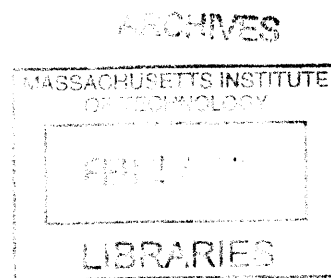


Underneath

by

Aimee Harrison



SUBMITTED TO THE DEPARTMENT OF  
WRITING AND HUMANISTIC STUDIES IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT  
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF  
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Requirements for the Degree of Bachelors of Science in  
Writing and Humanistic Studies

## ABSTRACT

Underneath is a full-length novel that follows Maggie Lawrence, a twelve-year-old girl growing up in the late 1970s, through the first eight months of her parents' divorce. To escape their fighting, Maggie crawls under her bed. There, she is transported to the Forest, a place where all the animals who were in the tree when the tree was cut down to make Maggie's bed are trapped. Maggie helps her friends attempt to escape the Forest, a place where nothing can change or grow, while struggling with the feeling that, in her real world, Maggie doesn't want anything to change or to grow. In an attempt to remain thin enough to fit under her bed and visit the Forest, Maggie develops an eating disorder, which eventually places her in the hospital. Through recovery, Maggie must learn to adapt to new changes in her life and accept her parents as they are, while also finding her own reasons to want to grow up and reflect these adults who aren't always perfect.

Thesis Supervisor: Shariann Lewitt  
Title: Lecturer of Writing

*for Cathy Harrison, Mary & Helen Wright,  
Thelma Harrison and Millie Thompson,  
the women I've always hoped to reflect.*

\*

*for Shariann Lewitt for constant support.*

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## Reflections on Writing a Novel

There's a saying that what comes easily to an artist is the type of artist they are. By that convention, I am a short story writer and a poet. So when I began the thesis writing project, I initially thought I would stick with my natural inclination and proposed writing a series of linked short stories set in Cambridge because these were the types of stories I was used to creating. For several weeks, I struggled to produce a meager ten page draft, throwing out page after page until finally something struck. When I showed this to my thesis advisor, Shariann Lewitt, she told me to throw that out as well. It had pretty phrases and somewhat of an arc, but it lacked the heart of what I had written for her in the past. She asked if this was really the story I wanted to tell. It wasn't, but the story I wanted to tell was asking for a longer form and it terrified me to enter a new realm of writing.

Yet even from the beginning of the process, the hold the characters slowly forming had on me allowed me to push through the difficult initial start. The story I wanted to tell was not fiction, but a family story. My Nanna, my mother's mother, eloped with my grandfather when she was nineteen. They eloped because her father never trusted my grandfather. He thought he was too much of a ladies' man. My Nanna ignored her father's advice. She went to university and was top of her class, yet got a job immediately after graduating as a secretary to help him pay for medical school. After he graduated, she became a stay at home mom when they adopted their first child in the late forties. She remained a stay at home mom until her fifth child entered puberty in the early seventies. My mother was her fourth child. My grandfather cheated on my Nanna through the birth of all their children until the early seventies, when she finally divorced him and returned to work as a secretary.

In addition to dealing with a divorce, my mother watched both her parents enter several unhealthy relationships with borderline psychotic and sometimes abusive individuals. At twelve, she developed an eating disorder that landed her in the hospital twice. This was a story about coming age in the midst of parental imperfections, but I knew I didn't want to write nonfiction and I didn't want to write about all of the details, so I had to find the pieces of this story that were really asking me to create a story from them.

In trying to find the narrative arc within this family history, I first began writing for discovery. In the time I had allotted for my thesis, I wrote free verse poetry, trying to enter the head of my mother as a twelve-year-old and made myself imagine the circumstances within a family that could cause a young girl to develop an eating disorder. From that poetry, my protagonist Maggie was born, not as my mother, but as a new person. She told me she lived in the town of Somerville, NJ, a suburb I had grown up in. She told me she lived in the seventies, in the era of modern female empowerment amidst conventional suburban ideology. She told me she didn't eat because she was terrified of growing up.

My favorite writers are Aimee Bender, Haruki Murakami and Etgar Keret, artists who utilize surrealist elements to symbolize the emotional development of their characters. When Maggie first appeared to me, I knew immediately that I would not be able to tell her story without invoking the tools I have learned from them. I have intellectual reasons for believing in surrealism, mainly that I believe people are more likely to accept advice when it comes with a dose of magic at a distance from themselves and their real worlds, but the reason I used surrealism in my novel was not intellectual. When Maggie came into my life, she told me a secret. When her parents fight, she crawls under her bed to hide from her house and her

real life. Under her bed, she transports to a magical world. If she keeps eating and developing, she won't be able to keep hiding there. This is why Maggie doesn't eat.

These truths were all I had to start with for my thesis. Maggie was only half formed, a silhouette beginning to haunt me, growing each day, but forming slowly. I had a setting, a character, and a hint of the supernatural, but what I had was barely a short story and far from a novel. I took it anyway. Some writers create detailed outlines and can conceive of the whole story before they sit down to write their first sentence. That sounded easier to me and so I tried to make outlines and bullet point Maggie's life, but it quickly became apparent that this was not the way writing would work for me. As soon as I entered the first chapter, I threw the outlines away.

Because a novel is a longer work, I wanted to change my process. In short stories I wrote quickly through first drafts then spent months editing the sloppy arcs to build up my characters and pinpoint the heart of the story. I didn't think that was possible for a novel and yet, I couldn't do it any other way. I wrote this novel through writing for discovery.

I created an outline for each chapter and then threw it away by the tenth page and went with what Maggie demanded. When I sat down to write, I would know the main emotional reason for why each scene would be important and I would know where I wanted them to take place. I closed my eyes and watched a movie follow in my head then did my best to describe it on the paper. As soon as I finish transcribing the scene in my notebook, I typed it into the computer and worked out superficial kinks that way. Then I submitted it to Shariann and moved onto the next section. Because I was discovering Maggie through these drafts, I often wouldn't move backwards in the first draft unless I hit roadblocks that required

reworking the past to find the future. The first major incidence of this was in creating the magical world that Maggie inhabited when she crawled under her bed.

When I initially tried to write this world, I had only written one scene for Maggie in the real world and I hardly knew her. I didn't yet know what it was she was looking for in escape, and so I created silhouettes of characters without their own plot. I kept them as a placeholder until I finished following Maggie through her parents divorce. By the time I finished writing Maggie's real life in the first chapter, I had a fuller picture of who she was so I was able to go back and determine what her fantasy world would look like. Once again, I turned to poetry. After a dozen free verse poems, the idea fell out. The animals who were in the tree when the tree got cut down to make Maggie's bed were trapped in a magical forest where nothing could grow or be destroyed. If Maggie was afraid of change and growing up, then her escape had to be to a place where everything always remained the same.

Once I had the characters in the Forest became real to me, writing their plot became as easy as writing the story in Maggie's real world. I continued writing both worlds in tandem as rough first drafts. I didn't hit my next roadblock until about halfway through the novel, when Maggie's eating disorder hit its peak and she entered the hospital. I tried to write the following draft and found myself throwing out scene after scene. It was going nowhere, and I called that writers block. I wanted to throw the piece away, and if it weren't for Shariann pushing me through and Maggie haunting me each night not to give up on her, I might have.

The aspect of writing for discovery that I learned differs greatly in novels as compared to short stories is that the first draft is not necessarily always a forward moving process. For a twenty page project with a single major plot arc, writing for several hours and



producing a rough first impression is not an impossible task. With a several hundred page project that intertwines a host of characters and multiple threads of plot, halfway through they all got tangled up and I had to go back and unwind them before I could continue writing forward. I took a break from writing new chapters and revised the old ones for the first time.

In this first revision, I found huge gaps in characters from both worlds. I realized that I could not only understand Maggie to write her story, I also had to fully understand the important people in her life if I had any intention of finalizing her story. This is something we're told time and time again in introductory classes, but somehow in my short stories I had skirted the problem by making my protagonists independent and primarily solitary. I could not, however, put Maggie alone in a room and hope to describe her well. Her story needed her family, her two best friends, and the characters of the Forest she escaped to at night, and each of them required full profile before I could think of entering the hospital to end the book. So I set about writing poetry and diary entries for the secondary characters and even created new ones who I hadn't seen in my first run through of the plot. I marked the places where their stories would have to be brought into my first draft and though I didn't fully write them in yet, because they were real to me, I was able to continue moving forward and, after writing each hospital scene upward of six times, I concluded the first draft.

Because of the writing process I chose, I didn't completely understand the important moment of the story or all the details of my characters until I had completed this draft. Yet as soon as the last words of the first draft were typed, I knew what my story meant. The major revision was an act of teasing and tugging the mess I had laid out on white paper to pull out the true story from the vignettes of eight months in Maggie's life. This required rewriting

about a quarter of the story completely and rewording nearly every other sentence from what I kept from the first draft, but because I understood the story by that point, it was easier to do.

This final revision process was an act of understanding structure. In a workshop I attended last summer, Benjamin Percy emphasized the importance of emotional beats, the idea that the moments you build to in your story require a slower pace to instill their importance. Shariann reiterated this idea by teaching me to look at my novel holistically now. Instead of seeing an individual movie for each scene and simply transcribing that, I had to understand the work as a unified story. Within that framework, I had to find the important moments that needed to be slowed and the transitory moments that needed to be sped up. I had to find the characters who needed to be brought into fuller light and those that needed to be pushed back a bit. In my initial draft, I had Maggie's brother as her major connection to the real world and so in early chapters I spent a lot of time depicting the kind moments they spent together. By the end of the first draft, it was Maggie's best friends, not Dennis, who held her to the world. I had to go back and put in scenes that showed their importance early on. I had rewrite all of the scenes that included Dennis to reveal him as the more antagonistic character that he had become by the time she entered the hospital. There were also characters I had originally written in as men who, due to the importance of female strength that came into focus by the end of the story, were changed to women. In turn, a character who was initially a woman had to become a man. There were scenes I spent pages on that became paragraphs. There were sentences that became ten page scenes.

All of this cutting and rewriting would have been heartbreaking had I kept the writing habits I had at the start of my thesis. At that time, I was writing 'only when I felt inspired' which amounted to several hours right before I had a deadline or a couple hours each

weekend when I had free time. To produce a full length novel in nine months, I clearly had to change my outlook on writing. By November, I was writing at regular spots for one to two hours four nights a week and sometimes more before a segment was due. Producing regularly allowed me to throw things away more easily because I knew I had the time to make them better, though some sentences I have saved in a 'Graveyard' document because it still hurts to press delete on sentence after sentence I have spent hours revising.

On the onset of this project, I saw novel writing and short story writing as separate enterprises. One of the reasons I initially wanted to write short stories for my thesis was that I knew there were aspects of my writing that fell short. Raised on confessional poetry and young adult psychological novels, the inner monologues and emotional arcs come easily to me, while creating convincing influential settings and character interactions often stumped me. In Shariann's fiction workshop last spring, she pinpointed these as my weakest traits and so when I asked her to be my advisor, I wanted her help learning techniques to improve these details of my story. For some reason I believed that improving them in my short stories came separately from developing them in my novel. When I chose to write a speculative fiction novel, I thought that I would focus on structure in longer form and the details of my shorter form would have to wait to be perfected.

I held this view for about a week into the writing process, when Shariann marked up the first draft of my first chapter. I wasn't paying enough attention to the physical details of the era and the town I had chosen. My interactions with secondary characters weren't always convincing. I spent too much time in Maggie's head, telling rather than showing. I made the same mistakes in my novel as I always make in short stories. It turns out that while the

structure and nature of building plot in longer works is different, the details of creating scenes are the same in long form as they are in short form.

I began drawing out Maggie's house and clothes, clipping images from 70s era women's magazines and reading 1976 editions of the New Yorker and Life in the library. Throughout the first semester, the details I worked hardest on were the physical world Maggie inhabited. These improved in each new chapter and by the time I went back to revise, there were consistency issues I had to deal with for the physical world but for the most part, I found that the physical world and mindset of the time period had somehow shown up even in my rough first draft. Furthermore, in the short stories I was writing in the free time, I found the setting and community my characters lived in becoming as important as the internal monologue and emotional state of my protagonists. The work I did to tell Maggie's story had ramifications in both my short stories and even my poetry becoming more 'show don't tell.'

The opposite of effect was also true. In a fiction workshop with Alan Lightman this semester, I read JD Salinger and Raymond Carver, short stories that rely on dialogue to move plot. In exercises for this class, I had to work on my dialogue and while that was once the aspect about writing that most terrified me, in practice I found that it was slowly becoming less and less difficult to do. When I went back into Maggie's story this semester, I highlighted large portions of summary that I knew had to go into dialogue and for the first time, I took the time to write it out rather than skirting around character's voices because they scared me. I read articles about the way women tend to speak with more questions and men with more declarative statements and looked at the aspects of each character's personalities that may manifest as details of their voices.

My novel ended up relying on dialogue to push plot and scenes that weren't working suddenly became clear to me by simply giving people words.

As I leave MIT and the nurturing environment of always having someone to correct my grammar and help point out the flaws in my writing, I was terrified that I wouldn't be able to continue as a writer without instruction. The most inspiring moment in this whole process was when I turned back to reread through my rough draft. I first read through without looking at Shariann's comments, and I was able to pinpoint most of her critiques myself. It felt like learning to drive without a parent. All the rules my teachers had told me sprang into action and I crossed out section after section, letting the pieces fall. It gave me confidence that I will be able to revise and write even once I'm on my own.

Writing this novel has been one of the most difficult writing processes I have yet gone through. At moments, I did want to give up, and as I finish the final revision, I'm looking forward to working on short stories and novellas during the hours I've set aside for writing. So I wouldn't quite say that I've been converted to a novelist. However, there are stories I have waiting to tell that I know will require more space than fifty pages to write and knowing I now have the tools to write a novel is comforting. Even if I'm a more natural short story writer at the moment, I don't believe I'll stay the same forever. Having guidance for this first entrance into the longer form will help me later in my career if I decide to change styles. There's also something about this novel that has haunted me more than any short story has been able to. Because I have been spending ten or more hours a week over this year watching Maggie's life, she's become a strange best friend. In moments of panic about my future and my personal life, being able to sit

down and weed through her problems has given me immense comfort and grounding. As I finalize the last draft of this thesis, it hurts to say goodbye to her.

There are two ways I've found to take comfort in the pain of this closure. The selfless approach is to say that with new readers, Maggie will be reborn, and find a fuller life through their eyes. My self-involved comfort, however, is in seeing that the way she connected to me means that I am indeed a writer. If I love the worlds on the page as much as any moment in my real life, how could I ever stop? Today, I say goodnight to Maggie, but that just means tomorrow I get to wake up someone new, watch them crystallize and let them take over my imagination.

## Underneath

*January 1976*

### 1:

Little girls always know when their worlds are falling apart. They may not say so. They may not understand what they know, but they can feel it. It's the panic that trembles just beneath their grasp of words. Sometimes the fear makes them cry. Sometimes it makes them run. For Maggie Lawrence, the unsettling air that surrounds her cul-de-sac as she exits the school bus each afternoon simply makes her pause, unsure whether she should enter her house or run away. On other days, she might have run to her best friends' yards, but today they both have swimming lessons. Maggie is left alone because of her fear of water. So today, Maggie concedes to walk to her own house.

As Maggie steps onto the front yard, she looks around and exhales puffs of winter air before her face. She tries to find her younger brother waiting amongst the mist of fog, hoping he might give her a reason to stay outside. He's not here.

There are four matching houses on Maggie's street. Each is two stories tall with a wooden front porch on the left and a single car garage jutting out on the right. They claim individuality with pastel paints and decorated mailboxes: a yellow house with a black cat box, a red house with a barn box, a tan house with a crow box. Maggie loves her house the best for its simplicity, white painted sides with baby blue trim, a black front door, and a traditional white mailbox that her mother decorated with blue birds and black cats.

