That’s what I wanted to ask you.”

“How would I possibly know?”

Paul sighed. “Look, Nora, I’m really sorry.”

Nora raised her eyebrows and stared at the duvet in between them, picked dog hairs off and tossed them onto the floor.

“I’m sorry for how I’ve been treating you. I hate fighting with you. I just want to be friends again.”

“Yeah, well, you’ve been pretty shitty,” Nora said after a while without looking up.

“I know.” Paul didn’t know if an apology was enough, but she gave another one anyway. “I’m really sorry.” She paused. “I’m glad you’ve made so many new friends. I think... maybe I’m just jealous or something. I don’t know what’s wrong with me.”

“Jealous?” Nora finally looked up. “Paul, you’re my best friend. Those camp kids are nice, but you’ve been my best friend forever. You know that I love you.”

Paul swallowed and felt a lump in her throat but tried really hard to ignore it.

“I don’t want to fight anymore either, but it would be nice if you could be happy for me and not be such an asshole at camp. And, I dunno, maybe sit with me at lunch sometimes or something,” Paul’s best friend poked her in the arm.

“I’d really like to sit with you at lunch,” Paul laughed.

“Okay, so tell me more about what you think is going on.” Nora sat up straighter in bed.

“Well, it’s not that I think you would know exactly, but maybe we could figure it out if we were both working on it.”

“Working on it?” Nora mocked. “What does that mean?”

“I just... you know, I think you’re really smart, and maybe can see things that I can’t.”

“You’re smart too, Paul,” Nora bent her head low when she said this.

“Well, no I’m not, but thanks. I just mean if we work together maybe the two of us can figure it out.”

“I don’t understand why you think something could be going on. It’s just a summer camp.”

“I know. But ... it’s Gabriel. There’s something weird going on with him. And Anna...” Paul thought of Anna, her kind face smiling at Paul as she put the kettle on the stove to make her tea. “I don’t know. I feel like they’re hiding something.”

“Why?”

“Have you seen their collection of tea in the kitchen?”

Nora rolled her eyes. “Paul, it’s a hippie camp. Of course they have lots of tea.”

“Unlabelled!”

“Yeah, well probably a bunch of it is weed. Who knows!”

That hadn’t occurred to Paul. She wondered if Anna would’ve given her weed tea instead of regular tea.

“Is that it? They have lots of tea?”

“Well, there are other things. A bunch of the tea looks like it could be that flower that we looked at before, but dried up.”

Nora looked suddenly like she was calculating something, her eyes unfocused and boring into the bed between them. She combed through her bangs with her fingers, something she did subconsciously when she was lost in thought, Paul knew. Paul could tell that this idea sparked something in her best friend’s brain. She couldn’t resist a plant puzzle.

“But if they made a tea with those... they’re toxic. It could kill a person. If that’s true, that’s a really dangerous thing to be keeping in jars next to the tea in the kitchen. Especially at a summer camp with a bunch of kids who can’t tell the difference and might accidentally drink it.”

“Yeah... I mean, I told you something weird is probably going on.” Paul tested the situation with smugness to see if her best friend was really back.

Nora rolled her eyes and stifled a smirk.

She was back.

“I think we need to look a little deeper,” Nora said. “Have you scoped out his room yet?”

“His room?”

“Yeah. I mean, he lives there, right?”

“He does... but what do you mean ‘scope it out?’ Like sneak in?”

“Yeah. Dig around a bit. See if there’s anything fishy in there.”

“Anything that might give us some answers.”

“Exactly.”

“Maybe tell us what the red X might be...”

“You’re still going on about the red X?”

“There was another one!”

“It could be anything.”

“Yeah, but what?”

“What were the dates again?”

“The first and third Wednesdays of camp.”

“Hmm.” Nora hopped off the bed and pulled the wall calendar with dolphins on it off her corkboard, ran her finger along the days. “Those are both lunar events. A full moon and a new moon.”

“So what does that mean?”

“I don’t know.”

Paul thought about her dream. About the monster, their tufted and scabbed back, the chunks of fur in the bushes.

“Well...”

“Maybe he’s a werewolf.” Nora snarled at Paul and laughed, re-hung her calendar.

Paul laughed nervously. “Yeah, I guess that’s silly.”

Nora didn’t say anything.

“Do you think he could be?” Paul asked.

Nora laughed. “I mean, I guess anything is possible.”

“You sound skeptical.”

“I am. But it’s worth looking into,” she said matter-of-factly. “What do you always do with them on your lunches? I see you sneaking into the kitchen every day. Is there a way you can get into his room during one of those times?”

“Maybe... I’m usually being pretty closely supervised in there, though.”

“Ahh, okay.”

“But...” Paul thought about Anna telling her to get the knife herself next time, that she didn’t have to ask. “I think they’re starting to trust me. Maybe I can go in alone.”

“There she is.”

Paul and Nora smiled at each other like best friends do. Finally.

Monday

When the sun started poking through Paul's bedroom window, she looked at the alarm clock and it said 4:57 AM. Good, Paul thought—a sunny day bright and early for her heist into the werewolf quarters. No, he wasn't a werewolf—he couldn't be. Paul didn't believe in those kinds of magical things: ghosts, fairies, werewolves. Those were make-believe things invented by adults to scare children into doing what they asked them. Like when her mom told her not to wander too far into the woods otherwise the fairies would lure her away and trick her into getting lost. Surely a werewolf was just a silly made-up creature used scare kids out of wandering too far into the woods, or to warn them to be careful around wild animals, or to not set off angry people in case they get mad and hurt you. Her mother had never told her a werewolf story—maybe she was never told one, never warned to be cautious around angry men. They both had to learn the hard way. Paul worried about her mother's safety and her dad's violent transformations. She worried that one day she'd come home and there would be more than just a teapot smashed on the floor, damaged in a way that couldn't be fixed by pretending it didn't happen. She worried that the monster in her dreams would become real and that it was coming for them.

The sun didn't last, and by the time Paul rolled her bike down the road the rain was coming down so hard that Paul thought the ground might wash out from under her. A chocolatey mudslide and she was a chewy marshmallow melting into the mix. If she let her foot shift slightly the wrong way in a particularly slick section, it would twist out of

her control and she would become part of the puddle, surely, she knew. She watched as it fell straight down, like a shower, then shifted sideways, diagonal in the wind, watched as the leaves shifted direction too and battered and flapped up against the hard drops. Then the wind slowed again, rain falling straight down and leaves and branches settling, swaying gently back and forth slower and slower like her grandmother's long, flowing skirt and apron after she had wiped her hands off on it to move on to the next task.

The back of Paul's outfit was entirely soaked by the time she got to the end of the street and she hadn't packed anything to change into, so she decided to turn back home and change to a more appropriate outfit. She was early, after all—she had time.

She arrived back at home, leaned her bike against the brick of the house, and ran back in. She scurried upstairs in the silence and ripped off her sodden clothes and put on leggings, splash pants, a T-shirt, a long sleeve shirt, and a windbreaker. Not entirely waterproof but close enough. She packed an extra pair of underwear, leggings, and T-shirt in a plastic bag and stuffed it into her backpack. She hurried back down the stairs when she heard the front door lock screech open. Her dad must be coming home. Paul felt herself become small and move more slowly, move through the house even more quietly than she already was, if that was possible. There was no avoiding him, but she had to leave now if she still wanted to get there early enough to start their new snooping mission.

The sound of her father's coat heavy with rain slopping on a kitchen chair. She froze and he spun around the corner.