Today, each of the cul-de-sac's quarter acre yards is draped with a fresh coat of white

snow, pristine except for the ragged piles of clearing that line the driveways and sidewalks. In front of the house with a crow mailbox, a row of paw prints traces a path from the driveway to the cat door. Maggie looks around for her neighbor's wandering skinny tabby, but he is nowhere to be seen. She whispers to the missing cat, telling him to be thankful for a warm house and a smiling family.

A shiver travels through Maggie's spine, so she wraps her black scarf once more around her neck, then adjusts her red coat over her ice cold smooth ears and cheeks. She spins twice on the heels of her boots, one final search for her brother. He's still not here, so she leans back and falls into a band of fresh snow to wait for him. Damp ice seeps through her baggy jeans, but Maggie balls her hands in her jacket pockets to absorb the warmth of fleece lining. She closes her eyes and wills herself to wait out the cold.

A slowly falling sun burns Maggie's eyelids, drawing images across the blackness with small red and orange specks of light. Failing to put together a story for these images, Maggie opens her eyes and plays story hour with the cotton clouds above her instead. A snowy cat steps from the sky into her lap. Beside the cat, a squirrel scavenges for nuts among the cloudy trees. In the same tree the squirrel scavenges through, a bird and her mate are just about to take flight from their puffy nest, three fledglings waiting behind them, flapping their short feathers, ready for their first leap. Maggie sees the animals in the stories and it makes her wish she could run to her own forest today, but the screeching of bus wheels jolts her from the fantasy.

With the arrival of a second yellow school bus, the squirrel, the cat, the bird and all the tree clouds press together, once more becoming just white pillows suspended in the sky. Maggie sits up and brushes clumps of melting ice from her jacket. Her brother and his best



friend hop from black steps onto the snowy ground. Maggie sits up and smiles, pretending she wasn't waiting for them.

Maggie's almond eyed, freckled cheeked brother acknowledges her with a quick and a wide gap toothed smile. "Are you going home?"

Maggie pauses for a moment and considers asking her brother if she can join him instead. There were days not too long ago when they would have run to the park together and played tag or had snowball fights, but Maggie knows that now she'd be out of place running with nine-year-old boys. "I guess so."

"Can you take my stuff?" He drops a pile of books into the snow at Maggie's feet. She quickly lifts the notepads and exercise book, waving them in the air to prevent the snow from melting and staining his pages. Before she finishes saying, "Yes," Dennis is already two yards away, running and laughing beside his friend.

Maggie watches his bright blue back walking away and nostalgia surges through her. She bites her lip and forces herself to stand up, clinging to Dennis's books. She will return home. Only her mother is there right now and Maggie needs help with her math homework. Her mother's better at helping than her father. Her father always plays fake offended if she asks her mother while he's home, so it's easier to get this done before dinner.

Maggie jumps over mounds of collected snow to the wooden front porch where she presses on a golden hooked handle and opens the front door. The scent of cinnamon and fake heating washes over her. From the threshold of the small oak foyer, Maggie can see her mother crouched on her knees in the kitchen. Three yards of navy blue and white daisy fabric surround her in rectangles with frayed edges.

Maggie abandons her slush covered boots and jacket at the entrance. Then tiptoes

across the hardwood floors and slinks into the kitchen beside her mother. The room already smells of buttery green beans and baking garlic sauce. Maggie wishes her mom were out, so she could go into the pantry and eat a small anything to keep her stomach's growling quiet until dinner. But because she doesn't want to be chastised for eating too much, she instead just kisses her mother's cheek and sits on the floor cross legged, careful to avoid ruining her mother's fabrics with her damp jean knees.

“Can I help?”

Her mother leans forward, smiles and kisses Maggie's cheek. “Of course you can, baby. Look.” She stands and reaches onto a gold Formica counter, then carries a magazine back onto the floor beside Maggie. The page she has creased shows a woman gardening plastic red roses with an oversized aluminum watering can. The woman wears a homely round pleated skirt, denim blue with yellow sunflowers patched across it. She is plump and happy, rosy cheeked, round breasted. Maggie's arms stretch out with a sudden desire to hug this ad's bright red lipsticked, perfect face. Certainly, this woman doesn't cry every night. Certainly, she would be comforting.

“Well, the fabric's not quite right.” Her mother's voice staggers as she stares intently at the woman on the glossy page.

“It's pretty, mom. Where's the pattern?”

“I don't have one. I'm making this one up.”

Maggie looks around at the pieces questionably, but determines to trust her mother's skills and nods attempting to show encouragement. Her mother's dazed stare appears to miss the point. Rather than say anything to interrupt her mother's thoughts, Maggie sits on the floor with needles and half sewn pieces. She always helps in the same way, by pinning the

edges. Her mother's in charge of cutting, basting and final stitches, but Maggie always deals with the pins.

When they settle into work, Maggie's mother focus finally returns from space to her daughter. She smooths Maggie's fabric out while Maggie tries to pin. She corrects the edges Maggie does too sloppily. Maggie does her best not to comment on this and instead focuses on making conversation. "Mom?"

"Yes, baby."

"I need help with math."

"Before dinner we'll do it, okay?"

Maggie nods and looks down at the soft array of pricks on her calloused fingertips.

"Mom?"

"Yes, baby."

Maggie wants to ask when her father's going to be home today, but quickly bites her lips so she won't mention her father. "Well." She looks back down at the daisies in the fabric, searching for words between petals. "Well. What did you do today?"

"I went shopping and I cleaned the bathrooms, so a lot." She doesn't look from the daisies while she speaks, concentrating on the thread rather than her daughter. "Oh, and I got a letter from your grandma. She says they finally found a new house. Well, Nick and Jenny did. Mom likes it though. She says they're moving in two weeks. That's so fast Dad says he misses New Jersey. Maybe we can get him to come back, what do you think?" She smiles at the thread. "I think mom likes the city though. She said that the Christmas lights are still up everywhere and it's magical."

Maggie can't help but laugh. Her grandmother doesn't like magical things. She prefers reality. Maggie watches her mother's hazel eyes, which lose focus as she repeats the letter. Maggie wishes her grandmother would just pay for foreign phone calls. Canada's not too expensive, and her letters always make Maggie's mother more nostalgic and lonely than comforted. Maggie tries to change the subject to make her mother smile. "Mr. Phillips changed my name today."

"That's nice."

"He said I'm too quiet to be a Margarita. Now I'm Margara. What do you think?"

"That's nice." She won't take her eyes off the fabric.

"Mom." Maggie draws out the word, dropping her pins as she does. Her mother doesn't respond, but laces one needle in and pulls it out by stretching her left arm far over her head, causing her pale skin to catch the light of the setting sun behind the sliding kitchen doors. The light makes her mother seem translucent she's so pale. Because she isn't speaking, Maggie momentarily worries her mother has become a ghost. Her next drawl comes out softer. "Mom?"

Her mother drops her arm. The light readjusts and her skin is opaque once more.

"Hmm?" She looks up with patient, distant eyes.

"You're not listening to me."

"Oh, baby. Yes I am. What were you saying?"

"I was saying about Spanish class..." The phone rings and interrupts Maggie's story. Her mother lifts one finger as if to signal, *wait a minute*, then places her work in progress careful on the floor and rises. The wind of her skirt to ripples shreds of fabric across the

kitchen tiles. She walks to the mustard phone, hung on the wall next to the sliding glass door, and lifts the receiver, saying hello to the other end.

“Why?” She twirls the gray cord between her painted nails. “Oh. Hm. Where though? I thought.” She chews on the plastic of the gray cord between her fingers. “But you said. Fine. Okay. Fine.”

Maggie bites her nails while she listens. It only takes three more words for Maggie to figure out what this phone call means. It means her father will be late for dinner tonight. Maggie grips the handles of the scissors tight as she clenches on a piece of cotton. It means tonight will be a fight.

2

Dinner always precedes the fights. Maggie is the first to hug her father as he walks through the kitchen door, out of the nightlight of happy neighbors' houses and into the dim fluorescence of the kitchen. The flab around his waist cushions his touch, and the smooth skin on his square chin rubs against her cheek. For an instant his embrace comforts Maggie. The comfort only lasts until she catches the heavy scent of sweat on his neck and sees the thin careless butterfly bruises near his collarbones. Maggie loses all warmth in predicting the inevitable course of their evening. Her mother's gray-hazel eyes will shut for a second before her cheeks tighten and she tells Maggie and her brother to sit at the table and wait for daddy to go change. He says he's going to take a quick shower and her mother mutters *Of course* in what she believes to be a hidden voice. Maggie always hears.

Maggie's mother walks to check on the food. Her red and white apron and blue pleated skirt looking out of date in front of the white and steel sheen of the stove. The children take their seat at the table to wait. Dennis makes faces at Maggie and Maggie crosses her thin hairless arms and places her hands on her still chubby cheeks.

Maggie always stares at Dennis in these silences, willing him not to speak. Usually he abides, but tonight he makes the mistake of asking Maggie what happened here while he was at the park. Maggie's not sure if he's referring to the scraps of fabric still lining the floor or the tension piercing the air, but she doesn't have time to respond. Her mother spins from the stove and stares into the blank air above her children. "Your father had better things to do than be with us." Which wasn't what Dennis was asking, but it silences both children anyways.

Maggie feels her heart pulsing through her arms and her neck as she watches the tears welling up in the mascara around her mother's eyes. Maggie wishes her brother realized the delicacy of these fights. He has seen just as many as she has. He should know by now how not to make them worse.

Actually, what Maggie really wishes is that she could be as oblivious as her brother. Watching him stick out his tongue and make silly faces from across the table, Maggie remembers when the fights first began. She never knew they were happening unless someone yelled *really* loudly. There was bliss in that. As it is, Maggie watches her mother standing over the stove, stirring mashed potatoes in a large silver pot, even though dinner's been ready for an hour and a half and the potatoes are undoubtedly smooth. Maggie knows exactly what her mother will say throughout the rest of the night. There's more pain in expectancy than execution. Maggie can feel her mother's anxiety with excruciating sympathy, she twitches once for every turn of her mother's wrist. The precession results in a steam rash on her mother's right hand and Maggie almost screams, feeling the heat herself.

Trying to tune out the endorphins, Maggie sits still at the table, tapping her foot quietly on the linoleum tiles. Only when her mother begins spooning the potatoes onto four olive plastic plates does Maggie look away, directing her gaze back towards her brother's freckled nose and almond eyes, which are carefully trained on Maggie's own face. It's as though they believe they can exit the house if they concentrate hard enough, sit still enough, behave good enough.

They continue to sit in silence as their mother places the dinner plates on their aluminum kitchen table. "We'll wait for dinner to cool while your father showers." She takes her own seat and crosses her arms across her chests. For three hundred and twelve seconds,

no one speaks. Then Maggie's father bounces into the kitchen, fresh shaved and smiling with damp hair.

Before he sits down, Maggie's father kisses her mother's cheek, transferring a layer of blush from her rounded face onto his mauve lips. "How was your day, Lucy Loo?" Maggie bites her tongue at his stupidity, wondering how he can possibly not notice the signals.

Her mother sits up straight in her chair and stares into space. "Just sit and say grace." A drip of mascara falls down her cheek, replacing the powder he took up with his lip. The whole family closes their eyes and the dull yellow kitchen dissolves into white lights and heaven beneath shut lids. "Thank you God for our family, for this day, for this food. Bless it to our bodies. Amen." Maggie holds her eyes shut for an extra moment, praying for prolonged peace on Earth, in this house, praying she were in the Forest and not here. No one picks up a fork or a glass until she opens her eyes.

Because the sun has already set today, the transition from the world of prayer to the world of speech, from the dark of her eyes to the light of her kitchen, is minor. Maggie exhales and crosses her fingers as she grips the silver fork. Her wrist glides across the smooth cold table surface. The glimmer of prayer fades with Dennis's cackling voice.

"I won tag today!"

"Good job, buddy."

Maggie stares at the scratches on her plate that decorate the space between food, quietly resenting her brother for breaking the silence with conversation. "How do you win at tag?"

"I tagged everyone!"



“My speedy son. Isn’t that great?” Maggie’s father looks at her mother for a response. She grunts, *Yes*, without taking her attention off of her plate. The appreciation in Maggie’s father’s voice sounds so sincere, it makes the forced timbre of her mother’s acknowledgments a dark pounding in Maggie’s ears.

“How was your day, Maggie? Is that boy still playing teacher for Mrs. Turner?”

“Yes.” Maggie forgets to finish chewing before she speaks. A piece of half chewed green bean falls onto the table. With the rosemary salted taste still lingering around her gums and lips, Maggie immediately punctures a second bean with her fork and fills her mouth back up, chewing properly now. Dennis and her father look at one another, their matching freckled noses and sweet round eyes align for an instant, then they turn back to Maggie, laughing. Maggie considers joining in, but then glances at her mother, who stares at her meat without moving. Maggie wishes she had matching eyes to stare at, but while her mother’s are hazel and her father’s and Dennis’s pale, wooden brown, Maggie has deep dark pools and no one to stare at. Instead of laughing, Maggie piles more food onto the fork and places it in her mouth. No one will expect her to talk if there’s food to be chewed.

Maggie wills her father not to speak again. Happy conversations always elongates the amount of time her mother spends pursing her lips before she looks up from her untouched food and focuses her attention on the child who had spoken less to their father. Maggie chews through four pieces of sweetly tamarind flavored steak before her mother lifts her head and smiles at Maggie. She picks up her fork and speaks methodically, robotically. “Did you have a good day, Maggie?”

“Good, mom. Thank you.” Maggie looks at the growing wrinkles around her mother’s eyes. She looks towards her mother’s rigid straight back. Maggie sits up straighter.

Good posture is vital. Maggie looks towards her mother's thick curly long hair, the only aspect of appearance her mother likes about herself. It's the trait Maggie most wishes she had inherited. Maggie puts down her fork and twirls the split ends of her own unfairly thin, blond hair as she stares at the cavernous indents of her mother's tresses. Maggie notices that her mother's auburn hair is now two inches shorter than it was yesterday. "Did you get your hair done?"

"Yes." She takes a bite from her fork.

Maggie's father looks up from his food and smiles. "It looks beautiful. You look beautiful." In his plaid shirt, parted brown hair and innocent smile, he looks like a sitcom character. If only he had a family to fit the set.

Her mother continues chewing, avoiding eye contact, until the family returns to silence. After three bites, she puts down her fork and lifts Maggie's plate, retreating from the plastic seats to the gas stove to refill it. The one good thing about the fights is that Maggie's mother lets Maggie eat as much as she likes without commenting on her overindulgence.

In the silence of the meal, Maggie focuses her mind to the inside of her mouth. She feels the torn skin of every buttered green bean dissolve into sweet and salt on top of her tongue. There's a world in the food, if she can block out the real one. Every slick bean, every fiber of steak, every milky, over stirred spoonful of potato, takes on its own name and special reassurance as they mingle across her tongue. When they fall into her stomach, they surge with joy, as though the acid they are falling towards is heaven. Maggie rushes to fill herself with these tastes, these reverences, forgetting to breathe between every bite, as though air is fights and unhappiness she should not allow into this paradise. Even with seconds, Maggie finishes eating before anyone else.

Her mother doesn't finish, but as soon as her father drops his silver fork onto the plastic plate, releasing a tinny clank, she stands to carry the dishes to the sink and pulls a trashcan from under a sink cabinet onto the spotless linoleum floor. She throws away all her leftovers.

Maggie looks towards the kitchen counter and spots a glazed Bundt cake waiting on a raised crystal platter. She measures her desire to fill her mouth with cinnamon lightness against her body's pleas to leave the table. The cake wins out, but she eats fast. They all eat fast. Silently. Maggie's mother clears a second set of plates.

Dennis catches Maggie's eye and glances towards the stairwell. Despite any differences during the day, at night Maggie's brother provides her the security of escape, and for that, she is grateful for his oblivious playfulness. The two depart the table without asking to be excused. For a second, Maggie regrets releasing her parents into their misery, but she has learned that waiting only allows the castle to dismantle before her. She retreats without so much as waving goodbye.

Dennis's room is over the living room, while Maggie's is on top of the kitchen and next to her parent's bedroom. During the fights, they play in Dennis's room. Inside the green walls, Maggie puts her second favorite record onto the turntable Dennis got for his last birthday. She was more excited than he was for the gift, because it added an extra layer of sound protection to their evenings here. Whispering along to the Bee Gees, Maggie stands on the tips of her toes and pulls their backgammon board from behind white sliding doors, off the top shelf of his closet.

“What are we playing for today?”

Maggie crosses her legs as she takes seat on the soft, yellow, shag carpet and chews

her nails. Hard enamel molars clench against malleable fingernail tips. Once the top of her thumbnail has been detached, initiating a tiny stream of blood that stings as it flows into the crevice of her missing cuticle, Maggie looks at her brother and states in all seriousness, “Who gets to live with mom.”

Dennis kicks her barefoot and grimaces before opening the board and placing the small ivory and brown ceramic pieces on the triangular lines of the board. “Don’t say that.”

She focuses her attention to her pointer finger now.

“They’re fine.”

“Sure.” Second nail off. Onto the pinkie. Maggie considers for a second if she should even be in here tonight. Maybe she should go under the bed instead of wasting the hours with an oblivious brother. But there’s fighting there today to, so she stays in place.

“If I win, I get your desert tomorrow.”

Maggie slides her fingers out of her mouth and a trail of saliva runs down to her chin. She cups her feet with her hands. “If I win, I get yours.”

Dennis stares at his stomach for a minute, scrunching his cheeks and considering the wager. Finally he looks up with childish seriousness and nods his head. “Deal.” He lifts the brown, leather shaker and rolls a single die. Dennis wins the first turn. Maggie wins the match. Same as always. This is why she always lets him place the stakes so high.

3:

After Maggie wins four games and the album spins into silence, she adjusts her ears to listen for noise outside the doorway. All is silent, so she tells Dennis she's getting tired and needs to go to sleep. Though he first objects, asking for one more game, he eventually releases his own wide yawn and agrees it may be bedtime.

Maggie walks heel to toe, as slowly as she can manage from Dennis's room to the adjacent bathroom, careful not to creak the baseboards, knowing that any sound might disrupt the momentary still below. She sits on the floor while she brushes her teeth, absorbing the burning cold of heavy tiles on her bare thighs. Hearing her mother's voice in the back of her head, insisting on the importance of good dental hygiene, Maggie brushes carefully. For every tooth, she counts to one hundred before moving the brush, drooling foam as she reaches for her newest molars, freshly burst from the gums.

Blood drains as she spits dissolved toothpaste into the sink and a second voice, that of her dentist, fills her head and reminds her not to brush so hard. His lecture fades as she walks down the hallway. Her lecture is drowned out by the drawl of the voices starting up again in the kitchen. Her mother accuses her father with a list of six female family friends. Her father defends himself with a list of male names as though they hold the same connotation, but even Maggie knows her mother spends each afternoon, every night, all weekend, at home with her and Dennis. Her father always smells differently when he comes home late three nights a week.

Safe in her room, Maggie trades her jeans and red wool sweater for a tan t-shirt and a pair of green satin shorts. She stands still in the middle of her room for a moment, running

her toes through the thick strands of floor, wishing the carpet could subdue the volume of her parents' voices, wishing their voices didn't need to be subdued.

The faint glow of her next door neighbor's bedroom lights falls through a single bare window and reflects off the thin mirrors she taped into a collage on her walls over a year ago. Through dim refractions, Maggie can see the food stains on her thin arms. The cut on her left knee from yesterday's recess adventures with Eleanor and Lila on the tree behind her school, the tree with branches sharp enough to puncture jeans, is just beginning to heal, growing puffy, hard and brown. Maggie admires its beauty, the precious fact that she can no longer see her insides falling out. She runs her torn fingers through long stringy blond strands, pulling them tightly over her ears, secure in a beard on her chin. She puts her fingers to her mouth and feigns smoking, pretending she is her father on a work break. She thinks to laugh.

But as Maggie tugs the hairband from her facial hair and the locks descend from her ears back onto her back, her mother's voices rises through her feet and radiates through Maggie's skull as it begins to break. If it weren't for these voices, she might just go to sleep and avoid the second round of bickering she's sure to encounter tonight. Instead, Maggie covers her ears and lies on her back. She slides across purple carpet, underneath her bed. The light blue bed skirt falls back into place as the darkness encompasses her. The space falls silent.

Maggie arches her back so her ribs press against the raw oak board holding up the mattress above her. For an instant, she feels the wood's hardness against the cotton of her shirt, and then, only lukewarm shivers.

The bed releases pinpricks of gold travel dust from inside its boards. When the flakes reach her body, they cause quick vibrations to tremor across her shoulders. Maggie feels

passing warmth and then the bed and the boards and the carpet beneath her bare legs disappear, replaced by gusts of cold winds in a backdrop of heat. Purple air swirls around her in amorphous shapes. The trip takes twenty seconds. Maggie counts them slowly while moving her lips. No sound comes out. Twenty seconds of noiselessness, and then a second flicker of black.

When Maggie's sight returns, she is lying in a sunlit field with long threads of grass wrapped around her bare legs. In the warmth, she feels a surge of relief and is glad she chose to visit tonight. The colors of this new outside look magic marker smooth. They are three shades brighter than life at home. A halo surrounds every object above a shimmering film. Glitter paint with transparent glue. It always takes Maggie several minutes of rubbing her eyes before her brain adjusts.

By the time her sight has fully transitioned to make sense of the sparkling glows and swirling aqua air, a three-foot tall squirrel appears standing over top of her with his baseball glove sized palm stretched out in front of Maggie's face. Squirrel's fur is imperfect, knotted, deep auburn and frayed but oddly so because his imperfections are always exactly the same. There's always an imitation brow above his right eye where the fur has been brushed straight upward. There's always a patch of ungroomed matted fur on the inside of his right arm. And, on the top of his right ear, there is the perpetual scar, a blankness where his hair has never regrown. Maggie reaches out her hand to smooth his stray strands. As soon as she wets and flattens them, they pop back up.

Perhaps because of the different tones of the air here, or perhaps because of the glow of his skin itself, Squirrel's fur does not look soft. His surfaces all appear smooth and shiny like well polished silver. Yet as he reaches out his hand to place a large acorn in Maggie's

mouth and the backside of his palm brushes her cold cheek, she feels the familiar comforting softness of his fur, a fabric like the coverings of a well loved teddy bear. He does not feel like hard porcelain. He feels real. Maggie accepts the gift from his palm.

When Maggie's stomach has calmed, she takes one last acorn from Squirrel and stands up. Squirrel hops and begins the familiar path to the Big Tree where their other friends wait at their Nest. Maggie has to sprint the first two yards to catch up to him. She jogs to match his pace, until her panting catches his attention and he slows down, though only slightly. When the pulsing of her heartbeat subsides, Maggie looks up to the bright blue sky above them and searches for the feathers she has missed in her recent visits. "Is Bird back?"

"Not yet. Walk faster."

"Why? Are we in a rush?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Luna found something an hour ago. I want to go check it."

"What'd she find?"

Squirrel hops faster before answering. Maggie has to jog again to hear his response.

"I made Luna leave the Nest. She was driving me crazy spinning the Eggs."

"You babysat for her? That's nice." Uncharacteristically nice. Well, maybe not. Maggie's seen the softer side of Squirrel when she talks to him about her parents. It is just uncharacteristic to see his kindness directed towards Luna and not Maggie.

"She was driving me *crazy*." He pauses and rolls his eyes for emphasis. "But she found something in the Sky Wall."



Maggie feels her chest screaming for her to stop moving. She used to be able to keep up with Squirrel, but lately her capacity for exercise has shrunk. She tries to ask *What?* but only half the word comes out. She concentrates on breathing in through the nose and out through the mouth while watching Squirrel's elongated paw feet rise and fall. Every time he lifts a foot, the grass beneath it instantly pops back up, leaving no trace of their steps. Maggie tries to force out her question and the word comes out, but louder and shriller than she intended.

Squirrel pauses, several feet ahead, and turns to wait for Maggie, but he taps his foot impatiently as he does. When she reaches him, she's panting once more and he reluctantly matches her pace. "Luna begged to see you. Since you weren't here yesterday." Maggie feels a pang of guilt for having too much homework and falling asleep at the kitchen table. Squirrel doesn't seem to notice her grimace. "But be quick. We need to go to the Sky Wall."

Rows of autumn trees, all four times Maggie's height with thick, ceramic branches reaching out to touch Maggie and Squirrel's heads, surround the stretch of grass they walk across. The ball of yellow that lies just to the side of the top of the blue dome sky shines pure light that reflects red and orange off the leaves, staining Squirrel's brown fur with sunset shades. Maggie reaches to a nearby branch and peels off a serrated, three pointed red leaf. As her parents' voices and Squirrel's guilt pry at her insides, Maggie focuses on tearing the leaf to shreds. Because the leaf looks like ceramic, she feels like a superhero destroying it so easily. Her anxiety dissolves with the leaf as she drops the pieces in the shimmering aqua air and they swirl into a tornado, gone before they reach the ground. Maggie looks back at Squirrel, who is grabbing his own leaf from a tree, but he doesn't rip his apart. He folds his

while they walk at a gradually quickening pace. “What did Luna find at the Wall?”

“A tree with two green leaves.”

“Oh.” Maggie thinks about this as she pulls a second leaf from the tree. At home, she sees green leaves all the time, but here? She’s never seen one here. Everything in the Forest is perfectly autumnal. This is a good sign. Maggie knows that. So why does she suddenly feel teary eyed and nauseous? She drops the leaf pieces, letting them recombine and return to their original branch. Then she forces a cheerful voice and wipes her cheeks with the back of her hand. “That is a good sign.”

“I know.”

Maggie searches the Sky once more, willing Bird to return with a comforting hug. Squirrel continues folding, oblivious to Maggie’s wavering insides. “We’ve been digging, but nothing’s working. Stupid dirt keeps refilling all our holes.” Maggie nods her head at the familiar story but has no response to comfort him. Fortunately, they have almost reached the Tree. Maggie doesn’t need to say a thing.

The Big Tree, a ninety-foot red oak, looks like everything else in this world, ceramic and shimmering, but larger. Larger than any tree Maggie’s ever seen in New Jersey. She is grateful to her mother for teaching her to climb trees when she was young. If Maggie was afraid of heights, she never could have fit in here.

As they reach the base of the Tree, Squirrel hands Maggie the leaf he has been folding. Instead of a red pointed leaf she would have wanted to rip apart, Maggie accepts an origami tree. Maggie smiles at Squirrel’s intricate creation and the twists of her stomach disappear like the leaves in the air. “Thank you.” Maggie places the present in her shorts’ pocket, careful not to undo any of the creases. She reaches out to give her friend a hug, but

he's already sprinting towards the oval hole in the trunk of the Tree where Squirrel nightly replaces his cheek stash of acorns.

Maggie uses her new burst of energy to run to the Tree and grab hold of the inch deep ridges of the trunk's bark. Using the friction, she raises her ninety-pound body up, past Squirrel who sprays her with a wide mist of saliva as he peels a lid off an acorn and sloppily devours the insides. When Maggie is ten feet up, Squirrel calls out to her. "Be quick." The air between them fragments his normally deep voice, causing it to ring like tinny chimes through Maggie's ears.

Halfway up the Tree, the trunk breaks into a spiraling geometry of branches Maggie knows as well as the path between the kitchen and her bedroom. When she can no longer see the ground beneath her, Maggie steps on a branch the width of an easy chair. Her weight causes the branch to sway beneath her, something it never used to do. Walking heel to toe, Maggie counts thirty-eight steps before she spots Luna curled like a croissant over the Eggs in Bird's grass and spider web nest.

Luna lifts her eyelids and squints, cocking her head towards Maggie. "Careful. You're shaking us."

Maggie slows her steps even more. "I'm sorry, sorry, sorry, sorry, sorry." Her voice trails off in infinite apologies.

"It's okay." Luna stretches her front paws two feet before her face and yawns so widely that Maggie can count all her pointed teeth and the taste buds on her laffy taffy tongue. As Luna raises her body into a crouching stance, she widens her eyes. Her green diamond irises glisten like snow globes beneath her thin, tan and gray patched body. The white of her coat looks more like real snow than the sheet on Maggie's yard today. Luna

gurgles a soft purr, which ripples through the branch, tickling Maggie's bare feet. Maggie wants to tell her to be careful too, but she knows better than to upset Luna. Squirrel does that enough for everyone. Besides, as she wakes up, Luna's face softens, revealing her happiness and her lethargy. "I'd come lick you, Maggie, but I have to stay here. You know, you know, we can't let Bird's Eggs get cold."

"I know. I know. I'll come to you." Maggie continues along the branch until she reaches Luna's stomach. Maggie hangs her feet and rests on the twigs at the edge of the Nest. "Tell me about your day." Maggie places her hands on Luna's three-foot long, arched back and begins stroking the soft, untangled, Calico fur.

"Just sitting today. Bird said she'd be back already. I'm getting nervous."

"You know, she always comes back. Don't worry. I think you should come look at the Wall with us. I've been thinking and I'm pretty sure the Eggs will be okay for an hour."

"Pretty sure. Pretty sure. I'll stay here for now and I'll come with you another day. The babies are singing again, you know, so I need to be here to rotate them." She yawns again and sticks out her tongue to lick a section of perfectly unmatted fur on her left paw. She stops when Squirrel approaches, bouncing across the branch. Luna cries at him to be careful with the Eggs.

"They're fine, Luna." He takes a seat beside Maggie and then turns his gaze back to the cat's wide eyes. "Want a nut?"

Luna opens her large mouth once more and Squirrel throws an acorn in, lid and all. Luna bites down and chews and chews then licks the fur around her mouth. She purrs in thanks.

Squirrel looks at Maggie. "We need to go now."

Luna closes her eyes and shakes. “You know I can’t leave the Eggs.”

Squirrel doesn’t bother looking back at her. “I know.”

Maggie runs her palm up to Luna’s ears and scratches them before saying. “I’ll come back tomorrow Luna, promise. Hopefully Bird will be back by then.”

Luna purrs throatily and rocks her head to say okay. Maggie rises then and also yawns as she stabilizes on the thick scratchy branch. Luna calls from behind her. “Wait, Maggie. What did you eat tonight?”

“Mashed potatoes, green beans, and steak.”

“And?”

“And cinnamon Bundt cake.”

Luna licks her lips and falls back into a purring silence. Luna says she misses her family in the real world, but Maggie’s pretty sure she just misses human food. Maggie lowers her hands to the Tree and attaches herself to the trunk to descend back to the ground. They spend the climb concentrating in silence. Maggie reaches the grass before Squirrel. He may walk faster, but she’s a better climber. She considers beginning the walk without him, so she isn’t forced to run to keep up, but as soon as she begins, she realizes she doesn’t know where the green tree is, so she waits watching him. He doesn’t take long and as soon as his feet reach the ground, he sets off, concentrating intently on the path before him. Maggie only has to jog for a short stint because this time he’s not certain enough to race.

“My mom and dad were fighting again at dinner.” Maggie didn’t mean to complain or bring up her parents tonight, but without thinking, the words fall out of her mouth.

“Why?” Maggie knows sympathy is implied in Squirrel’s bluntness. He’s just too distracted checking their surroundings for landmarks to include phrases like *Oh no. I’m sorry*.

“Dad came home late again and mom got upset.”

Squirrel mutters, “Jerk,” while pausing to check the orientation of the sun above them.

“Then mom gave us all the silent treatment and Dennis didn’t even notice. And then they yelled for two hours. They’re probably still yelling. Before I came, I could hear her crying.”

Squirrel stops walking and looks directly at Maggie. Frozen in place, Maggie swears she sees sadness filling the crevices of Squirrel’s eyes. He shakes his head then returns to walking. “I’m sorry.”

Maggie shrugs and wraps her arms around her chest.

“What was he doing?”

Maggie shrugs again as a wave of nausea passes through her stomach. She knows what. She won’t say though. She wishes she hadn’t started this conversation. Maybe now that the story is floating in the blue air, it will leave her thoughts. She tries to change the topic by asking Squirrel, “Where is Bird?”

“You know.”

Sort of. Maggie knows Bird is in the Forest, but she never really knows where her friends go when they disappear for days. “Two days is long, though.”