"Paul," he looked surprised to see her.

"I'm just leaving for camp."

“Do you have to go this early? It’s—” he looked at his watch, “it’s 6 AM. I thought camp didn’t start until 8?”

“Yeah, but me and Nora are going to go early to work on some stuff.” She noticed a stale smell coming off of him, like a musty basement. Like he’d been sprayed by a skunk and then stayed in the same clothes for days.

“What stuff?”

“Art... stuff.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah.” Paul noticed his arm movements were slow, tired. Confused.

“It’s raining pretty hard out there,” he said.

Paul knew he wasn’t concerned about her. She knew it’s what he thought he had to say because he was a dad, and he couldn’t say nothing about the pouring rain and his child leaving the house on foot—or bike—early in the morning.

“Do you... want a ride?” he hesitated.

Paul also knew he didn’t want to give her a ride. “It’s okay, I’m all geared up.”

“I can pick up Nora on the way—”

“No—that’s okay, she’s going to meet me there.” Paul knew she couldn’t let this happen—Nora wasn’t going to camp early. This part was to be Paul’s solo mission. Her dad hesitated so she took the opportunity to put her shoes on and walk out the door, back to her bike, and he didn’t follow.

Paul arrived at the top of the driveway in the deserted parking lot of the camp and when she looked up through the trees she could see the remnants of the full moon, fainter in the

pastel daylight. The beige reflection of the moon's spots fading into baby blue in places so that it looked almost translucent. Parts of it invisible, even. Camouflaged, as if it was hiding out over the camp, as if it was just hanging there and trying to act small, pretending to be light and cute, hoping no one would notice its presence even though its glaring body loomed over the grounds like an omen. Paul watched it harder, hoping for some answers, when Gabriel's image appeared in her head, his baby blue eyes glowing as they transformed from light and gentle orbs into sharper versions of themselves, pointy pupils overtaking the soft curves and hair growing over them, then fur, then fangs—she shook her head to stop her imagination from taking this silly image too far. There was no such thing as werewolves. She knew that. But she just needed to make sure.

Paul rolled her bike over to the bushes that covered the far part of the fence. She tried to tuck it away into the branches and leaves so that it was at least partly hidden in case someone came by. She couldn't have anyone know she was here, and if they noticed a lone kid's bike locked up in the parking lot at this time of day, they'd surely get suspicious. She worked her bike into bushes, but they fought back, so she pushed harder, yanking larger and larger branches out of the way to make room for her bike. She pulled another branch and there was another bike tire already in the spot hidden well in the bushes. It was bigger than hers, definitely not a kid's bike. It looked like it had been there for a while—a few days at least. It couldn't be Gabriel's bike—it was bigger than hers but not by much, definitely too short for him.

Paul locked her bike up behind the other bike. She unclipped her helmet and swiped the water off of her forehead, re-clipped the helmet over her bike seat, and replaced the vines and branches to hide both bikes. She stepped further under the foliage

to get out of the rain and have a look in the woods before seeing what she could do inside the house, if she could even get in.

She stepped into the mulch, extra mushy today with the dew and dampness. The smell and squish of the rotting leaves and bark filled her senses—as if she was being submerged into the world of the forest, leaving the realm of reality, the parking lot, the camp, her dad, Gabriel, Nora. No one knew she was here and it was possible that no one would ever know. She could, if she wanted, stay there forever. Find her butterfly friends and make her own way in the woods. She pushed her way through the branches, letting the water from the leaves drop and brush against her cheeks, waking her up to this new reality. She suddenly got a whiff of a different earthy smell. The flowers from Gabriel's tea. She pushed further into the trees and saw a flash of orange flutter by—her butterfly. She followed it and saw another, then another, emerging to form a cloud around a plant. Vines twisting themselves up the trunk of a tree, and the same purple flowers, the same smell taking over the rot of the wood. She stepped slowly closer and willed herself to stay still amongst her friends, begged her heart not to beat too loud and scare them away. The butterflies landed sporadically on the flowers and fluttered off, before finding another flower to land on, as if they were examining them. The ground felt different here, and even looked different. Paul looked closer and saw a small creature wriggling—a caterpillar on the ground below the flowers. Then the others caught her eye—lines of bodies, caterpillars covering the ground surrounding the plant. The struggling caterpillar stopped moving and laid still among its lookalikes. Were they all dead? Paul grabbed a stick from nearby and poked one, its stiff body easily pushed aside onto the one next to it.

She began to panic and froze, stared at the caterpillars, then at the butterflies, wondering if they would suffer the same fate. Why were they here?

Paul grabbed a sprig of the plant, made sure to get some of the flowers and leaves, and yanked until it separated from the rest. The vine shook and sprayed dewy water over her head and the butterflies scattered, floating around her like magic. She swung her backpack over one shoulder and dug in it to find her lunch bag, stuck the sprig inside so it was protected, and zipped everything up again. She would show Nora later—she would know what was going on with the plant. She would at least know something about it.

She hurried through the wet vines and back towards the house. She didn't care if the water sprayed down on her anymore as she was already wet and she was running out of time before campers and their parents started arriving, and she needed to see what she could see in the house while it was empty of them. The browns and greens of the wet trees and foliage all began to look the same as Paul spun in one direction and then the other to try to find her way back to the house. She started to panic, she should've known how easy it was to get lost in the woods after last time, and after Nora warned her against going in there alone.

She turned a corner after a tree trunk with familiar nubs on it and saw the peak of the roof of the house poking out through the leaves above. She felt relief wash over her as she pushed on in that direction.

She came to the back window of the camp, the one into the kitchen, and saw steam pouring towards the glass and out the cracked-open window. The window was high up, but she could see the top of a head full of black curls bobbing up and down, side to side, as Gabriel likely pattered around the sink, maybe putting away dishes and getting

ready to make his pot of tea. She could hear the muffled sound of the radio coming through the window, too, and the rush of the tap turning on and off, then on again. She heard him humming along, and one time bobbing his head side to side along to the music. Then the music stopped, and someone started talking at a loud mumble—a commercial. Gabriel moved aside and the sound became lower. Then she heard him speak—she couldn't make out what he was saying but he would turn his head towards the door, then back down again towards the sink. Then he started bouncing his head. He was laughing. Then he said something in a sing-song voice, and a laugh, then another sound: someone else laughing. Loud and high-pitched, maybe a girl. Who was he speaking to? Could it be the owner of the hidden bike?

She continued around the rough back end of the house, branches pushing up to the brick in an untamed way, not carefully manicured like the plant life in front of the house because no one used this space, and kids weren't allowed back here. She had to squeeze through one part, but her small body was able to manoeuvre through even the tricky bits that surely no adult could get through. She reached the big windows on the other end of the house—the sunroom where she napped. A break in the branches and leaves which let the sun through most of the windows to fill the room with heat for at least part of the day. The day bed was made up like a real bed: sheets and a big comfy duvet and two pillows with pillowcases and everything. There had been just an orange throw blanket and a few decorative cushions with itchy sequins when Paul had napped there. The day bed was the size of a single bed—big enough for a kid or a small adult—but the two pillows were crammed next to each other as though two people had also been crammed on the bed, sheets and blanket messy and unmade on both sides. A small, grey duffle bag sat open

and spilling over with stuff on the floor next to the bed. Paul pressed her forehead against the window to get a better look at the contents: T-shirts, underwear, socks, the bottom cuff of a pair of jeans. The cozy lounge energy of the room erased by the messiness and belongings of an overnight visitor.

Gabriel often emphasized that only he was allowed at the house or on the grounds after dark. But his room was in the back, and it wouldn't make sense for him to have his stuff spreading out of a packed bag in a different room. If he wanted to sleep in a different room, why bring a bag of stuff? It must have been someone staying over. Or two people staying over. Or Gabriel staying in the bed with a person staying over, if Paul's hunch about the pillows was correct. There was only one bag, after all—if two people other than Gabriel had stayed there, why didn't they have their own bags and instead choose to share one small one?

Paul was about to continue her lap around the house, but remembered if she wanted to see into Gabriel's bedroom, she'd have to backtrack. It was in the other direction from the kitchen—maybe it was too much to peer into his bedroom window, but maybe it would give her some of the answers she was looking for.

She scraped along the brick of the house, trying not to rustle too many leaves and branches as she scurried under the kitchen window, even though this time she didn't hear anything from inside and didn't see the shiny curls poking out from above. She pushed through overgrown vegetation, so tight and sharp it scraped at her skin, fighting her. She came upon a part of the outside of the house she hadn't been before. It was almost inaccessible in all of the thick growth. The vines clung to the brick so closely, she had to rip some off the wall in order to make space for her to pass. Even then, she still had to

squeeze. She reached a window and felt her heart rate rise. The rotting wood of the trim crumbled under her grasp and she held on to help pull herself through the last bit of foliage. She lowered her body, made sure her head was fully out of view just in case there was someone inside. The smell of the wet, rotting wood and the old chipping paint of the trim filling her nose, almost entirely covering up the damp smell of the plants around her. First, she listened, even though the window was closed—these old panes surely let some sound through them. The windows looked original, maybe even a hundred years old. The holes in the bottom of the frames, three to fit three fingers through to pull them open from the outside. But Paul heard nothing. She slowly let her eyes wander up to the glass, the glare reflecting the trees swaying behind her, the dewdrops falling from leaves high above her. She focused. She saw the upper back wall of the bedroom, beige with a wall hanging made of different coloured ropes tied onto driftwood, and where the wall connected with the ceiling, off-white with a ripple pattern moving downward, dust collecting in each nook—but she didn't see any movement. She kept her eyes there for a bit, kept watch, and still nothing moved. After a minute or so, she felt safe to lift her head a bit to get a closer look into the room. She was very conscious of her bed head combined with helmet hair—how high it was sticking up, the cowlick on her temples on each side and slick roundness at the top, how if someone was looking out the window, they'd spot her for sure, if only because of her bizarre hair grabbing their attention. As her eyes crossed the threshold of the dark chipping wood of the frame, she tried to calmly take in the contents of the room piece by piece—a drum kit, piled in an irregular way, not set up to play; a hard, black, scratched up saxophone case; a teetering pile of tambourines in every colour: yellow, blue, red, light brown wood, dark brown wood, burgundy, pink and yellow floral,

baby blue, dark blue, white and purple stripes—each with brassy (what are they called) hanging off, some missing a few; more instrument cases: French horn, tuba, clarinet, flute, guitar—she could tell the difference from band class at school; a wicker basket full of plastic recorders in different colours: translucent pink, translucent blue, solid beige, black, white; a cluster of music stands all standing up facing each other and all different directions of the room, crammed in to fit in whatever way they could; stacks upon stacks of clear crates full of paint, paint brushes, canvasses, wood panels, cardboard, pastels, giant sticks of chalk, clay, paper. The room was filled with stuff. Camp stuff. Art stuff. Music stuff. There was no bed. This was not Gabriel’s room. This was a storage room for arts equipment.

Paul wondered how many rooms were in this section of the house. She had never been down the hall, and had no idea how long the hall was. Maybe it went on for ages, and there were many rooms. Maybe there were many people living here—maybe it wasn’t just Gabriel’s private quarters. She peered down the wall but the vines continued to take over the wall past where she was. The house went on and on. She decided to keep pushing through—eventually she’d get to the other side of the house, and maybe she’d find Gabriel’s room. She ripped at the vines as if she was in a trance, as if she’d done this before. Her hands knew exactly what to do and her feet knew exactly where to step to get just close enough but also get a good grip to rip the next portion with just enough force. She felt a strong sense that she had actually done this before—maybe *déjà vu*. Maybe she’d dreamt it. Wasn’t that what *déjà vu* was? Something that you felt like you’d dreamt before, but it was just the chemicals in your brain playing tricks on you? She’d have to ask Nora.

Paul came upon a second window. This one even more rotted than the last, whole chunks of wood actively falling—pieces on the ground beneath it, hunks of it hanging off as if the next gust of wind that reached it would detach it from the house. The dampness she felt in this area was beyond anything she'd felt at the camp before. It was as if this part of the grounds held the dampness in, the vines and trees clutching and insulating the damp next to this very spot, holding it tight to this window, making it seep in. This window was slightly propped open, just a centimetre or so. She saw a dim light coming from the window and knew this must be the spot she was looking for. Unless it was another storage room—this one being actively used by the guides who must already be there prepping for the day, awaiting the wave of the arrival of the campers and their parents.

A gust of wind suddenly pushed Paul into the wall, up against the house in a way that was sort of convenient for her—if someone was peering out the window before the gust, they may have been able to see her, but when she was pushed up against the wall she was hidden. It was almost as if the wind was helping keep her cover, as if nature was on her side. What sort of thing would make nature act this way? Some sort of magic, surely, would be the only reason the environment would assist her in this bizarre way. Maybe Paul was letting this whole thing get too much into her head.

She copied her approach from the last window—crouched down, making sure her hair was properly covered by the bottom of the frame, waiting, listening. She heard movement coming from inside. More muffled voices—maybe it was Gabriel and the mystery guest from the kitchen, the owner of the hidden bike, or so she guessed. She sunk deeper into her squat to make sure they couldn't see her. She heard giggling, a deep one

and a high pitched one. Then silence. Then more giggles, louder and more frantic than before. What was happening? She tried to peer into the room from the lower angle, knowing she couldn't lift her head this time because she would definitely be seen. She saw a shadow of a tall figure with a large halo around their head—probably Gabriel and his curls. Then the shadow disappeared. Then another shadow, wider and more wriggling—both figures together, intertwined. Squirming against each other, or so it seemed, from the dark connection on the wall.

She saw another faint shadow on the wall, a shadow of the shadow, two figures changing shape and size and writhing together and apart and then together again, sometimes mimicking the shadows of the human figures, sometimes doing a dance all their own, and sometimes disappearing entirely. She tilted her eyes over the edge the slightest bit, shifting her view just enough to see that the second shadow was coming from what looked like smoke. Then she saw that it was steam coming from two mugs, erupting with heat and spilling and spreading their vapours all over the room.

Paul heard a loud crack and then a crash behind her, the sound of a tree limb being ripped from the body of the tree and falling through a tangle of branches and vines. The wet leaves vibrating through the forest all around her. Paul ducked, pressed her back against the wall as close as she could get and tried to see what made the noise: a squirrel leapt from a branch nearby—it must've been him. She attempted to slow her heart—took a deep breath in, held it for a few seconds, then let it out silently. She heard footsteps to the window from inside, some muffled voices, and then heard the window creak shut. She slowed the heaving of her chest as best she could and let her eyes peer upwards again. She saw the shadows reuniting in the new silence, the steam mingling with the bodies on

the wall, grasping, climbing, growing. Creating new and fearsome shapes together that she had never seen before. Did she see pointed ears?