“Not here.” Squirrel counts the branches on the trees and looks up at the sun once more. He spins on his hind paw and changes their direction.

“Is she looking for him?”

“Yes.” He increases his speed again, and Maggie runs to catch up. He stops short a minute later. Maggie nearly trips over his foot. “We’re here.”

“Here?” Maggie looks up at the trees around them. Several have bare limbs, but otherwise, nothing looks special.

“Yes.” Squirrel walks to a tree whose branches are curved against the arc of Sky behind them. This is the place where the Sky meets the ground. Maggie reaches a hand to pull at the tree above her. “This one?” When Squirrel approaches the Sky, ignoring her question, Maggie knows it is the tree they’ve been searching for.

Before following Squirrel, Maggie circles the tree. The brown limbs above her appear like pencils with knobby attachments at their ends. Like every other tree lining the edges of this forest, most of the leaves are red and orange and yellow, luminescent hues of eternal autumn that contradict the warmth of the air and the bright glow of the noonday sun. On the most vertical limb, stretched out to nearly prick the tarp of sky right above, this tree has two baby green leaves. They look soft and malleable, untarnished. Maggie feels an impulse to climb the thin trunk and tear the leaves from the bark. But maybe these leaves are special. Maybe they wouldn’t regrow. Worse, maybe they would grow back red and crumbling. Squirrel would kill her if she broke the landmark.

Maggie looks away from the tree and walks towards her friend who has his puffed cheeks pressed firmly against the cerulean blue wall. She places her hand lightly on his back and also leans against the Wall. She expects to hear nothing. Or, if anything, she expects to hear the swoosh of quick air through wide empty space. While this is what she hears from her left ear, gusts of aqua air past her empty canals, from her right ear, she hears something

more. She hears loud footprints and a squeaky rumbling of two voices. Their words are too muddled to make sense of.

Maggie listens for a minute but pulls away when Squirrel does. “Is that what all the walls sound like?”

Squirrel shakes his head and puts it back against the cold blue. When he pulls back, he looks up and examines all the tarp around them. “Good job, Luna.”

“What now?”

“I don’t know. I have to talk to Bird. Luna found it but she’s not smart enough.” He rubs his paws against the Sky and Maggie follows with her hands. The Wall is warm and hard, but also glassy. It’s the only feature of the Forest that could actually be made of porcelain. “It’s still hard.”

“That’s why I didn’t find it before.” Squirrel rubs his belly. “I don’t know what to do. This is good.”

“This is good. This is good.” Maggie mimics Squirrel and also starts pacing back and forth in front of the Wall, stopping every so often to place her ear against the ceramic. But, while Squirrel seems to see a reason for doing this, Maggie quickly becomes bored and impatient as she realizes she has no clue what they’re searching for here. She tries to talk to Squirrel while he scavenges, asks him what he’s doing exactly. She doesn’t want to think about her own day anymore. He’s too distracted to respond with more than “Mmhms,” and half mumbled sentences. Maggie tugs a brown leaf from a nearby tree and decides that now would be a good time to learn Squirrel’s origami. He’s too impatient to teach her anyways. She curls up against the tree trunk and tries to crease the leaf they way he always does.

With Squirrel’s pattering in the background and the weight of the evening that



descends as she becomes frustrated with the folds she makes, Maggie's eyes quickly grow heavy. The leaf disappears when her fingers slow, and Maggie runs a strand of soft plastic grass through her fingers in its absence. Her eyes close.

In her shut-eyed-darkness, the smooth of the tree and the warmth of grass on skin fade away. Maggie is once more suspended in a purple swirling transitory stage. She silently counts to twenty and then there is a final flash of blackness. When Maggie reopens her eyes, there is hard wood above her, cool carpet beneath her.

She slides from under her bed onto the mattress above and wraps herself in the warmth of a knitted blanket. The kitchen has fallen silent beneath her. Maggie closes her eyes to sleep.

She awakes to her father shaking her shoulder, telling her it's morning once again. Time to wake and go to school. When he leaves her room, Maggie says her morning grace, thankful that her father awoke still living at home. She rises from the bed and pulls the Squirrel's leaf gift from her pocket, wanting to place the origami on her dresser. As soon as it touches the top of the dresser, the folds come apart. There is no tree in Maggie's room, only a shimmering autumn leaf.

4:

When Maggie descends the tar black steps of her school bus today, fear is more tangible than the cold of the air. She takes her normal steps, pauses her normal pauses, but finds no relief even as she lays her head in the damp snow banks and stares up into the blue afternoon sky. There's no story in the sun or the clouds today, only the memory of last night's fights and the subtle feeling that today's break won't heal as easily as those of the past. One thing is certain. Maggie does not want to go home and help her mother make dinner. She will not walk through her front door today until she absolutely has to.

Maggie knows the fights' rhythms by now. Instead of a kitchen filled with fabrics and her mother making cuts and stitches, she would find her mother sitting straight backed on a wooden chair staring silently at the orange polyester curtains. Just as Maggie's foot touched the stairs in an attempt to escape to her room, the boards would creak and her mother would rise, walking quickly to find Maggie. She would force ten minutes of precise motherly pleasantries and then, as though a timer clicked in the back of her mind, she would descend into the string of complaints and worries, telling Maggie all the suspected details about her father's affairs, descriptions Maggie's too young to know how to respond to. By the time her mother wiped the black mascara streams from the ridges of her eyes and walked to the kitchen to begin preparing dinner for "an ungrateful, ignorant child," Maggie's nails would be blood stained, gripping her upper arm. She would have no energy to accomplish any task except to slip into the bathroom, into the shower, and run burning steam and water over her pale skin, creating new maps of blotchy temporary burns.

So when Dennis and Nicolas exit the bus today, Maggie packs a snowball to throw at the boys and pretends she is as young and as happy as they are. When Dennis asks her to carry his books home, she offers instead to carry his things for him if he'll let her play with them at the park. The boys look at each other doubtfully, but eventually, Nicolas nods and Dennis hands Maggie his notebooks. She stacks them on top of her own and follows her brother down the road.

While they cross three blocks on white cement sidewalks cracked open by frozen ice, Dennis and Nicolas laugh as they speedily recount the jokes they each made in class today. Maggie struggles to keep up with them. Fortunately, they're not quite as fast as Squirrel, so she isn't reduced to panting.

"Leann wanted to solve it so she got to write on the board but then she had chalk all over her shirt and I told her she should have asked for pink."

Nicolas falls into hysterics, laughing at Dennis's jokes. Maggie tries to giggle with them and come up with a response so they don't regret letting her tag along, but for all she tries, she doesn't understand what's funny. "Was her shirt pink?"

Dennis shakes his head and looks at Nicolas. As soon as they lock eyes, they start laughing again. Maggie shrugs and falls a foot behind them, deciding not to bother making sense of her brother. Has he gotten dumber or has she gotten smarter? They used to look at each other like that and she always understood why they laughed together.

The field they play their winter games at is two blocks from Maggie's house and today, it is covered in snow and footprints from where other children have run and made snowmen with carrot noses and plaid fabric hats. There are only a handful of younger children already at the park, but they run to one side, closer to their sitting mothers, so

Maggie and the boys can play free and alone. Dennis suggests they play snowball freeze tag. Since he picked the game, he gets to be “it” first.

The rules are that whoever gets hit with a snowball by Dennis must freeze in place and stand very still until another person touches their arm and puts them back into play. If Dennis freezes everyone, the last person running gets to be “it” next.

When Lila and Eleanor used to play in the park with her after school, freeze games were Maggie’s favorite game. There is a row of white and tan split level houses behind the field and Maggie liked to go catatonic while facing the houses so she could watch lights flicker on as happy families came home. She made up stories for the silhouettes she watched through these windows. No one ever fought.

Today, though, Maggie’s head pulses too loudly with the sounds of her own parents’ fighting and the images of her father dancing beside other women. She has no desire to be left alone with her head.

She screams loudly with the younger boys and runs as fast as she can for an hour and a half. She gets to be “it” six times. Nicolas laughs at her and asks if she found funny cigarettes or something. On the rare occasions she plays with them, she never plays this way. Maggie doesn’t know what funny cigarettes are, but she laughs along so he’ll stop asking why her legs are moving so quickly.

Maggie is still “it” when Dennis looks up from his stilled stance, rubbing his shoulder where Maggie just hit him with a particularly icy ball, and suggests they start going home. Because all light has pretty well left the sky, Maggie reluctantly agrees. At the thought of what might be waiting for them at home, Maggie pauses and stares at the lit windows, willing her body to trade places with one of the children in those kitchens.

The blustering cold freezes snot across the ridge of her upper lip. Dennis hits her shoulder with a black gloved hand. He hands Maggie his notebooks and they cross the snowy grass to return to a cleared sidewalk path that leads them home. Dennis seems content to watch the matching houses pass by but with home approaching, Maggie's heartbeat races. She tries to find distraction from the fear pulsing in her chest and stomach.

"Mr. Phillips told us a joke today."

"What was it?" Dennis kicks a tree branch from the path. It cracks as it rises into the clear air and falls broken in the snow. No magic swirl repairs the break. Maggie talks faster.

"What's black and white and read all over?"

"A raccoon?"

*A raccoon?* "No. A newspaper." Maggie laughs, staring at her brother's blank face.

He just shrugs.

"I don't get it."

"Read. R-E-A-D." Dennis shrugs again, but doesn't laugh. Maggie's stomach knots.

"Do you know what news stands for?"

"What?"

"North, east, west, south."

"That doesn't make sense."

Yes it does. Sometimes Maggie wonders if there's something wrong with Dennis. She looks at him, concerned for a moment, but everything about his face seems normal. "Guess what?" Maggie refuses to give up on making them laugh together.

"What?"

"Lila started something new today."

“What?” This time, Dennis actually looks at Maggie when he responds. He loves Lila. She always asks him to join them when they play and she always laughs at his jokes.

“She’s going to have a different hairstyle every day. Today she had fourteen braids with blue rubber bands at the ends.”

“Are you going to copy her?”

“No. My hair’s too thin. But I’m going to tell mom. I think she could do it.”

They both pause for a minute then begin to laugh at the thought of their mother decorated in fourteen haphazard braids. Maggie’s stomach fills with relief as Dennis shakes his head. The ring of his chuckle echoes through her ears. “You have a better chance convincing dad than mom.”

As their laughter fades, Maggie and Dennis arrive at their house. They enter the tiled foyer of their house to the smell of melted cheddar and sweet oven baked bread. From the kitchen, they hear the sound of their father’s voice talking seriously and quietly.

Dennis slips off his winter wear and discards it at the door then runs to the kitchen. His white high topped cotton socks slip across the recently cleaned floor. Maggie watches him fall into a glide as he crosses the kitchen entry way and jumps into his father’s arms, asking, “What are you doing home so early?”

Well, at least he isn’t late. Maggie takes her time, crouching down to untie her slushy boots. She places them on the wooden shoe rack between her mother’s short heeled red loafers and her father’s recently polished leather shoes, then steps carefully across the smooth floor, tugging at her red wool sweater as sweat pools under her armpits in the heat of the spiced house. She takes a side step into the bathroom to pull leggings and socks off from under her dress and stares at the mirror preparing for the heat and her parents before she

finally opens the door and walks the rest of the path into the kitchen. She kisses both her parents' cheeks as she enters the kitchen and is just about to take a seat at the table when her mother runs her hands across her apron and says they need to have a family talk in the living room where their father says he needs to go change out of work clothes first.

Maggie looks to Dennis, whose smile drops into a concerned pout, a look he copied from their grandfather. It always seems so out of place on Dennis's chubby, freckled face. They nod while locking eyes and cross the linoleum floor into the plush carpet of the living room, where they take their seats and wait five minutes in anxious silence.

After the five minutes are up, Maggie's mother enters the room and sits down. Her feet rest flat on the ground and her bouncing knees ripple the fabric of velvety navy blue love seat. Maggie and Dennis are beside her, each gripping the fabric with their fists. Dennis's feet barely reach the ground. Soon after their mother has adjusted her skirt, their father crosses the ridge separating the kitchen from the beige walled living room, the only room Maggie's mother has yet to decorate in their three years here. She says she's simply devoid of inspiration. The time will come when she'll know what to do. They must be patient. Besides, the wooden archway and gray stoned fireplace provides enough dim coloring.

Maggie's father takes his seat across from her mother on a straight backed oak chair. An oval glass coffee table sits between the father and his family. It is covered in stacks of magazines, New Yorkers and Woman's Day, balls of yarn, Maggie's Spanish textbook and Dennis's toy cars. For several minutes, the parents just sit, perfectly in line, yet separated by this rubble, the mother on the edge of her seat, the father stiff backed with no smile on his face. Maggie sticks her right pinkie into her mouth and bites down. Her father inhales and coughs once then begins to speak.

“You know we both love you.” Maggie’s mother grips Maggie’s knee with her thin, cold and damp, unsteady fingers. “But you know we’ve been fighting lately and we both agree . . .” Maggie’s mother coughs and bites her lower lip. Maggie looks at the indents forming in the cracks of her mother’s pink glossed lips while she chew on her own frail fingernails and her father continues to speak, hardly acknowledging the interruption.

“We agreed it will be best for all of us if I move out for a little while.”

Dennis pulls his hand from under Maggie’s grip, crosses his bare arms across his heavy blue sweater. Maggie takes hold of her own sweater, letting the fabric burn her torn fingertips. She looks to her brother and shakes as he asks, “Where are you going, Daddy?”

Why does Dennis ask these questions? Why does it matter where their father goes? He won’t be home.

“Just down the road, still in Somerville. I found a place on the street with the Courthouse. Two blocks from the movie theatre. We’ll move in this week. How does that sound? You get two houses now, like rich kids do.”

Maggie pulls her hands from her mouth and shirt then places them on the tops of her thighs, barely touching her mother’s hand that is still gripped in place. “I’m staying here with mom.” Maggie avoids both her parent’s eyes as she states this, looking instead towards her brother whose eyes are concentrated on the gap between the floor and his feet.

Her father’s voice flickers between contrived stability and hurt sincerity. “Of course, during the week, but you guys will come visit on the weekend. You’ll both have your own room there too, and you can decorate them however you like. And Maggie, we will build you a tree house.”



His voice recovers its innocence in the last part of his plea. Maggie starts to feel sorry and smiles towards her father, though the redness of her eyes betrays little excitement. “Of course, Dad.”

Maggie averts her gaze, looking towards an oblong new greenish bruise on her kneecap. She looks at her mother’s red long and perfect half moon trimmed fingernails, now shifting to graze the mark. Maggie returns her own short unpainted nails to the safety of her teeth, giving her attention to the harsh grinding of tooth on nail, the ease with which she can break thick decoration from her own skin. There’s a swell of gratification as she rips the nail apart. It’s almost as empowering as tearing apart a ceramic leaf, but not quite.

Her mother speaks now for the first time since the start of the conversation. She splits her gaze between her children as she talks. “We’re going to have one last family dinner, okay? So go wash your hands and meet us at the table.”

Maggie rocks back slowly, letting the forward swing bring her onto her feet. She twirls her toes in the soft of the carpet and reaches her hand out towards her brother, pulling him to his feet as well. They walk, silently, side by side to the bathroom where Dennis leans against an oak door. Maggie runs hot water over her fingers, scrubbing suds lightly over new wounds and the fatty bulges of her palms.

“At least he won’t be far.” Dennis looks like he might be reaching his hand out to Maggie, but instead he shoves it into his pockets.

“At least. At least.” Maggie shakes her head as she stares at her reddened dark eyes in the mirror. She backs away to let Dennis wash his own sweat and grass stained fingers. They exit the bathroom and walk slowly towards the kitchen. Dennis forces a smile. Maggie holds a stoic stare to prevent tears.

Maggie's father is already seated, but her mother stands over the steaming stove ladling orange milky soup from a large metal pot into wide black bowls. Maggie inhales the air of cheddar and cooked onions. Her stomach twists and she has to lean forward after taking her seat, inhaling slowly to relax the knife like jolts rushing through her organs. The thought of adding rich bubbling milk to the torrents of her insides forces gallons of acid to rise into Maggie's throat.