Paul rushed back the way she knew. She didn't care about seeing more of that side of the house now that she'd seen what she'd seen. Was it Gabriel? Who was with him? Were they both transforming? She had to fill Nora in and ask her what to do. She ignored the branches scratching her face as she forced her way back around the house and to the safety of the parking lot. It must almost be time for people to start arriving, she hoped.

The plants widened ahead of her and she emerged from the wooded area and burst into the parking lot. A car was idling in a spot near the door—an early bird and their parent waiting for camp to start—and another car roared up the last push of the hill on the driveway. It was Nora's mom's van, with Nora and her mom inside. Paul couldn't contain her thrill—excitement, fear, both, she wasn't sure. She ran up to the van as it slowed down and Nora's mom gave a hesitant wave out the window to Paul as Nora jumped out of the car and slammed the door shut, giving her mom an impatient wave back as if to say *okay thanks please leave now*.

“What happened?” Nora's wide eyes mirrored the feeling in Paul's chest. She knew she had news for her.

“Come with me. We can't talk about this here.”

The two girls plodded through the grass towards the stone steps, onto the more overgrown area of the grounds, near the swing, and crouched under the bushy archway to get to the privacy of the meadow where people ate lunch.

The plants parted and the vast emptiness of the surrounding green made Paul feel instantly calmer. Nothing could hear them there. Nothing could get at them. At least not without some advanced warning.

“Okay, tell me.” Nora urged.

“Well, my dad slowed me down this morning.” Paul didn’t know where to start.

“Okay.”

“But... I think I saw something.”

Nora stared eagerly.

“I think... I saw Gabriel transforming. Into something. I don’t know. There was someone with him. I think someone stayed over, I don’t know who. But it looked like they were both transforming.”

“Into what?”

“I don’t know.”

They paused.

“A monster?”

“I mean, I think I’m going to need more details than that. What did you see exactly?”

“Well, I don’t know, there were shadows—”

“Paul! We need more proof than that.”

“I know, I know.” Paul panicked. She knew what she saw, she thought, but she also knew she couldn’t prove it. Nora needed to see for herself.

“Maybe we need to see it together.”

“Yeah, maybe we need to do the stakeout.”

Nora nodded seriously.

“Oh, I also found a plant. I don’t know if it’s the same plant, but the butterflies were around it again. Except this time there were a bunch of dead caterpillars under it—I don’t know what happened to it.” Paul fished her lunch bag out of her backpack, unzipped it, and pulled out the clipping. She held it up in front of Nora’s face.

Nora looked but didn’t touch, curious for a minute, and then a look of concern came over her. “Paul, this is an invasive plant. It’s called a dog-strangling vine. It can be poisonous. You really shouldn’t have touched it, you should go wash your hands right away.”

Paul felt a bit nervous for a minute—was she itchy?—but then shook it off. “It’s everywhere back there, Nora. It’s unavoidable.”

“Yeah, but not if you avoid creeping around the woods behind the house,” she smirked.

“I had to.”

“I know.”

“What does it do, exactly? It kind of smells like the tea.”

“Well, it can be toxic. Some people have allergic reactions just from touching it, and you definitely shouldn’t ingest it. So I don’t know what would happen if you made it into a tea...”

“What about the caterpillars?”

“Yeah... it’s really sad, they think it’s milkweed because they’re in the same family, so they lay their eggs on this stuff but then the caterpillars can’t survive on it when they’re born, so they die.”

“Great.”

“Yeah. As if we need another thing hurting the butterflies.”

Paul thought about her friends and felt her stomach sink. They didn’t even know they were setting their children up to die—they were being tricked into it by this plant.

The volume from the parking lot through the trees got louder—they would have to head to the start of camp soon or people would get suspicious.

“I can’t tonight, my aunt is coming over for dinner. But tomorrow night?”

Paul nodded, and Nora nodded back.

The girls made their way back through the archway and into the loud reality of the camp. The opening circle, the clapping call-and-response, the quiet coyote. The girls went through the motions, sticking close to each other and doing the bare minimum of participation. Paul was in a haze, felt like these busy camp activities were so unimportant compared to the crisis at hand. She felt the same energy coming from Nora, who wasn’t smiling or talking or even making eye contact with her other camp friends who kept clearly trying to get her attention from various parts of the circle. Paul knew they couldn’t wait until the following evening to find out what was going on, so she decided to herself to try to figure out at least a little bit more about what was going on before then.

Whatever she could find out would be helpful. They needed all the information they could get. What if there was not one but two werewolves at this camp? Were all of the children—including Paul and Nora—in danger? How could they not be?

After the circle, the campers were broken into their music groups to try to finalize their pieces for the show. Paul watched as Nora sauntered like a zombie over to her group, all of the kids clearly at a much higher energy level than Nora. The guide handed

Nora an accordion—she had mentioned this to Paul, that someone wanted her to play the accordion in the show. Nora had no idea how to play the accordion, and today didn't seem like the right day for her to learn, but what else could she do. Paul watched and felt so much sympathy for her best friend. She wished she could do something to help, but Paul was even less musically inclined than Nora was—she had never even seen an accordion in real life before, let alone held one, so Nora was already way ahead of her.

“Paul! This way!”

Paul looked over and Anna was waving her down. All of the other kids in Paul's group were already following Anna into the wooded area where they usually met. The rain had stopped, and although it was still quite soggy out, they decided to keep them outside anyway. They'd just have to be a bit careful in the dampness. Paul felt instantly stressed at the sound of Anna's impatient voice, though she was already stressed, so she couldn't tell if this was making it worse or just different. The sun breaking through the clouds made the previously comfortable mistiness of the air muggy and unbearable. Paul was grateful that they would be in the shade of the trees and not in the direct sun like some of the other groups.

Anna seemed different. She looked tired, and she had never looked tired to Paul before. She had always seemed cheery and bright and ready for the day. After watching her lead the children into the woods, the impatience which had previously seemed directed at Paul seemed to actually be directed at everything around her. The campers, the other guides yelling in the distance, the structure of the day. Paul could tell Anna didn't want to be there, that she clearly had something better or more important to be doing, when every other day Anna seemed like this was exactly where she wanted to be, and that

she wouldn't prefer anything more than guiding the campers through silly music exercises that they sucked at. Well, at least Paul sucked at them. Paul didn't think she'd be able to get away with much today.

Anna rolled her eyes as the boys began to pick up larger and larger sticks and chase each other around with them, pretending they were sword fighting and yelling “HI-YAAAA” at each other louder and louder. Anna crossed her arms and tapped her foot, then started picking at her nails, ripping bits of nail and cuticle off and biting at them, then flicking pieces onto the ground. She was wearing a dark grey crewneck sweater—baggy and thick and much too warm for this weather. She slid the sleeves up her arm one by one in between bites, and the sleeves slipped slightly and hung loose just below her elbows. Paul noticed a large bandage on her left forearm, white gauze covered over with layers of translucent medical tape. The gauze was saturated with bright red blood. It looked fresh, like she was actively bleeding. Anna looked up and saw Paul looking and quickly covered over the bandage with her baggy sleeve.

“Okay guys, that's enough.”

Ro held up their hand in the formation of the quiet coyote, and Paul followed suit, then Anna. None of the boys noticed and they continued chasing each other.

Paul felt itchy and thought she might be getting bitten. It would make sense, this damp buggy day in the shade of the trees, but then she remembered she hadn't washed her hands right away after touching the strange plant like Nora told her to do. She looked down at her palms and thought they looked normal—the same colour as usual, not red or splotchy. Maybe it was just bug bites. She looked to her right and saw Ro frantically scratching at their shoulder, a red rash growing on their neck.

“Okay,” Anna sighed loudly. “Does everyone know what they’re doing?”

“Um, where are the instruments?” Ro asked meekly.

“I thought you were all singing,” Anna said.

Paul felt panic rush through her. She had missed so many sessions, she had no idea what they were doing for the show, or even what was discussed.

“I’m not singing,” said one of the boys.

“Me neither,” chimed the other two.

“Oh, I think... we decided it would just be me singing,” Ro reminded gently, scratching the back of their head. “But everyone else needs instruments.”

“Okay, what do you guys want to play?”

“Electric guitar!” shouted one of the boys.

“We don’t have one of those,” Anna shot back.

“Aww... drums?”

Anna sighed. “I guess we have a few bongos in the back. I’ll go grab them.”

The boys high-fived.

“Paul, what about you?” Anna asked.

“Uhh...” Paul froze.

“Maybe Paul can play the tambourine? I was thinking that’d be nice with the song we’re doing,” Ro suggested.

Paul felt a rush of relief and gratitude. The tambourine she could handle, even if she was just holding it for show. Paul caught Ro’s eye contact to try and express this without words.

“Sure,” Anna tossed, and walked off towards the house.

“What’s with her?” Paul said quietly to Ro when Anna was out of earshot and the boys were back to their stupid boy stick game.

“I don’t know... she’s acting really weird today,” Ro said. “Maybe she’s sick or something. Or maybe she got dumped.”

“Was she dating someone?” Paul hadn’t really considered the lives of the guides outside of camp before.

“I don’t know.”

Paul and Ro watched as Anna reached the door of the house, hunched over and moving slowly. The door opened from the inside, and Gabriel held it open for her, as if he knew she was coming. She leaned her head up towards him and he winked at her.

Paul sniffed the air, and she could smell roses, she thought, or, no, maybe it was lilacs. But it was too late in the summer for lilacs—what was the smell? She stepped one foot into the mossy ground, followed by the other, felt a root arch its way under her foot through the surrounding softness. The beige mush getting softer and softer, damp now under her feet as she approached an opening in the bushes. The branches revealed a flower—purple, but not a lilac. It smelled sour and hot, and she felt its heat pushing her away as she stepped closer. She reached her hand out, and as the heat grew stronger, she heard a yelp in the distance, shot her hand back.

“Nora?” she whispered, peered through the leaves at the large mass moving through them on the other side. She hoped this time it wasn’t her best friend wriggling under the furry beast.

Tuesday

Paul woke up covered in sweat. Her brown alarm clock shone 1:11 AM from her nightstand. She had fallen asleep early, right after dinner—Kraft Dinner at 7:30 PM, bed by 7:45, asleep by 8. She knew since she’d already slept for five hours—plus the fact that she felt as though she had just emerged from a sauna only to roll into another one, with no escape from the suffocating mugginess—that she likely wouldn’t be able to fall back asleep too easily.

She wandered downstairs without a sound, the bushy green carpet absorbing the creaks under her toes. She opened the cupboard which normally squeaked, but Paul knew the exact speed at which to open it to make sure it didn’t make any noise. She knew this from her countless nights stealing crackers in the dark while trying to make sure the monster didn’t catch her. She knew how to remain hidden from monsters, she was well trained.

Paul stuck her hand in the open bag of chips, steering her movements around each fold so she didn’t disturb the crinkles and cause the bag to make that horrible noise that it did. These noises didn’t matter in the day, see—not for monsters. Monsters weren’t drawn to noises during the day because there were adults around, and they didn’t want to reveal themselves to the adults. Paul could make all the cupboard and chip bag noises she wanted in the day, and it didn’t matter because there was nothing to hide from when the

sun was shining. The worst thing that the sun could do to her when she was a kid was give her a sunburn, and the best thing it did was keep the monsters at bay. They waited for the night because they could sneak through the house unseen, hide in the shadows from the adults and wait by the cupboard for just the right time when an unassuming kid would sneak down for a chip and not be careful enough when sticking their hand in the bag.

The morning fog hadn't lifted off the road yet as Paul sat on her bike seat and let the hill roll her down towards the driveway of the camp. She had to pedal hard again to get up to the house at the top of the hill, through the trees, dew clinging to branches and dropping down on her in the breeze. She was very early today—no cars in the parking lot. Gabriel might not even be awake yet. She hadn't planned to come so early today—especially with the stakeout planned with Nora for the evening—but there were only so many morning cartoons she could take in.

She locked her bike and let the dew drops hit her face, mixing with her sweat and cooling her off after the hard push up the hill. She walked into the wood behind the house and let the leaves and branches brush against her arms and shoulders, wiping their wetness on her and cooling her off. She pushed through bush after bush, let herself follow a different direction today, and hoped she would see a sign of a butterfly again, blue and orange wings illuminating through the dark browns and greens and the pale fog. But she didn't see them. She followed the small breaks in the brush through the greenery until she could no longer see the house or the parking lot, the overhang of the trees and fog blocking her view entirely until she felt like she was in a different world, like last time, in

hopes that her friends would reveal themselves to her again. She heard a rustling in the branches and froze—it sounded big, not like a sound a bug could make or even a small creature like a squirrel or raccoon. She couldn't see movement yet but heard the rustle again, and then again. She moved as slowly and silently as she could towards the sound, the noise getting faster and louder. An echo reached her through the leaves, the sound of a voice, a high-pitched whimper. Maybe an animal, maybe in pain. She felt her chest tighten, afraid of whatever was causing the noise, but she thought she should help if it was something in need of it. She heard another sound, a lower whimper, separate but moving in time with the higher one. Then they matched up—were they both in pain? Was one killing the other, eating it? Were there coyotes in these woods?

She pushed even more slowly through the leaves, careful not to frighten whatever was there in case it lunged at her next. She saw movement in the leaves as she glided through them, hypnotized, forgetting herself and the need to be quiet. The whimpers grew louder as she came across a break in the bushes. The trunk of a tree and two grey figures, one taller than the other. Black curls shining atop the taller figure as they moved rhythmically toward the smaller one, sandy frizz of the second figure tangled in the hand of the first, teeth biting on the back of their neck as the face of the second figure was pressed up against the tree trunk. Anna. Her face looked pained as she whined again and again but she didn't try to run away, instead leaning back into the taller figure as he pushed his body onto hers over and over again, turning his face to bite the other side of her, his teeth bared as he groaned. A ray of light broke through the trees so Paul could see his face—Gabriel.