Dennis asks his father where he will be staying tonight and offers to share his own twin bed. Maggie rolls her eyes and crosses her fingers beneath the table hoping her father doesn't give a stupid answer to a childish question.

"Thanks, buddy, but I'm going to pack up after dinner and drive to a friend's house."

Maggie's mother coughs and shakes the fourth and final bowl in transit from the stove top to the table, causing streams of soup to form on the edges of the bowl, streams that run over her smooth pale fingers. She bites her lip, bites back a word Maggie knows she normally mutters when she stubs her toe or pricks her finger. Instead of cursing though, she places the fourth bowl in front of Maggie and tells their father one last time, "Just say grace." She grabs the rounded top of her chair, yanks it from under the table, then pulls her red skirt at its sides and flattens the top before taking her seat. She reaches one hand to each of her children and closes her eyes.

Maggie close her eyes too, but there is no heaven in this darkness, only the shaking voice behind her father's every day prayer, the trembling of her mother's grip and pulsating nausea spreading across her belly. As her father says, "Amen," and her mother drops her palm, Maggie pushes back her chair, looks at her father and says, "I feel sick, but I love you. Have fun at your friend's house," then walks through the foyer and runs up the steps, two at a

time, into her bedroom. She slams the door and avoids looking into the mirror paneled wall as she dives onto the carpet, rolls onto her back and pulls herself under the bed.

*February 1976*1:

Maggie and her mother spend Valentine's Day with their best friends. Eleanor Cook's father has a meeting late at work, and since Maggie's father works in the same group at Merck, Maggie's mother uses the meeting as an excuse for why she's alone on the holiday. Lila Johnson's father doesn't have work plans, but her mother believes Valentines Day is a superficial holiday designed to make love more important than independent endeavors, so she boycotts the holiday by banning her husband, D, from her presence until ten o'clock. Before he leaves the house, he tells them that all his friends have dinner plans, so he gets the night to himself, which is perfect because he needs to collect "things" for his most recent art installation in his friend's basement gallery. Lila tells the girls not to ask him what "things" refers to. She made the mistake once and she still can't get the image out of her head.

Maggie's mother, Mrs. Cook and Lila's mother, who refuses to be called Mrs. and tells Eleanor and Maggie to call her Ariel, are seated in the kitchen scanning newspapers and sipping herbal tea. Unlike Maggie and Eleanor's houses, the Johnson's kitchen has no store bought furniture, so everything feels like it's from another country. The decorations barely match.

The kitchen is Maggie's favorite room. Ariel's brother carved the table from a tree struck by lightning. The top surface shows the line burnt when electricity surged through. The table is only three feet tall with short, padded stools set around it. On the bright blue walls, macramé covered planters and hand-woven tapestries provide rainbow colors that

compliment the mint colored stove and pale yellow refrigerator. Maggie's mother and Mrs. Cook always look out of place seated at this table in their billowing skirts and done up hair, but Ariel fits her kitchen well. Her loose silk dress, with a white rope belt, and free falling, dirty blonde hair, match perfectly with the wall hangings. Her natural skin, hooked nose and chapped lips, look prettier beneath the illumination from three white paper Chinese lanterns. The same lighting only seems to emphasize particles of powder and blush on Maggie's mother and Mrs. Cook's cheeks. Mrs. Cook and Maggie's mother are also too tall for the seats. At five-foot two, Ariel's legs fit comfortably between the table and the linoleum floor.

"Why do you need a job?" Mrs. Cook asks. Eleanor's mother once appeared in a list of Maggie's mother's complaints about her father, but Maggie doesn't believe this one. Mrs. Cook always bakes the best desserts for bake sales and she is always present at school events. Maggie refuses to believe she could make the marks that occasionally appear on her father's neck.

"I already told you. We want to start going on vacations more often, so I'm trying to save extra money. Do you think it is bad if I get a job?"

"You don't need a reason to get a job just because you're a woman." Ariel looks at Maggie's mother, not Mrs. Cook, when she speaks. "So what are you looking for?"

"Anything."

"Childcare?" Mrs. Cook scans the paper carefully, circling the best jobs under the *For Women* listings.

"She takes care of her own children. She should do something she likes."

"I like children."

“What else is she qualified for?” Mrs. Cook asks. Maggie sometimes wonders how Ariel and Mrs. Cook have stayed friends for so long. She knows they met at preschool, but other than Eleanor and Lila, they don’t seem to have anything in common. They bicker more than Squirrel and Luna. Listening to them twists Maggie’s stomach, making it difficult for her to finish the last of her pink frosted cupcake.

“Just because she’s a woman doesn’t mean she has to be a teacher. I’m a lawyer.”

“We know that. And I didn’t say she had to be a teacher. I said childcare. She’s not qualified to be a teacher.”

Maggie watches her mother’s face fall while they argue. Maggie offered to give her mother a reference because she’s the one to balance the budget and pay the family’s bills, not her father. Maggie’s mother said *Thank you* and *That’s sweet*, but even if she’s good at math, she doesn’t have work experience, so she’s not going to get the jobs she wants. Now Mrs. Cook is confirming her mother’s insecurities. Maggie wishes she would be quiet. “I don’t have experience, that’s true.”

“Men are pigs and that’s why women don’t get jobs. It has nothing to do with work experience. Unless you want to be some man’s wife at work, you are not going to get any job.”

Lila leans into Maggie and whispers, “That means being a secretary. I’m bored of listening to this.” She has paints waiting for them in the basement and wants Eleanor and Maggie to make art with her. They can all paint on three canvases and then each can take one home and hang it in their bedrooms. It was D.’s idea.

Eleanor and Maggie live in matching houses in the same new development, but Lila’s house is in a different neighborhood. Her house comforts Maggie because of its uniqueness.

Only in Lila's house does she feel like she's really escaping her own. When they leave their mothers in the kitchen, Lila leads them past the foyer, down a half flight of stairs and into the basement level that has the family's art room plus Lila's older sister's room. Lila's older sister, Minnie, is a nurse at Somerville hospital. She and her mother always argue about her job and her boyfriends and the fact that she wants to share the name of a Disney mouse instead of going by her full name, Minerva, goddess of wisdom, magic, and crafts. For silence's sake, Maggie's relieved that she's out tonight, though her absence did induce Ariel's fourth rant about Valentine's Day. "It isn't right for a young girl to think she can't be alone on this day just because the other girls want chocolates and flowers. We're teaching them to think of fashion and romance instead of empowering them."

The craft space is a white burlap carpeted room with four easels and bright abstract paintings lining the walls. It smells like incense and outdoors. D. has already spread a white tarp across the floor. Three rectangular canvases lie blank over the tarp, surrounded by red cups filled with paints. Lila walks to the black cupboard against the wall next to Minnie's shut door with pink lights illuminating the cracks. Lila slips a record onto the turntable and the room fills with King Harvest, blocking out the last trace notes of their mothers' voices overhead. Maggie doesn't care about most of this album, but she loves *Dancing in the Moonlight*. This is the song they always put on to dance to together because they all heard it on the radio once. That same day, they promised to be best friends forever.

Lila picks up three brushes and walks into the bathroom to fill a mason jar with cleaning water. Back in the room, Lila settles on the floor and preps three paintbrushes. "I don't talk while painting. Dad says it interferes with my creativity." She dips her brush in a cup and withdraws once black bristles now dripping with crystal blue acrylic. On the canvas

closest to her, Lila presses down, causing the hairs to spiral into a circular array of stems. She lifts, leaving thick and sparse textured paint as a firework, a dead dandelion blowing on the canvas. She pauses before dropping the brush in water and looks back at her friends. “You can talk. I just don’t. Mom says we each have our own creative process.”

Maggie shrugs. Lila gives them the same explanation every time they paint together. She and Eleanor usually don’t talk either, using the music as their inspiration. Eleanor takes the thinner remaining brush and sets out drawing sweetheart candies on the corner of a canvas. Maggie stares at the paints and her brush and feels her arms lock, frozen.

She doesn’t know what to draw. There’s too many secrets boiling through her limbs and if she paints now, surely the images will betray everything. That’s what D. always says. Art reveals what’s inside. Well, Maggie doesn’t want her friends to see what’s inside. She looks at Eleanor’s work and sees her friend’s growing obsession with adolescent boys. In Lila’s marks there’s her mother’s carefree spirit. What would Maggie’s marks show?

She closes her eyes and listens to the melody chiming above a baseline. Perhaps she could channel Robinson’s emotions instead of her own. Or maybe, there is a part of herself she is not afraid to place on the paper. Behind shut eyes, there’s Eleanor and Lila and her climbing trees, feet dangling above the green trampled grass below them. She places her brush into a cup and lifts it high above the canvas, let’s the paint drip in whatever form it wants to fall.



2:

Tonight, Maggie wears an old sweater as she enters the Forest. After feeding on only two sweet nuts in a soft bed of grass, Maggie stands up and follows Squirrel to the Tree. The divorce tremors in her stomach lasted longer than she anticipated. They're only now beginning to subside.

The heat of the sun makes the fuzzy inside of her sweater just perceptively uncomfortable. Sweat drops from her armpits down the side of her ribs and she wraps her hand around her skin to wipe it away. A thick odor of her growing body fills the threads of wool and cotton.

Bird remained absent for fifteen days. Because Luna tends to be slightly more comforting than Squirrel, Maggie chose to spend her time huddled near the Nest during the past week, relating tastes of sweets and plots of sitcoms. Squirrel continued his explorations without them.

Last night, though, he finally snapped. If he was the only one who cared enough about getting free to do anything, he was going to leave them all here when he did finally break free. Maggie bit her tongue when he yelled even though she wanted to ask him what was so good about the real world that he was rushing to reenter it. All she said was that he was unsympathetic. He told her moping never accomplishes anything. They didn't speak for the rest of the night after that, but when Maggie appeared today, they both tried to pretend nothing had happened.

"I searched the Wall today. There are only two green leaves."

"We already knew that." Maggie pants as she jogs, but her short exclamations don't slow Squirrel down tonight.

"Nothing else is out of place. But the leaves mean something."

"I know." She stops and holds her stomach in her arms. He pauses for a moment but glares at her as he does. She begins walking again, but now she refuses to run.

“I traced the whole Wall. There's nowhere else with sound. We have to go back to the green leaves.”

Maggie asks, “Is the other side of the Wall in my world?” Not that she cares if Squirrel disappears, but she wants Luna and Bird to stay around.

“I don't know.” He grabs a leaf from the tree above. Instead of folding it into a gift, he lets it drop and dissolve. “I searched all week while you were moping. There's no hidden spot. No portal there. Just sound. I've been listening all week while you sat with Luna.” Maggie wishes he would stop talking. He's making her nauseous again. She also wishes he would slow down. He does neither. “The sounds are too distorted. I don't know where they are coming from.”

Maggie is certain it is her backyard. It has to be. She doesn't respond though. If Squirrel's going to make her run, he can't make her talk. He continues ranting, but Maggie stops listening. She tries to remember facts about science and walls and trees and fantasies. She doesn't know too much about any of these things and trying to pull something from the emptiness of her brain gives her a headache. Mr. Phillips says she's smart. Math doesn't help her, though.

“We need to go together. So go get them, but be fast.” *Them?*

With the Tree in sight, Maggie sprints past Squirrel and grabs hold of the tree bark and climbs up its rough papery surface. A foot below the Nest, she hears Bird's melodic hum descending with warm spirals of air. Her music wraps velvet around Maggie's skin. Maggie's stomach pains finally subside and she gets a burst of strength. She climbs faster to receive her embrace sooner.

Maggie shouts hello as soon as she reaches the spot where Bird's branch first diverges from the tree trunk. Luna yells, “Careful!”, but trots across the thick branch, smiles and places her double paws deliberately so that her arched body undulates as she proceeds. Her two-foot long tail glimmers as it sways above the bright air and finally wraps around Maggie's feet.

As soon as Luna brushes past to wait for Squirrel, Maggie runs towards the Nest. Her heavy steps shake the branch and Luna screeches, "Be careful. Be careful. The Eggs!" Bird laughs while Maggie dives into her chest, beneath the right wing. Bird's body is shaped like a hung light bulb, a round head with a bright beak screwed onto the bulb's top. Her indigo feathers all fall in place regardless of how many times Maggie rubs her hair against them. While from a distance her feathers look like thin shards of dropped painted plates, up close they are consolingly real. Her embrace is instantly warm, cushiony and tickling. The faded blue feathers of her stomach brush Maggie's arm, leaving a soft tingle. Even when they separate. Her pudgy stomach surrounds Maggie's face. With that and the darkness that descends as Bird lowers her wing, Maggie enters a blackness as safe as nightly grace.

Minutes pass quickly under the mother bird's embrace, and then Maggie steps back. She tugs a red wool turtleneck over her head to reveal a pleated plaid jumper below. She stretches out her arms to give Bird the gift. "I brought you something."

"Thoughtful, baby, but I don't think it'll fit." Bird's voice carries the same light warmth of her plumage. The notes of a music box turned into words.

"This isn't for you. It's for the Eggs." Maggie's own voice weighs heavy and ill rhymed alongside Bird's sentences still lingering in the air. "Wool is the warmest fabric, see? If we wrap it around the Eggs, they'll stay warm and be safe for at least an hour. That way, we can all go to the Wall together." She pauses and glares into the blue air below them. "Squirrel says we have too."

Luna doesn't seem to like this idea. "Something horrible could happen other than the Eggs getting cold. Gusts of wind or an absentminded vermin might knock the Eggs off." A terrible end to years of careful parenting.

"It won't happen. I promise they'll be safe."

Bird pats Maggie's shoulder with her cardboard wing. "There's no wind here, Luna."

"Yes. And Squirrel will be with us," Maggie says.

With a few more coos and Bird's reassurances, Luna finally agrees to follow them.  
"But only for an hour."

"Deal."

Bird steps from the Nest slowly, with a single flap of her wings and six hops on her black wrinkled twig feet. Maggie uses her own limbs' dexterity to secure the fabric of her sweater over the four bleached Eggs. She tucks the sleeves around their sides for extra warmth. Luna shoves her pink nose around the edges of the Nest for a final inspection. Bird hums a lullaby to say goodnight.

With that, they all begin to descend the Tree. Squirrel waits one foot below them, perched on an outstretched branch, examining the Sky. He greets them with, "You took too long. Walk quickly." Bird flaps to the ground now, while the other three crawl and grip and slither. Bird beats them, like always. Once reunited on the grass, Squirrel leads the way and Maggie runs to keep up with him. Bird flies in circles over head and fills their walk with questions.

"Luna told me what happened. I'm sorry, baby. Have you seen your dad's new house?"

"Not yet." Maggie does her best not to let her voice break, but she won't embellish. Luna wraps her tail around Maggie's palm and licks her. Kisses of sympathy.

"Is Lucy okay?"

"She's fine." For most of the week, Maggie exhaled her tears in the Forest. She wants to forget about her parents now.

"How's your brother taking it?"

"He is fine. Bird where were you?"

"Oh. I was just flying." She flaps quicker, not wanting to answer, only wanting to ask.  
"Have you been sleeping okay?"

"Yes. I've been here."

“I'm sorry I wasn't here.” Bird grows silent and hums a sequence of eight repeating notes. She looks straight above and the shape of her flying circles waiver.

“It's okay, Bird. I'm okay. Don't worry.” Maggie falls into her own silence, not wanting to make Bird feel bad for her absence like Squirrel always does to her.

Squirrel breaks the calm once they've reached the spot he seems to now know by heart. To Maggie, it still looks the same as everywhere else. “We're here.” His voice raises two decibels. “Bird, tap at the Sky. I want to see if there's a break. I can't reach.” Bird flaps her arms, causing a wind that cools Maggie's sweating arms. Soon the rhythm of pecking decorates the air. “Luna, check the ground.” She begins pulling up mounds of dirt and grass with her nose and paws. As soon as her paw pulls a lump from the Earth, the hole fills in and the grass reclaims its place. They're all used to these temporary obstacles. She continues digging, inch by inch, anyways.

Maggie waits for her directions. When Squirrel doesn't offer any, she asks, “What should I do?”

“Just stay with me.” He thinks she's useless. Maggie walks to the Wall, three feet away from Squirrel, and hits it with her fist. She's going to find the Exit before he does. She'll take Luna and Bird there with her. She'll leave him behind and then they'll see who mopes. Unfortunately, Luna beats her to the discovery.

“Come here! Come here! Look.”

Bird flaps her wings and quickly falls beside the cat. Squirrel and Maggie run to her side. In the rush, she forgets to stay at least a foot away from Squirrel. In front of Luna, Maggie can only see a pile of dirt and green tufts of torn grass. She wants to ask what is exciting about this. Then she looks again. Four long minutes pass with four sets of eyes stationed on the hole. Not a clump of dirt moves. Not a single blade regenerates. The hole lasts.

No one's gaze moves from the ground until Squirrel's directions break the trance. “Keep digging, Luna.” Luna shoves her paw back into the dirt and they watch her dig and

dig. This will not be an easy trench to carve. Luna's limbs are awkward and any motion too far to one side of the hole results in dirt and grass regeneration. She keeps digging anyways. As Maggie stands watching her friends, she feels her limbs screaming to sit, her stomach nagging her to go lie down. She doesn't want to show Squirrel her weakness, though. Fortunately, Luna's paranoia kicks in to relieve her.

After a fresh burst of dirt undoes ten minutes of her work, Luna stops digging and glares at Squirrel as though the permanence here is his fault. "We need to go back to the Eggs. They may be hurt or cold and we need to sing to them so they can sleep."

Squirrel pounds his foot but doesn't break eye contact with Luna. "Keep digging." His voice sounds like a child, pleading and desperate. Maggie feels her anger fading, but she offers no consolation.

Bird flaps her arms to subdue the fight. "I'll go back and check. It's okay, Luna. I'm not helping much anyways." Maggie wishes Bird could come home with her and quiet her parents this way.

"Okay, but please rotate them, because it's been three hours and you know they need to be looked after." Luna has no way of knowing time here, but Maggie knows better than to point that out. She focuses on her aching limbs instead. Without looking at Squirrel, Maggie tells Bird she needs to go back to the Nest too because she needs to take back the sweater in case her mom asks about it tomorrow or in case it gets lost in the air of the Forest. Once she brought Luna a ball of yarn and within two days, it disappeared.

Squirrel doesn't seem to care if Maggie leaves tonight. He just continues watching Luna dig and instructs her with helpful phrases like, *faster*, *careful*, *not there*, and *damn it*.

Tired and, for reasons she can't explain, suddenly sorry for Squirrel, Maggie walks mostly in silence while Bird flies overhead. Her singing soundtrack fills the glittering space between her and Maggie, between ground and sky.

When they reach the Nest, after a slow dreamy climb, Maggie tugs the sweater from the Eggs. She pulls it back over her head. Even though the air is warm, her body is chilled

and beginning to ache with cries for sleep. Bird taps each Egg to reassure herself they are well and warm. Satisfied, she settles herself on top of them.

Maggie curls up on the scraggly rim of the Nest, resting her head on Bird's pillow stomach. The warmth of sleep runs through her cheeks as silence surrounds the pair in enchanting spirals. Maggie hears Bird whisper, "I thought you had really come back this time," and then blackness descends. Twenty seconds of purple stretch like the final hours of the last day of school. Back in her room, Maggie barely has the energy to crawl onto her mattress but out of the necessity of secrecy, she forces herself up onto the top covers and finally releases her mind to the nest of dreams.

**3:**

The school cafeteria still smells like chocolate hearts and preteen love. Ginny Thomas and Trevor Black sit side by side one table away from Maggie, Eleanor and Lila, laughing awkwardly between bites of Wonder bread. Maggie hears Ariel's advice against love in the back of her mind as she rejects two boys' offers to sit with them today. Even though they left paper hearts in her bag during the classroom celebration, she doesn't owe them anything. Maggie's mother taught her about cordiality. She gave an equal sized card to everyone so she refuses to take anyone's heart as anything special. All she wants today is to sit across from Lila and Eleanor as she works through a ham and cheese, a bag of cut carrots and one remaining pink cupcake, which she eventually gives to Eleanor when she is full.

Eleanor has thick curly hair and pretty brown eyes and Maggie thinks she's as beautiful as Mrs. Cook, despite the fact that she is two inches shorter than Maggie and five pounds heavier, weight she carries mostly in her cheeks and stomach. Eleanor is the only girl she knows who can eat as quickly as Maggie. When their parents used to take them out to eat, waiters would compliment in amazement the amount such small girls could inhale. Lately, though, Maggie has realized that the speed they eat might be overindulgent, so Maggie has been trying to match Lila's speed rather than Eleanor's, a practice that makes her feel full faster.

Today Lila's dark brown hair is twisted into six buns, secured by small colorful plastic rubber bands. Maggie can see her scalp through the breaks where her hair is twisted too tightly. Maggie always wonders how Lila maintains her skeleton features despite eating more carelessly than either Eleanor or Maggie.

Last night, Maggie returned home to find her father packing up the last of his boxes. He moved into his new house ten days ago. Maggie watched him pack a box in the kitchen, though she's pretty sure he has no claim on the kitchen items. Since her mother wasn't there to see, Maggie didn't say a thing.



While Eleanor and Lila recount yesterday's art projects, Maggie thinks of her father and sits silently, afraid that if she opens her mouth, all her secrets will fall out without warning. She focuses on eating instead. Watching the pointy eared boy at the table who's staring at her while she eats only makes her feel nauseous and discontent.

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This anxiety builds as she enters her classroom. As the other red faced children, sweaty from running around at recess, abandon jackets in their lockers and take their seats at oak desks, Maggie's teacher, Mr. Phillips, calls her to the front of the room.

Mr. Phillips used to be a teacher in the elementary school, but with recent budget cuts, he was demoted to substitute teacher position this year. When Maggie's teacher, Mrs. Turner, fell ill in November, he took over her class. Mr. Phillips is sweet and patient, over all not a terrible teacher, but there are some points of his youth Maggie can't overlook. For example, today. He tells her, "The office told me your father called and left a message for you to wait for him after school."

Maggie nods, "Okay," but her head is screaming now. Her father never picks her up. What happened to her mother? It is nice that Mr. Phillips smells like cigarette smoke and Maggie's grandfather's cologne, while Mrs. Turner only smelled of cat pee and ginger snaps. It's nice that Mr. Phillips has pale green eyes, the color of Luna's, and a rough beard to mask his baby face. It's nice that he isn't too bored with sixth grade vocabulary to take the time to explain when his students don't understand the initial definitions, but there's something he's missing. Mrs. Turner would have asked the office the appropriate questions to subdue Maggie's nerves about the change to her schedule. "Don't get on the bus, okay?" is all Mr. Phillips says.

So Maggie is left to wondering if her mother got in an accident or if her grandfather had another episode, or if Dennis needs to be rushed somewhere. She spends the rest of the afternoon panting and biting her nails down to the skin. She signs out twice for the bathroom, which along with her jitters, prompts Mr. Phillips to ask if the cafeteria ladies have started

brewing coffee. The afternoon passes too slowly. Maggie feels her tears welling and her chest aching.

When Mr. Phillips calls the end of the day, Maggie's the first student out the door. She runs straight through the hallway and nearly trips on an unsuspecting boy with his legs stretched out, seated leaning against a row of gray lockers. He yells, "Slow down pretty. Talk to me," but Maggie's outside before she comprehends his words. By then, it's too late to roll her eyes.

Fortunately, her father's always early. She spots his black Camaro in the first row of the parking lot as soon as she exits the green painted double doors. She slips on the ice while opening the passenger's side door and collapses on the well worn fabric seat, out of breath with cold induced watery eyes. "What's wrong?" Her father wraps his free arm around Maggie's shoulder and tries to give her a hug hello.

"Why?" She bites back tears and drools while catching her breath. She looks wide eyed at her father without bothering to wipe away the dribble. "Why did you come? Where's mom? How's grandpa?"

Her father withdraws his arm, looking confused.

Maggie sucks the spit from her lips. "Why didn't you tell me why you had to pick me up?"

"Hey, hey stop. We're fine. Your mom just got called in for an interview, so I thought we could make dinner and I could show you my new place. It's not completely furnished, but I think we could still make dinner. It's okay, Maggie. Calm down."

Her father tugs at his seatbelt, trying to keep his daughter steady. Maggie exhales when she hears the good news. She smiles for a second and wipes the liquid from her face, but then bursts into tears and collapses on her father's shoulder. Her father hugs her close and she inhales the starch from his baby blue work shirt. The smell only makes her tears worse. She blows snot on his wide navy tie.

He rocks her back and forth, patting her head softly without saying a word. Gradually, Maggie sits up and wipes her eyes with the sleeve of her pink wool sweater. Her father leans back in the seat and rests his hand over the gear switch. "You okay now?" Maggie nods, slowly. "Hey. You forgot your jacket. Want me to go get it for you?" Maggie shakes her head, quickly. "I'll get it. It's cold outside."

"Are we playing outside?"

"No, probably not. Unless you want to do a camp fire." Maggie stares silently at her father, who shifts in his seat and laughs at himself. As she continues to stare, his laugh falters, slows and then flicks off. "Just a joke, Maggie. Okay, you can get it tomorrow. But don't blame me when your mom asks where it went." Maggie nods once more and curls into a ball, resting her head on the fog frozen windows.

Maggie doesn't know why she's crying and wishes with all her strength she could switch the tears off, but every time she looks at her father, the anxiety lingering from the afternoon shuttles heat to her cheeks and clogs her throat. Maggie shuts her eyes to calm herself down.

Maggie's father found her mom a job as a secretary, but she refused to even apply. Her mother's indignation may have had more to do with her opposition to the neighborhood friends knowing she had to get a job, and her conviction that friends shouldn't talk about her private business. Maggie still hopes her mother will get a more appropriate job than a secretary. Her handwriting's illegible and she would be a terrible message taker. Plus, she is good at sewing and bill keeping.

When her father stops the car in front of Dennis's elementary school, Maggie opens her eyes, no longer feeling anxious or teary eyed. That sensation has been replaced with a disoriented dizziness, like the feeling of waking up in the Forest. Dennis walks to them from his own green double doors with a group of friends, not in a panic. He steps into the car easily, slowly, and Maggie doesn't understand how he always stays so calm. Maybe her father remembered to tell his teacher no one was in danger of dying.

When Dennis is buckled in the backseat and her father reverses the car. Pulling out of the lot, he tells Dennis about their evening plans, word for word as he told them to Maggie. She remembers now to ask what interview her mother has. “A secretary job. In Clinton”

“Where's that?”

“Twenty minutes away. Farm country.”

Maggie leans against the door, feeling the tears well up once more. She's not ready for her mom to get remarried and move away, even if it is just during the day.

4:

Maggie's father's house is painted yellow and blue, a large old house with rotting stairwells but a white front porch and a huge backyard. The house isn't anywhere near the court house, like he said it would be, but he explains to them that this one seemed better. It has a wonderful yard and it used to belong to his friend's parents, who recently moved into a nursing home. He's living here cheaper than he could have lived directly in town. "Splitting a salary isn't so easy." It is a little bit further from their mother's house, but he thinks it's worth it to have such a beautiful yard and to be only a few blocks from a pond and two streams. Maggie doesn't tell him, but she thinks the white chipped railings and the large old windows are beautiful. It looks to her like a countryside fairytale house.

Inside the under heated house, Maggie realizes her father forgot to put out a table. There's no couch and no television, either, only a bed in his room, which is not really a bed but a mattress on the floor and a few serving dishes in the kitchen cabinets, which are not his own. His clothes are spread across the living room floor, and as Maggie walks through the front door, she immediately knows why he hasn't invited her and Dennis over yet. The air smells like stale cigarettes and even without furniture to get dusty, he's managed to let the place descend into the dirtiest depths of adult mess.

Dennis says he loves the place because he gets to keep his shoes on, can play ball inside, and can sit wherever he likes. "Isn't it great?" He laughs as he plops on gray sticky tiles in the center of a spacious kitchen where oak window frames and white cabinets fade to gray beneath falling sunlight and a golden chandelier hangs in the center, over top of nothing but tiled, empty space. Maggie shrugs and leans against a bare periwinkle wall, the only clean corner of the house, not wanting to say anything that might hurt her father's feelings.

Her father unpacks a brown bag of groceries he bought before he picked them up. "I found this recipe book for kids, and your mom said you were learning to cook Maggie. I thought we could make lasagna."

Maggie shrugs again and walks over to his counter, tentatively flipping through the bright red Betty Crocker book her father bought her. She should say thank you, she knows, but instead she goes to the index and looks up lasagna. Her father peers over her shoulder, checking the recipe with the items in his bag. "I know I can't cook like your mom, but did you know I've never lived alone before?"

Dennis chimes in, "Neither have I." Maggie smiles but doesn't say a word. She takes the tin of tomatoes from his hand and searches the drawers for a can opener. She opens all his cabinets but only finds two glass plates, a yellow plastic bowl, and an olive colored martini glass. "Where are the cooking supplies?"

"Over here." Her father walks to a box already opened sitting next to the refrigerator.

Maggie stares at the familiar bowls and glass pans he pulls out of the cardboard while searching for the can opener. "Did you take ours?" How did her mother not notice that.

"Your mom has three of everything. Trust me, she won't notice."

Maggie wants to object, but her mother hasn't seemed to be missing any of her supplies this morning, so maybe he's not wrong.

After layering ricotta, fried ground beef, noodles and peeled canned tomatoes, minus the spices the book suggests but Maggie's father doesn't own, they slide the pan into the oven and Maggie checks the time on the clock above the stove. She calculates the time they must take their dinner out.

"Have I ever told you about the first time I saw your mother?" Because there are no chairs to wait in, her father sits beside Dennis in the center of the tiled floor and beckons to Maggie to join them. She reluctantly sits down. "My dad moved into Glen Rock when I was sixteen, you know that right? Before then, I was a city boy. He wanted to own a store, so we came to New Jersey."

Maggie knows this story already. She ignores him and stares at the water stains running across his ceiling and the walls. She's never before seen a house that looks so much like it wants to split in two.

“Your mother came into my dad’s store every week for cigarettes and soda. I swear, she lived so far away she could have only been coming because she wanted to see me. She says she just couldn’t buy cigarettes in her own town, people talk too much. She said I looked like I could keep a secret. I knew she meant I was handsome.” Dennis and her father smile at one another, sharing the joy that can only ever spread between their matching eyes. Maggie’s mother would be horrified if she knew her father had told them she used to buy cigarettes. Maggie asks her dad if her mother used to smoke Camels too.

“She was a Marlboro red lady, but you don’t know what that means do you, honey?” Maggie doesn’t know the difference. She just knows that Camels smell like her father. She can’t quite picture her mother bathed in cigarette smoke, young and flirting with her father. The faint image she can conjure makes her smile.

“On our first date, I took her out to dinner, and all she would eat was a salad. Can you imagine? I saved all week for that date, and all she wanted was a salad. She said later it was nerves. We had a nice date anyways. I teased her for not eating, which she said didn’t help her nerves. Your mother was so pretty.” *Was*. He pauses and Maggie tries to turn her attention back to the water stains, but when he speaks again she can’t help but listen to him. “It’s funny how much we all change, how much this job and this town have changed the way we all act. I remember days at your grandparents’ place when she didn’t have to clean all day and she was always happy to see me come home. Every night I came home felt like our first date. This new house changed us.” He shakes his head and looks towards Maggie, waiting for some response.

Maggie stands up, though Dennis still stares intently at his father. This is his first piece of too-much-information, but Maggie has enough stored already. She doesn’t want to take this slice. Maggie remembers her grandparents’ house. She remembers the change when they moved. She remembers the way her mother became short with her father. She remembers how she stopped laughing at him. She heard the fights. She saw them both cry. She doesn’t need all of this re-explained to her. She doesn’t need a new point of view.

Maggie looks at the clock and tells her father dinner should be done now. He pauses for a moment, as though trying to calculate the real amount of time that has passed, as though he wants to say something more, but eventually he picks himself off the floor and walks to the oven. The steam that cascades from the open door stains his face red. As he stares at a pan full of unmelted cheese, he whispers to his daughter. "I still love your mom, Maggie. I just wasn't happy and neither was she. We all need to know how to live alone. You'll learn that one day."