Paul froze in place and even though she wanted to run she couldn't bring herself to move. Gabriel's eyes opened and shone directly at Paul, filled with something at first, then changed quickly to horror and then to anger. The change in energy freed Paul from her frozen state and she turned and ran, branches once gently brushing her with light dew drops now scratching her, tearing at her clothes as they snagged and she pulled herself through anyway, desperate to get out of the woods and back to the safety of the concrete parking lot, visible to the rest of the world, but the trees all looked the same without the help of her floating friends and lack of plant knowledge and she ran but this time it felt longer and she wasn't sure if she was going the right way, but she couldn't stop. She hit a chain-link fence that she didn't recognize at first but ran her hand along it as she followed it, hoping it was the same fence her bike was locked to at the other end, hoping that it would lead her away from the rustling that was now following her from all sides, it seemed, and pushed her farther and farther into the unfamiliar territory, too afraid to look behind her in case she saw the glow of the bright blue eyes again. The shrubs around her became more manicured as she ran and finally the fence led to a clearing, but not one she recognized. A backyard, and a grassy park with a jungle gym and a sandbox in the middle. The hills of the park sloped neatly, freshly mown, not like the wild of the grounds surrounding the summer camp, the mulchy ground and trees holding the dew differently. She looked around at the empty park, walked through the grass and felt the canvas of her running shoes start to get damp and stain green as she paced quickly to the other side. A sidewalk and street, one she didn't know but the houses looked familiar. Once she was safely on the pavement, even though she hadn't stepped here before, she worked up the courage to check behind her. There was no one following her anymore, no shadows of her

counsellors, no rustling of the trees where she emerged from the forest at the end of the park. She was safe now.

Paul walked along the sidewalk on the quiet street, then turned down another quiet street. She didn't recognize these streets, so she turned down another, then another until she found a busier road that she did recognize as the one she rolled down on the way to camp every day. There was no sidewalk, so she hugged tight to the curb and the cars were careful to leave a wide gap around the small girl walking on the side of the road.

She turned down a different road than the one that led to camp and headed to Nora's. She and her mother would be getting ready to leave soon, surely.

Paul walked at a steady pace and noticed she was panting. She also noticed a stinging on her arms—both arms, but not bug bites. She looked down and saw red scratches, some just marks and some with broken skin. Probably from when she was running through the branches. She suddenly felt scratches on her legs, too—she was wearing shorts, after all, and why would the branches spare her legs—but she didn't dare look that far down to see the damage just yet. She combed her fingers through her hair and pulled out a few twigs. Tried to make herself look less wild when she appeared sweaty and panting and bleeding at Nora's door so early in the morning. Maybe they would be less concerned.

Paul didn't see any movement yet coming from the front of the house or the van, so she went around back. She didn't see the dogs outside, either, so she walked up to the sliding back door. She pressed her face up to it to try to see through the glare, saw her ragged face in the glass. Nora's mom at the sink, Nora sitting at the island on a barstool, her feet dangling off the edge. The dogs waiting next to her, waiting for something to

drop even though she wasn't eating anymore. Maybe hopeful that she'd let them lick her plate. Nora's head turned and she made eye contact with Paul through the glass. She glared for a second, looked concerned, then walked up to slide the door open.

"Are... you okay?" she looked Paul up and down.

"Yeah... I think." Paul was very aware of her state—ragged, wet dirty clothes, tears in her thin shirt and scratches on her arms and legs.

Nora's mom looked over at Paul too, a worried look wiping over her face as her sudsy hands dripped soapy water into the sink. She wiped them on her pants and walked over. "Paul, what happened?"

"Um, can I get a ride to camp with you guys today?"

"Are you all right? Do you need me to call your mom?"

"No! No, I'm fine. I just... did a little morning hike."

"Where?" they both said in unison.

"Just... around." Paul thought she needed to distract them. "What did you guys have for breakfast? Got any left? We ran out of Cheerios."

"Uh... of course. I made some overnight oats. We have some left—" Nora's mom went over to the fridge and took out a huge Tupperware of overnight oats, not much left after their family had their fill for the morning. She opened a cupboard over the sink and took out a delicate glass bowl with petals around the edges, the daisy bowls Paul loved so much. She scooped a smooshy spoonful into the bowl, then another, then grabbed a big container of Greek yogurt out of the fridge and scooped a glob of that on top of the oats, then a container of blueberries and grabbed a handful and sprinkled them on top—Paul

always ate so much better at Nora's house than at her own. Nora's mom placed the beautiful bowl on the island and moved to put away the containers into the fridge.

"Thank you." Paul climbed onto one of the stools and began to shovel the mixture into her mouth, making sure to get a bit of blueberry, yogurt, and oats in each spoonful.

Nora climbed onto the stool next to Paul. "What happened," she whispered urgently.

"I'll tell you later," Paul whispered back. "This is so yummy." Paul said louder so Nora's mom could hear. She felt the cinnamon, chia seeds, date chunks, and vanilla extract hit her tongue and let the flavours take over her senses. She wiped her eye with the back of her hand and felt some grimy dirt come out. She squinted her eyes and kept eating until she couldn't feel it anymore.

Nora's mom smiled at her. "Nora and I were going to leave soon. Are you guys excited for camp today? Only a few days left until the big show." She looked at Nora.

"Yeah, I guess so," Paul said. "It should be fun."

"I think it'll be fun," Nora echoed.

"I can't wait to see you girls perform. Are you feeling ready?"

Paul felt her stomach sink. She had no idea what she was doing for the show, but she knew Nora probably did.

"Honestly I'm not great at the music stuff," Nora admitted, "but I think it'll be good."

"Yeah, I guess so," Paul said. She thought about the idea of going back, of seeing Gabriel and Anna.

“Gabriel’s a good teacher, though, isn’t he?” Nora’s mom said. “Gabrielle,” she said, with a French accent like the girl’s name. “He’s French, right?”

“Is he?” Nora said. She looked at Paul.

Paul felt her stomach turn upside down. “I don’t know.” She tried not to sound too bitter but wasn’t sure she succeeded.

They both looked at her curiously.

“I think I’m just playing the tambourine, anyway,” Paul tried the distraction technique again.

“I’m playing the accordion,” Nora rolled her eyes. “I don’t know why they think I can do that. It’s going to be a joke. But my art pieces will be up, at least.”

“I can’t wait to see them, honey.” Nora’s mom looked lovingly at her daughter. “Are your parents both coming, Paul?”

“I think my dad has to work,” she scraped the bottom of the bowl with her spoon to make sure she licked up every last chia seed covered in yogurt and blueberry juice.

“We should probably go soon, I guess.”

“Oh goodness, yes, we have to go,” Nora’s mom said as she looked at the digital clock on the stove. She rinsed her hands in the sink and wiped them on her pants again, damp still from the last time she wiped them. “Nora, sweetie, are you ready to go?”

Nora looked down at her clothes, hopped off the chair. “Yeah, let me just get my bag.”

“Don’t forget your lunch!” Nora’s mom handed Nora her lunch bag, already packed with a fresh healthy lunch and snacks for later.

“Thanks,” Nora grabbed it and ran upstairs. “Paul?”

Paul obediently hopped off the chair too and followed Nora upstairs to get her bag. She ran to catch up and stayed close behind Nora through the hall and up the stairs to the cool second floor, dark and air conditioned. She watched as Nora pushed her white wooden bedroom door open, and the two walked inside. Nora closed the door behind them.

“So what the hell happened? Did something happen?” Nora interrogated.

“Well... I went to camp early,” Paul said. “And...”

“And what??” Nora’s face was urgent, concerned.

“Well... I saw something.”

“What now?” Nora said, almost in disbelief.

“I went into the woods...”

Nora rolled her eyes. Paul knew she disapproved.

“I saw Gabriel and Anna. I think they were... having sex.”

“In the woods?”

“...yeah.”

“Why wouldn’t they just do it in the house?”

“I don’t know! But doesn’t this prove my theory from yesterday? And it was... kind of scary.”

“Why?”

“Well, he was biting her and stuff...”

“I mean... don’t some people do that? For sex, I mean.”

“I don’t know...” Paul didn’t know. She didn’t know much about sex at all.

Neither did Nora, so she wasn’t sure how Nora would know that.