5:

One week later, Maggie's mother calls Maggie and Dennis to the table on Saturday morning. "Your dad has finally put furniture in his house. He wants you to spend some afternoons and weekends there, so today you need to back up your clothes. His house is going to be your home, too." Dennis smiles and makes a joke about having a second playhouse. Maggie doesn't see this as a good thing. It means her father's not coming home.

So this afternoon, Maggie places each sweater she owns across the top of her bed. She orders the five garments, first by color then by texture: cable knit, crocheted or store bought wool. After five arrangements, she finally settles on the one that must be packed into a cardboard box in the center of her room.

Splitting apart her closet makes Maggie feel sick, but if this is what she has to do, at the least she's not going to send the green store bought turtleneck into her father's house alone. She also packs a rainbow crocheted cardigan. Her father's sister gave it to her. Maybe it belongs with her dad. Maggie takes all her skirts off their hangers in the closet and arranges them on the floor by pattern: plaid, solid, pleated or straight and long. She hasn't worn some of these items in months. Looking at them now, she decides to try them on and remember what wearing them feels like before she packs them away or hangs them back up.

Four of the skirts won't zip over the bulges of skin and fat accumulating on her waist and the base of her back. Looking in the mirror, Maggie sucks in her stomach and tries to zipper a pleated purple skirt her mother made her for Christmas. With a deep breath and a quick tug of her arm, the zipper eventually reaches the top of its track. She exhales and the zipper falls an inch. Every inhalation sends a surge of pain through her lungs. Maggie has to yank the zipper three times before it reopens. She tugs off the skirt, folds it and places it in a box for her father's house. Now she just has to pick out a buddy to travel with it.

When Maggie hears the engine of her father's car pulling into the driveway, she looks out the window to see her mother greet him without leaving the safety of the front step. She

made him give her back his key last night when Maggie accidentally told her about the stolen pans. Today she's going to let him in to pick up his kids, but then she's going to walk to have tea with Ariel. She told Maggie that looking at her dad is too painful right now. All she can see are the lips of other women on his cheeks.

Two seconds later, Maggie hears her mother ascend the creaking stairs with her father. She crouches in a pile of clothes so that when they walk into her room to ask how her packing is going, they won't realize she was watching them. Once in her room, Maggie's mother complains that she should have packed last night, but her father's eyes soften. He tells her to take as long as she wants. "Do you need help?"

Maggie shakes her head and returns her concentration to the piles of clothes now lining her room. Should she take a stuffed animal or doll with her too? She doesn't want to look at her parents together. She should probably bring a book. Her father leaves. Her mother picks up a crocheted sweater from the top of the box and rubs the fabric between her thumb and palm. "I liked this one." She drops it back into the box and walks towards the dresser.

Looking at herself in the mirror, Maggie's mother picks up the red sparkling leaf lying on the dresser and twirls it in her hand. She tilts her head and looks from the leaf to Maggie to the base of the bed then back to the leaf. She pauses, mouth half open, as though on the verge of speaking. Then her mouth closes. She looks up to the mirror, holds the leaf beside her cheek, smiles for a split instant and then puts the leaf back down. "Be quick please, baby. I'll see you tonight." She exits the room without looking at Maggie.

After sorting through her pants and skirts, only half of which will zipper over her stomach, Maggie comes to one conclusion. It really doesn't matter what outfits she gives to her father. She throws random handfuls of the dresses into the box and yells to her father that she's done and ready to go. Her dad comes back into her room and lifts the box to carry it out to his car. Maggie walks to the kitchen to say goodbye to her mother one more time.

Her mother sits, tapping her foot beneath the kitchen table and twirling her ponytail. Loose curls fall beside her face, highlighting thin cheeks and the dark circles growing around

her eyes. Maggie pulls a chair out from under the table and crosses her legs. She stretches her back straight mimicking her mother's posture. She folds her arms on top of the table. "I think we should start eating healthier, mom."

Her mother's mouth dangles open for a moment, and she looks towards the stove and the fridge. "You want to go on your first diet, baby?"

Maggie lifts her hands from the table and places them on the bulges of her stomach that have made her pants unwearable. "Yes."

"My stomach's getting big, too. Isn't it?" Her mother looks down at her own torso, but all Maggie can see there are ribs and flatness beneath the cotton of her tight dress, the indent right above where her skirt poofs into decorative ripples of red fabric. Maggie shakes her head at her mother's mistake.

"We'll go on a diet. I'll pick out some recipes tonight, okay? It'll give me something to do."

6:

Throughout the past two week, Maggie has become accustomed to spending weeknight dinners without her father. Dennis says grace instead of her father and on Friday nights and Saturday afternoons, they go to their father's house and eat with him in town, without their mother. This Friday night, her father asked if he could invite his friend along but Maggie said she wanted to talk to him alone. She had nothing to say, there's just only so much new she wants to face right now. This afternoon, her father took them to their old town to climb trees and hike. He thought this would be a fun outing. It made her hurt to be there without her mother or her grandparents.

Standing before the Sky Wall in the Forest tonight, Maggie lifts a rock the size of a bowling ball and swings her arms between her legs, releasing it into the air. The gray shining stone arcs and meets the blue walls with a chiming bang then falls back on the grass, without a roll or bounce. Maggie lifts a lighter stone from beside her foot and gets a running start before she throws it like a baseball bat. She's never had a very good arm. The rock pings and falls on top of the other stone, making a slate snowman.

Maggie attempts five more sizes of rocks and retries throwing the original stones with more force. The wall pings and chimes, but not a single crack appears. Squirrel, Bird and Luna wait a meter behind Maggie, biting back suggestions that proved useless in the first hour. With the excitement of new plans, Maggie and Squirrel gave up on their bickering today, rejoined by the familiarity of purpose.

Maggie brought another sweater this evening, so Bird could join them for the breaking party. While they rolled rocks the mile to the Wall, the friends had planned how they would get the Eggs through the doorway once they broke it open. Each Egg would be individually wrapped in the sweater. Bird would carry the packages to the grass where Luna would wait to watch the delivered babies while Maggie watched the ones remaining up in the

Nest. Squirrel would supervise. Once on the ground, each friend would be responsible for protecting one Egg as they carried them towards the gateway.

Maggie's arm begins to tingle and weaken now as she realizes the Egg plan will not be implemented tonight. After a final coo of encouragement from Bird, "You can do it, baby," Maggie collapses beside the Wall. "I'm sorry, I just can't throw anymore."

Luna crawls close and places her paw on Maggie's lap. They rest their heads against the Sky. While Luna's hole has still not filled up, she has dug it as deep as she could get it and it still has not led anywhere useful. Bird flutters beside Maggie and pats her shoulder with the whisk of a feather. Her yellow eyes glisten with sympathy. She looks up towards the peak of the Sky. Their hope fades daily. The sun never does.

Squirrel attempts to lift one of the lighter rocks and fling it himself, but with his disproportionately short arms, the rock barely travels a foot in the aqua abyss before falling silently back to the ground. He steps slowly to the right side of Bird and leans his back against the archway. "What now?" Maggie shrugs and stares at the pile of rocks, willing herself to grow stronger. After several minutes of pause, the rocks dissolve into glimmering sparkles of dust, which rise into swirls of air and float back towards their original positions.

Squirrel tells the group they need to come up with a new idea. No sense reminiscing on failure. Tomorrow, Maggie will bring a long shovel along and Bird will test the skyline again. They will come up with something. Maggie leans on Luna's soft back and tries to close her eyes. She wants to go to sleep and return back home. Feeling like a failure, she squeezes her eyelids, willing herself either strength or invisibility.

Bird flinches beside Maggie and stands up suddenly, placing her head against the Wall. Squirrel and Luna stand up too, causing Maggie's head to fall into a pile of plastic grass. "What is it?"

Bird hushes them and lifts a bright blue wing to block the noise from one ear. Maggie pulls herself onto her knees and brushes dirt off her cotton nightdress. She crawls to the Wall and places her own ear flat on the shimmering ceramic.

For a moment, she hears only gusts of wind swirling from both sides of her head. She cups the left ear to block out sounds of the Forest. Quickly, she realizes what caught Bird's attention. Behind the wall, a series of eight melodic notes ring, periodically repeating trills and double steps. The sounds grow close then back away like the rushing of a train that continually approaches and leaves. Bird hums her own sequence frantically towards the Wall. On the other side, the flapping of feathers in the background ceases. The sound cascades, finally stopping in a single spot.

The bird on the other side sings his song once and pauses. Bird fills in his silence with her own cadence. Then, she waits. He responds. Back and forth. Back and forth and back.

Bird raises her arms wide and stretches her whole body flat against the Wall. Her stomach ripples stretch from front to back. She smiles as she turns to look directly at Luna. "He's here."

*April 1976*

1:

For Maggie's birthday, her father unveils the promise kept in his backyard. At the top of a Black Maple tree, there now sits a square house with diamond windows and pink and purple curtains peaking through. This morning, he set a small wooden table with six pink frosted cupcakes in the center of the tree house floor. Now, after a lunch downtown, he, Dennis, and Maggie are climbing up a bristled rope ladder to the grand opening of her new hideaway. Maggie thinks she could grasp the hooks of bark and raise herself up to the new house without a ladder, but because she knows her dad would be too heavy to follow, she decides to test the second route tomorrow.

The store bought planks still smell of fresh wood. Her father says he thought it seemed unsafe to light a candle in the new room, but he and Dennis still sing Maggie a simple verse to celebrate her birthday. Maggie closes her eyes, willing her mother to appear holding her father's hand, and then puffs her cheeks and blows on an imaginary flame. When she opens her eyes, the candle is still lit. Its transparent flame still heats the air above the pink cakes. She closes her eyes once more and wishes for Squirrel to be back home when she enters the Forest tonight. As she pushes all the breath from her lungs through pursed lips, she opens her eyes to see the flame flicker and go out.

Her father and Dennis clap their hands and smile as though her wish has come true. They each unwrap a single store bought cupcake and crumbs fall onto their hands. Cake bits stick to their skins' surfaces, glued with egg and butter. Maggie's stomach is still heavy with the weight of lunch's Carbonara sauce and linguine. She knows her mother told her only to eat when she's actually hungry, but the smell of vanilla and sugar opens a latch. Her mouth moistens with saliva. She devours the cupcake in six large bites then sticks out her tongue to lick the thick frosting and pebbles of cake from her fingers. The frosting carries the scent of

sawdust and fresh wood in its taste, but even that is delicious laced between vanilla and buttery sweetness.

When Maggie looks up, her mouth rich with icing, her father and Dennis are admiring their handiwork, each only half done with their cakes. Maggie considers lifting her hands to reach for seconds, but watching them eat, she suddenly feels glutinous and too aware of her stomach. She tells herself not to pick up another cake. If she just focuses on the crumbs still lingering between her teeth and cheeks, she can preserve the taste without adding any extra fat.

Half concentrating on the sweetness still in her mouth, Maggie lifts herself from a cross legged seat on the floor and dusts flakes of wood and bits of crumbling autumn leaves from the front of her jeans. She runs her fingers across the square walls, which are unpainted and dressed with the crevices and stains of imperfection. Every other nail is bent slightly at the tip, leaving a centimeter of air between the silver head and dull beige base. On every wall, there is a glassless window made of a thick diamond wood.

Gusts of spring air break through the open windows to cool Maggie's pink cheeks and damp fingers. She shoves her hands into the sleeves of the pink cable knit wool sweater her grandmother sent her from Toronto, then turns to tell Dennis what a good job he has done. Her dad smiles at the two of them and then at his work. "I'm going to get real windows in. Then, or when it's warm again, we'll have a sleep over up here. Just the three of us." *Just three.*

Maggie bites her pinkie and says, "Maybe."

Dennis kicks Maggie's right Adidas with his left Ked and turns to look at their father. "I like that. We can tell ghost stories."

Maggie hates ghost stories but she doesn't dislike her father's house. She likes that it reminds her of their old farmhouse, especially now that there are couches and a teakettle inside. She has her own room here, which she painted a marble of forest green and sky blue. Her dad's friend, Jenny, used masking tape and thick brown paint to add a large tree beside



the main double window. She doesn't dislike the room. It's just the bed. Her father let Maggie pick it out and it is a double and springy and has cotton soft sheets with woodland creatures decorating their surfaces. It is a good bed and the first night it arrived, Maggie was happy while she and Dennis jumped back and forth across it. She was comfortable while laughing on her side reading by the gold lamp her father had set up on a silver nightstand. But when she crawled onto the floor and slid across the short scruffy white carpet beneath the frame, nothing happened. She lay under the bed for almost an hour, knocking at the wooden board and pressing her chest off the floor towards the mattress. Her stomach twisted and her tongue ached for the sweet woody centers of acorns. Nothing changed.

When Maggie pulled herself out from under the bed, the bruises on her legs were lined with bright pink patches of rug burn. Her hair was messy from the static of the carpet. She knocked on her father's door across the hall. He walked her back to her room and tucked her into bed, folding the sheets tight against her chest. With a kiss on her cheek, her father told her it would take some time to get used to the new place. She should try to fall asleep, though, so her body could adapt.

Maggie waited until she heard the creaks of her father's steps silence and his door click shut. She rose from her bed, leaving the sheets flat and tightly folded, then tiptoed through the pitch black hallway, running her hand against the smooth wall until she found her brother's door. If her father was useless, maybe Dennis could be comforting. She slowly turned the knob and, by the illumination of his nightlight, found her way through a mass of unpacked clothes covering his floor. She crawled on top of the covers and curled up beside him. Dennis asked what she was doing. In her silence, he turned his back and curled into sleeping position. Maggie wouldn't let him sleep. She stared at his ceiling and cried. She cried as Dennis kicked her and asked her to stop. She cried until he finally stood up, leaving Maggie alone on his new twin bed, and walked to his father's room.

The new hallway is small, and Maggie could hear their voices from her huddled mass on Dennis's bed.

“Maggie’s in my bed. She won’t stop crying.” Eventually her father called their mother. Fortunately, Maggie couldn’t hear that conversation from his kitchen.

Maggie felt like a child crying, but that didn’t matter. She didn’t want to be there. She cried until she heard her mother’s voice outside the window. She cried as she ran down the stairs. She cried until she was safe in her mother’s newly purchased used Chevy. As her face finally dried, she watched her mother outside. She examined her old yellow terry cloth robe, her thick hair perched on top of her head in pink plastic rollers. Her mother told Maggie’s father not to take it too hard. It just takes kids a while to get used to change, but as she slid into the driver’s seat, a small smile crept across her face, only slightly breaking through the mask of sympathy. Maggie cried again as she watched her mother smiling at her tears.

Back at home, Maggie didn’t run to her room. She didn’t fall on the floor or slide underneath her bed. She crawled into her parents’ bed and waited for her mother to come in and wrap her arms around her shoulders.

Maggie visits her dad all day for the weekends, but even though Dennis always spends the nights, Maggie returns home to sleep. Her father keeps asking her to stay and Maggie doesn’t know how to explain all the reasons she can’t stay there, all the people his house is missing. Instead of explaining, she always shrugs her shoulders and tells him, “Maybe.”

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Her brother’s birthday gift to Maggie is a backgammon board he placed under the small wooden table. They open the black leather and red striped box and huddle around the small table. Maggie’s way of saying thanks is to let her brother win the first game. She sets herself up early for loss then spends the entirety of the game trapped in the back of the board while he builds up an impenetrable wall that shifts closer and closer until he takes all his pieces off their felt spaces.

Maggie wants to tell her father that this is the way life goes. You make one careless move and then you’re attacked, hit over and over until you’re kicked off the board and

everyone keeps moving, winning without you. The worst part is the moment when you know there's no hope of winning and you want to give up, but that's poor sportsmanship. So you wait and wait, keep letting your opponent attack you until they win, leaving your pieces completely alone on the board, feeling wasted, feeling useless. Maggie feels like she's choking watching herself lose, even though she knows she did it on purpose. When her brother finally removes all his pieces, cheers for his win and wipes the board clean, her father takes Maggie's spot. As he lifts the oval cups to roll a die, Maggie exhales. She abandons the table to lean against the wooden wall, switching her attention from the game to instead absorb the intricacies of her new abode.