“I mean, I’ve just seen it in movies is all,” Nora said, as if answering Paul’s question.

“What movies?”

“I don’t know. That is kind of intense, though, that you saw that. I didn’t mean to minimize your experience,” Nora said, as if she was an adult, or a therapist.

“Thanks. Yeah, it was intense.” Paul was tense, and tried to relax but she still couldn’t. “I ran.”

“I can tell. You’re covered in scratches. Did the trees beat you up?”

“Kind of.” They both laughed.

“What happened after?”

“I don’t know... I think someone was chasing me, but I just kept running. I didn’t want to face them after... that.”

“Yeah. Jeez. That is scary.”

“I don’t want to see them today,” Paul admitted.

“Yeah, that’s fair. I wouldn’t either.”

“What do I do?”

“I don’t know, just avoid them? Try to not talk to them today.”

“Anna is my group leader.”

“Damn. Yeah, I forgot about that.”

“Well, what’s she gonna say? She won’t talk about it in front of the other kids, anyway. It’s not like she’s going to tell all of them about their sexcapades.”

“Yeah, I guess.” They both laughed again, but Paul was still nervous.

“Just avoid being alone with her. Come on, let’s get this over with,” Nora said.

Paul watched as Nora's mom beeped the van's locks, opened the driver's side door, and ducked in. She leaned over to manually open the passenger side door, because the automatic lock wasn't working anymore, and then Nora yanked open the passenger door and climbed inside, too. Nora looked out the window at Paul and Paul snapped out of her tableau.

“Uh, I forgot my bag inside. Be right back.”

Paul ran back to the front door, punched in the door code which she knew by heart, and hurried into the kitchen. She pulled open the fridge and grabbed the open pack of bacon, picked out a piece and ate it raw, then one more. She let the greasy, salty morsels slide down her throat before placing the package back in its place in the fridge and hurrying back outside.

Paul clicked open the back door of the van, and pulled with all her might to slide it all the way open. She climbed into the first seat inside, and then leaned her weight the other way to slide it closed, slamming it good and hard like Nora's mom taught her when she first got it. Paul was bigger now, and the slams got louder as she got older, but Nora's mom never corrected her, never got mad at her for possibly breaking the door if she slammed it too hard, even though Paul knew she might be. The car sputtered to a start and the van began its slow roll down the street, pulling the three of them along inside, en route to camp.

The drive was probably less than five minutes, but Paul tried to drag it out in her head, letting her gaze linger on the sights of the neighbourhood that she took for granted every

day: the chestnut tree on the corner, it's leaves like a million high fives; the colourful book box halfway down the main road, clearly decorated by neighbourhood children (not Paul and Nora), green and yellow handprints on the pink and red background, a purple door protecting the books inside from the rain. Paul never checked it—she didn't care about books, really—but Nora made her stop to check every time they walked by together. It had been a while now, and Paul couldn't remember the last time they checked inside. She felt a sudden urge to ask Nora's mom to stop—maybe now was the time to check, maybe Nora wanted to see what treasures were left inside for her to find. But she knew it was a bad idea. They'd be late for camp, and this wasn't a good enough reason. They could check the book box any time.

They slowed their roll as they approached the driveway, Nora's mom's left turn signal clicking rhythmically as they waited for an opening in traffic. The moment felt like forever.

Finally, Nora's mom rushed the car through the left turn and into the driveway. They climbed up slowly, the old van bursting into gear for the struggle uphill.

When they reached the parking lot, it was already mostly full. The grounds buzzed with children who had already arrived for the day and were running around before the start of camp. Paul watched the other kids and dreaded joining the crowd, though she tried not to show it on her face. Paul felt a draw pulling her to stay in the van, but she knew she had to leave it. She crossed the threshold from the safety of the van and onto the loud property. She and Nora waved as Nora's mom drove away.

Paul followed the motions of the morning circle as if by remote control—felt her hands moving, clapping, heard sounds coming out of her mouth during the morning song,

but she didn't feel as if she was in control of herself. Every time she glanced at Nora it seemed as if she was under the same spell, moving involuntarily, possessed. Paul avoided looking in the direction of Anna and Gabriel, standing next to each other in the circle as if nothing had changed. Pretending that what they had done hadn't happened, that Paul had simply dreamt it or that it was imagined. Her body moved as if under water and she didn't remember how she came to be in the forest again, with her group in the trees, rehearsing for the show in just a few days. The dress rehearsal would be on Thursday and Paul still wasn't sure what she was supposed to be doing. She turned her head and watched as Nora's group filed inside the house, passed under the wooden archway and through the side door, Nora being tugged along behind them as if by a string. Nora turned back and Paul's eyes locked with hers, a jolt of electricity between them. Paul could feel their protective bubble tearing down the middle as she anticipated this next bit of the day apart.

"Okay, my little chickens," Anna said, her cheery voice dampened by the mulchy wood surrounding them. "Are you ready to practice?"

"We're goats," said Shane. The other boys giggled as Shane's eyes declared that he thought Anna was the stupidest person he'd ever seen.

Anna rolled her eyes. "Okay. Goats. Should we do a quick verbal run-through before we practice to make sure we're all on the same page?"

The goats stared blankly at her—Paul didn't feel so alone in this moment.

"What... do you mean?" asked Shane, and the rest of the goats nodded along with the sentiment.

"I mean should we talk through what we're doing. It's good practice."

"Why?" asked Travis.

Anna was clearly becoming impatient, Paul thought. She saw her eyes darting to the house, the kitchen window, where Paul knew Gabriel would be, steeping his morning tea, floating around the room, humming. It was obvious Anna would rather be with him than with this group of annoying children, Paul thought. Maybe she was thinking about him naked, maybe she wanted to be deep in the trees with him again.

“Uh, I’m playing the tambourine,” Paul said. She didn’t know why she said it, or why she spoke at all. Something came over her that was out of her control.

Anna looked shocked as she stared at Paul, eyes wide and almost scared. Could it be fear that Paul saw in her? But why would she be afraid of Paul speaking?

“Yes, thank you, Paul.”

“And I’m singing,” said Ro confidently, a smile tearing across their face as redness spread on their cheeks and neck.

Anna lightened, smiled at Ro, seemingly relieved that the attention was replaced from Paul to Ro. “Yes you are, and I can’t wait for the audience to hear your beautiful voice!”

Ro blushed even deeper.

“We’re drumming,” said Shane, speaking for all of the boys. The other boys grunted in agreement.

“I thought one of you was playing guitar?” Anna asked.

Travis looked nervously around, his eyes shifted from one boy to the other and the other two boys eyed him. “Uh... I guess I was, yeah.”

“Great. Thanks, Travis. Awesome. So we’re all on the same page for instruments. Does anyone want to tell me the sequence?”

The group stared blankly again. Anna sighed, leaned her weight into one hip and crossed her arms.

“Okay. Let’s just practice, then.”

Paul snuck away quickly for lunch, looked for Nora in the sea of children digging for their lunches in the pile of backpacks. She looked for her own, but tried to stay out of the way—wormed around the other small bodies and tried to be small, slippery. Unnoticed in the crowd. She saw a hip dodge, a small presence mirroring her own out of the corner of her eye—it was Nora, doing the same thing as her. They made eye contact, wordlessly collected their bags from the same area they’d placed them in the pile in the morning, and slipped away towards the back of the building.

“Do you want to go into the woods?” Paul asked. “I can show you the plants—no one will find us.”

“Are you sure? What about Gabriel and Anna?” Paul remembered Nora had never been in the woods behind the house before.

“It’ll be fine, don’t worry.” Paul led the way around the back of the house into the trees, and her best friend followed. Finally, something Paul excelled at in the camp. The trees thickened around them, faster and faster, and Paul could tell Nora was slowing down.

“It’s kind of dark in here,” Nora whined, “the branches are blocking all the light.”

“Just follow me.” Paul turned and saw her friend attempting to dodge the branches as best she could, but it was almost unavoidable in this part of the forest, and Paul knew it was only going to get worse. She backtracked to help Nora push the branches aside and

clear a path for her. The two of them pressed further into the trees until it felt almost too dense, but Paul knew relief was coming. The clearing. The plants. The butterflies.

The two girls scratched through their last scrappy section of branches and came through into the clearing Paul knew was coming. She looked around, then looked at Nora, whose eyes filled with awe, as if she was seeing magic for the first time. The place Paul had described so pressingly finally presented to her in real life—not a dream or a vague description, but Paul had placed it right in front of her. There was no doubting its reality now. As if on command, two butterflies floated in and found their way to the girls, beating around their heads, almost touching their hair. Trembling, as if they were afraid as much as they were curious of this new guest their familiar human friend had brought along.

“I think they like you,” Paul said.

Nora blushed.

Paul continued over to the leaves that smelled like Gabriel’s tea.

“Paul! Don’t get too close to that—that’s it!”

“What?” Paul froze.

“It’s poison. That plant!” Nora pointed at the plant that Paul was walking towards.

“But... this is the one I was going to show you.” Paul gestured at the plant and when she looked again, she saw two, three, four butterflies fluttering around the plant, landing and poking around but not staying in any one place.

“Paul,” Nora warned.

“What do we do?”

A shuffle came from further in the trees, a noise like someone was there. The girls froze, looked at each other, waited. Nothing.

“Probably just a squirrel or something,” Nora laughed. “Right?”

“Yeah.”

“Do you really think this is what he’s making the tea with?”

“I mean, it smells just like it.”

The girls got closer to the plant, Nora inspecting with her big brain full of plant knowledge and Paul could hardly contain her excitement.

“What do you think?” Paul urged.

“This is definitely it. It’s poison. We shouldn’t touch it.”

“But I did touch it. I brought you a piece last time. Remember?”

“Yeah, and I’m surprised you didn’t get a rash or something. I looked into it more and very dangerous if ingested. I wonder why he’d be drinking it. Or how he’s okay...”

Another rustle, and then a gust of wind—the girls jumped. Paul tried not to look scared so Nora wouldn’t want to leave.

“What else does it do?”

“It’s highly invasive. Look at the plants around it.” Nora pointed up towards the covering and Paul saw that the trees that were wrapped in the vine only had a few leaves left. The other vegetation in the area was gone—it was the only thing around.

“That’s why this is a clearing now,” Paul said. “It’s killed everything else.”

“Yeah,” Nora said seriously. “And not to mention the caterpillars.”

Both girls looked down, heads heavy as they towered over the swaths of dead caterpillars below the plants.

“Poor things,” Nora crouched down. “They didn’t even know what was coming.”

Paul sighed as she and Nora observed the bodies. “They were drawn to it, probably dreamt about it,” Paul said.

“What’s this?” Nora pointed at something Paul couldn’t see, so Paul crouched down next to her. Nora grabbed a stick and began to poke around in the sea of caterpillars at what looked like tufts of fur. “Do you think there was a dog here?”

“Nora.”

They heard a louder rustling and then a crash—definitely not the wind this time. The girls rushed to their feet. A low rumble, and the rustling of the leaves grew louder, and movement sprouted from deep in the leaves behind the clearing. Paul thought she heard a thumping sound, rhythmic, but she wasn’t sure if it was her heart pounding in her ears, or someone’s feet beating the ground, running, something big. The girls stood absolutely still, not even breathing.

“Paul! Nora!” Anna’s head appeared through the brush on the other side of the house. “This way! Quickly.”

The girls looked at each other and both ran towards Anna.

“Quickly,” she repeated, as she led them through the trees in a direction Paul didn’t recognize. She felt uneasy about following Anna, trusting her to take them to safety rather than somewhere even more dangerous, but her legs led her as if by the same autopilot spell she was under earlier. She heard Nora’s heavy breathing, panting beside her, then saw her rushing ahead through the branches after Anna.

Little fingers with sharp nails scratched at Paul's face and clothing as she lost sight of Nora and Anna in the trees up ahead. She tripped over a loop of root sticking out of the ground and landed on all fours. She looked around her at the uneasy stillness of the trees, no longer any movement to suggest which direction they went. She sniffed the air and perked her ears up, searching desperately for any sign of them in the woods around her, but there was only stillness and quiet, the overwhelming smell of rotting wood and leaves. She focused her attention on her feet and hands, felt the damp ground tingle beneath her. Then she heard it—the smallest crack, snapping of a twig somewhere in the distance. Paul ran as fast as she could towards the sound, all four of her limbs hitting the ground. She ran faster than she had ever run before, allowing the branches to hit every part of her body, close enough to hurt, except it didn't hurt. It scratched an itch she never knew she had.

She heard voices coming from ahead—finally, Nora—and kept running.

“Wait, where's Paul?” she heard Nora say.

“She'll be fine,” Anna said back.

“We can't leave her!” Nora yelled.

“Shhhhh!”

Paul tried to yell out *I'm here* but no sound came out of her. She heard a low growl coming from the trees on her left and she stopped, finally able to see her best friend and the counsellor through the trees. They both stood shocked, stayed so still. Paul heard the leaves rustle to her left and when she looked over she saw grey—a giant dog, or a wolf. It stepped slowly out through the poisonous bush and lifted its lips over its teeth in a deep snarl. Paul looked at the wolf and then at Nora, still stuck in place, then at Anna,

who fumbled around the bottom of her pants, lifting the ankle and pulling a giant silver blade out of her boot just like the ones in the kitchen. She lifted the blade above her head slowly, then knocked it on a branch, and it fell to the ground. She fell to her knees, fumbling again in the leaves. Paul looked back at the wolf. It crouched low, and the ground rumbled around it. Paul felt the spell taking over her body again, and she leapt toward the beast—grabbed it with all fours, scratching wherever she could. It squirmed beneath her, it was so much bigger than her. It tried to reach its head back to grab her with its teeth, when Paul sunk her teeth into its back, digging in deep to its ribs. It squealed and whined, shook violently until Paul was flung from its body. It locked eyes with her for a second—bright blue eyes, shining like sea glass—then ran back into the woods.

Paul laid on her side on the forest floor and looked back up at Nora, who still stood in silent shock, her eyes locked on Paul's. Anna grabbed Nora's arm and began to pull her away from Paul.

"Let's go," Anna whispered urgently.

Nora obeyed the command, and the two girls disappeared into the trees.

Wait, Paul tried to say, but again no sound came out.

Paul woke up feeling dizzy and sodden, her hair and body covered in wet leaves and broken twigs. She felt an exhaustion unlike any she'd felt before. She felt it heavy in her face, like she was filled with water, a damp sweater she had to lug around because the dryer wasn't working. She fumbled onto her hands and knees, and shakily stood up onto her two feet, holding onto a nearby tree trunk. Head bowed, she dragged herself through

the trees in the direction she saw Nora and Anna disappear. She had no idea where she was in the forest anymore, but knew there must be a way out. She just had to figure out how to get back to camp.