Her grandfather used to tell Maggie and Dennis stories at bedtime, until she turned ten years old. That was the year he decided to move in with her aunt and uncle, who had moved to Canada six years earlier. He once told her that the history of every tree's inhabitants is ingrained in the wood when men cut it down. Her grandmother always scoffed but Maggie liked the implications. When she was seven, every night in bed she would hold her picture books close to her face and try to determine if the words printed on the pages told the stories of the lives of the animals living in the branches before the trunk was pulped and drained into white sheets. By the time she turned ten and her grandparents were planning to move their magic laced tales up north, Maggie had begun to believe the stories might just be fairy tales. Then for her tenth birthday, her grandfather gave Maggie her mother's old bed. It took two months before she crawled beneath it, searching for a shirt that had gone missing. The shirt never reappeared, but her grandfather's stories regained their meaning.

Maggie rests her palm flat on the house's sawdust floors and tries to imagine what animals once lived in this wood. A small fur covered creature runs past the open window, but she cannot decipher its face in the brief passing. Maggie sits up, stabilizing herself on her bottom, which is beginning to ache with the pressure of bone on hard ground. She shifts her legs to relieve an ounce of the weight, then turns back to the game and the table. "I love this place, Dad. Thank you."

Her father gives Dennis a knowing look and raises his thick wild eyebrows before returning to roll the dice. With a six and a one, he removes the final two ceramic pieces from his side of the board. He wins without any gloating, and Dennis doesn't exhale or pant. Maybe losing doesn't hurt him as much. He is oblivious. Maybe he doesn't see the implications of the game. Dennis and Maggie switch sides of the table and when Maggie takes her new seat, she sits on her knees and does her best not to make any careless moves.

They play until the sun begins to set and their mother's car pulls into the driveway. After descending on a swaying ladder, Dennis and Maggie kiss their father's cheek goodbye. Maggie holds onto her father's slightly fatty shoulders for an extra minute, until he initiates a release. He smells like saw dust and vanilla. She wants to tell him that her refusal to stay overnight isn't about him. It's about her Forest and her friends. She wants to tell him many secrets, but instead she tells him the gift was wonderful, then slides into her mother's baby blue car to drive ten minutes away to homework and dinner and a second celebration with a second parent.

After dinner, Maggie's mother brings out a fruit tart she made for a healthy birthday treat. The thought of eating it still makes Maggie's stomach ache with a new awareness of all the sugar and fat already floating through her blood, but because Maggie's mother looks so hurt when Maggie initially rejects her slice, she forces herself to eat it. Well most of it. All of the fruit, but not all of the crust. As her mother cleans three plates, Maggie thanks her for her gifts, a homemade dress and a set of Easter cookie cutters. Then she runs up to her room for a third birthday celebration.

2:

In preparation for the Forest, Maggie ties string around her back and loops it over three cardboard boxes she took from the trash after school yesterday. The white threads stretch red indents across her shoulders. She forces a roll of duct tape into her pocket beside the scissors she stole from her mother's sewing basket. She has to be sure these objects are attached well to her body because if she loses the scissors her mother will be upset. Without her father around, and now that he is supporting two households, her mother says they have very little money to spend on frivolities and accidents.

She lies carefully on her back on top of the cardboard boxes and slides under the bed. The wooden edge scrapes across her chest, but she slips through by holding in her lungs. If only she hadn't had two celebrations, she would still fit easily. Safe beneath the bed, Maggie exhales and arches her back, which takes effort with the thin boards beneath her. A moment of black, swirls of purple, and once in the other world, she stretches her arm across yarns of grass and opens her mouth expectantly. Warmth covers her tongue. She leaves her mouth drooping. Squirrel is nowhere to be seen.

He disappeared more than a week ago, but Maggie thought he would remember her birthday. A ringing resounds in his ears every day she arrives. She thought tonight he might respond to the buzz. For all her hope, he's nowhere to be found.

She waits several seconds more for him to appear, but when he does not, she accepts his absence and the ceramic glow of the air, then rises up without him and follows the path she knows even without him in lead. She thanks God for the insight to strap these boxes to her back. Carrying them like a camel is so much easier than holding them with her hands. Squirrel should be here to help her.

Squirrel usually disappears when a plan fails, though normally only for two or three days. It's his form of a temper tantrum. Tonight marks eight days he's been gone and Maggie is starting to transition from missing him to being mad at him for not realizing how much she

misses him when he's gone. He never tells them what he does while he's away, but each time he returns ravenous and sullen, a low mood which usually lasts about two days until one of them finds a new plan for escape. He takes control and starts acting like himself again. Eight days is too long for this, though. He should have come back for her birthday. Maybe he got out and didn't remember to tell the others where the Exit is. Well, at least without him shoving acorns in her mouth, she'll have more room for cake this weekend.

Climbing the Tree takes twice as long with the added weight of cake and supplies restricting Maggie's motion, and her heart pulses with every misstep the contraption causes. She's sweating, her hair's a mess, and she's used up all her patience by the time she reaches the Nest. Bird and Luna greet her with large hugs and a round of *Happy Birthday*. There are no candles, no cakes here, so Luna asks her to describe the cupcakes at her father's house. Maggie does so in such detail that they're all licking lips and salivating by the end. Maggie's stomach churns, and she has a sudden overwhelming desire for a sweet, oaky acorn. She presses her hand on her stomach and wills it to quiet.

When she stops purring, Luna arches her back around Maggie's leg and asks what the boxes are for. "Squirrel's still not here, you know."

"So?" Maggie avoids looking at her friends and grabs a leaf from above her head, tears it in half and drops into the depths of sky. She wants it to float all the way to the bottom, but it evaporates into dust only one foot below. "Why does Squirrel always have to be in charge? I've got my own idea."

Bird raises her eyes and Luna backs away from Maggie. "What?"

Maggie describes how she was watching her mom bake the Bundt cake for her school bake sale last week. Even though cake should always close up, fold into a solid flat piece, if you get the right pan, you can make a hole in the circle and rearrange the shape completely. Maybe the ground here is like that too. Even though the dirt naturally wants to fall into a flat cake, what if they were to build a new pan? They could construct a barrier to prevent a dug hole from instantaneously closing up. The hole near the Sky Wall clearly leads somewhere.

All they have to do is make a cardboard tunnel wide enough for Luna to fit through, and if it works, they can widen the hole and then follow her down.

Bird shrugs her wings and stares at the Nest. “That’s nice. That’s nice. It really is a good idea, baby. But *my* babies have been singing so loudly today. Loudest song in months. I want to rotate them. I’ll stay here with them. You understand.”

“I brought my sweater, see? You can leave them for just an hour.” Maggie tries to yank the sleeves of her cardigan off without having to undue the strings of her backpack.

“Maybe. Maybe.” She taps one of the Eggs with her wing. “But it’s not just warmth. I need to be here with them tonight. You understand. We’ll all go out again together when Squirrel comes back with a fresh idea. Just stay here with us tonight, okay?”

Maggie drops her eyes to the sky beneath them and whispers, “It’s my birthday.” The Eggs will be fine regardless of whether or not anyone watches them. Nothing changes here. Nothing breaks. Once one Egg slipped out of the Nest. The next day, it reappeared. Regardless of Bird and Luna’s fears, the Eggs are always fine. Maggie keeps her mouth shut, though, holding in what she knows they should not speak of. No one wants to be useless. “Well, fine. I’m still going. You stay here with your Eggs. Luna, will you help?”

“Hmm. Hmm. Maggie, I don’t want to leave Bird alone. What if she needs help rotating them?”

Maggie glares at the cat but then twists her shoulders, turns and walks away from them without a word. Bird calls her name from behind, and Maggie half expects the pair to give in and join her. When they don’t, she continues climbing down the tree alone, her sweater half on, half bunched and falling off beneath the strings. She shrugs her shoulders to adjust the ties.

During her walk, Maggie pulls eighteen red leaflets from the trees and tears them all to dust. She gets lost once but only once and only momentarily. At the green leafed tree, she takes scissors from her pocket and cuts the strings off her back. She sits cross legged next to the hole and begins cutting her cardboard boxes into foot tall strips. None of the edges come

out completely straight, but they will be taped and overlapped, so it doesn't matter. She refuses to think of either Bird or Luna. She's just as smart as Squirrel. They'll see. She's always here. Squirrel is not.

Maggie tapes the ends of one of the strips and creates a circle of cardboard the size of Luna's head. She claws at the soft dirt around Luna's preexisting hole. Once she gets a foot down in the soil, she places the cardboard circle around the edges to prevent it from filling in. She tapes together a second strand and begins digging again. One foot lower, the second circle goes into place. She steps her left leg into the hole, trying to see what waits at the end of the tunnel. Maybe she could test the invention herself, without Luna's help. She'll escape and all the animals will be trapped without her. The fit is tight with her new butt and stomach protruding, but eventually Maggie crams her fat thighs inside. Her head's certainly smaller than her legs. She won't need the bird or the cat's help.

As she tugs one leg out of the hole and is about to step out completely, the first cardboard piece suddenly dissolves and dirt refills the hole with an implied ding, which makes Maggie's heart scream. The air above the dirt puffs glitter dust in Maggie's face. She coughs and glares at the hole. She tries to pull the dirt from around one stuck limb. Her other leg is now splayed, awkwardly bent in the grass. Sitting in a seven shape, attached to the ground, her stomach and back shoot pains every time she bends to tug the dirt from around her leg. She gives up and just lies on her back. If she can only fall asleep, she'll go back home and she can just forget about the hole and the cardboard and the animals who don't believe in her, don't care about her. And who cares if the scissors don't get back home? Her father can just buy her mother a new pair. It really would be the least he could do.

Lying on her back, her sweater now burning in the heat of the sun, Maggie begins sweating. She sprays spit in the air above her face, hoping it acts like a summer sprinkler to calm the heat. She doesn't want to take the sweater off here. She likes this one. She doesn't want to leave it behind.

She tugs her eyelids shut and wills herself to think of anything except the heat



spreading through her chest or the cramps growing in her legs. She thinks of birthday cake, her mother's and her father's. Her stomach growls. No, anything except hunger. She thinks of her mother and father screaming and flashbacks of her last birthday party. Nope, that's no good either. Think of the tree house. Yes, the tree house. There's a baby raccoon there, she's certain of it. Next week she'll go back. She'll sleep there. Bird and Luna have their own Eggs and Squirrel is the only inventor they need. Why not find a friend who actually needs her help?

Maggie squeezes her eyes and shoves her left index finger into her mouth, sucking not biting this time. She says a prayer and begs God to soothe her into sleep. The dirt around her right foot closes in. Her foot was pointed when the hole fell in and now it's cramping up. She needs sleep to come. If God won't help she'll summon sleep herself.

After counting slowly to one hundred and still finding no rest, she opens her eyes and sees a laughing face crouched over her foot, digging the dirt quickly and methodically away from her leg. When he reaches her kneecap, Maggie twists her body and finds enough space to finally pull her foot free. It tingles and stings. The muscles and nerves are all fast asleep. She spreads it out and winces while it wakes.

"Thanks."

Squirrel squats beside Maggie. He reaches out his hand. In it lies an origami leaf, folded into a cupcake. "Happy, happy birthday."

Maggie falls into his shoulder. "I thought you forgot."

"Of course not. It just took me a while to get back tonight."

"Where were you?"

Squirrel doesn't answer but instead looks up towards the arc of the sky. After a silent pause, he glances back down to the cardboard strips, the scissors and the tape. "What were you doing?"

"I thought I could build a tunnel."

“Oh.” He stands up and walks towards the pieces. “It’s a good idea. We tried it before. Not this hole, of course. But another. A long time ago,” He bends down and picks up all the cardboard, folds it as though he’s testing its strength.

“Really? Why didn’t Luna and Bird just say so?”

“I don’t know.” He takes the scissors, one handle in each palm, and pretends to cut through the thick air.

“Wait. The last time you did it, where’d you get the cardboard from?”

“I don’t remember.” He looks back towards the tunnel and up towards the sky. Then, he crouches over the hole again. Luna’s tunnel is still there, now just a thin hole in the dirt. “Maybe we could try something stronger.”

“Like what?”

“Metal. Or Rubber. Cardboard dissolves in water.”

Maggie looks up towards the sky and then towards the green leaf above her. She thinks of a metal ring her mother has for making certain pies. It has the edges of a cake pan but no bottom. “I’ve got it. I’ll bring something tomorrow night.”

Squirrel leans against the Wall and Maggie stands up, shaking her foot until the motion wears out the tingling sleepiness of her limb. She crawls beside her friend and leans on his shoulder. He asks her questions about her birthday, and she describes all the food and the tree house and her new dress. She tells him about her panic in the backgammon game and the real reasons she can’t sleep at her father’s house. “How do I tell him without betraying our secrets?”

“You can sleep there. You don’t have to be here every night. I’m not.”

“I *want* to be here.” She glares at him, but he looks away. “Anyway, I can only fall asleep here since my parents, you know.”

Squirrel looks towards the Sky, avoiding her eyes. Finally, he looks back to her but changes the conversation. After three prodding questions, she answers and they talk about

fruitcakes and school and Lila's newest hair dos. It's the best birthday celebration Maggie's had all day, with or without Bird and Luna.

As their words drain into nonsense, as Maggie's weekly stories run out, they close their eyes and lean close together, pressing their heads against one another. Maggie falls into sleep, comforted by the warmth of Squirrel's ceramic fur.

3:

Maggie wakes an hour early for school the next morning with a pulsating stomachache. Two desserts, even without any of Squirrel's nuts, seem to have clogged every pore of her insides. She runs to the bathroom and tries to throw up. It doesn't alleviate any of the pain, so instead she cups her hands underneath a stream of water in the sink and sips one large pool of lukewarm water.

Back in her room, Maggie undresses before the wall of mirrors. She sees clumps of fat lining her bloated stomach. On her breasts, her nipples have widened, from pink chocolate chips to Hershey kisses. Not only the nipples are changing, there's also a new mass of skin and fat appearing to make her breasts rise from their once flat position on her chest.

Maggie picks out her tightest polyester dress and slips it over her head, hoping the weight of the fabric will suppress the masses of fat. She takes a bristled round plastic brush from on top of her wooden dresses and counts fifteen strokes until her sparse hair is untangled and sits smoothly on her fabric coated shoulders. After her dressing is complete, she descends the stairs, intending to sit with her mother until it's time to run outside and catch the bus.

In the kitchen, her mother sits at the kitchen table with a ceramic mug of steaming tea and a cigarette burning. Maggie and Dennis know their mother picked up smoking again because the kitchen always smells of ash after they return from their father's house. Still, she doesn't smoke in front of them, and it seems to be an unspoken promise that no one is to speak about the habit.

So when Maggie steps across the doorframe and sees her mother exhale circles of white fumes, tapping black powder into a silver tray on the kitchen table, her eyes attached to the window looking glassy and thoughtless, yet sad in their absence of almost anything, Maggie silently backs away and tip toes up the stairs. She lies across her bed and waits twenty minutes until she hears her mother's footsteps walk through the hallway and the

tapping on Dennis's door. Only then does Maggie stand up and leave her room. She says good morning to her mother as though she has just finished dressing. Her mother smiles and hugs Maggie close. Her dress and hair are heavily coated by thick flowery perfume, and she exhales in a minty breath, "Why, you're up early."

Maggie says nothing but smiles and walks to the kitchen to make her own cup of tea and curl into a ball on the couch to make the stomach pains subside. The kitchen now smells of the vanilla candle burning on the table.

4:

In the cafeteria at school, Maggie plays with the tin foil around her sandwich while her two best friends carelessly dig into packets of pudding and baggies of Oreos. With the scent of her mother's Marlboros in her nose and the weight of last night's desserts still clogging her tracks, even the peanut butter on mushed wonder bread feels like too much to swallow.

The cafeteria smells like cleaning agent and burned foods. Combined with the sounds of laughing children and the two hundred watching eyes of teachers and thinner students, Maggie hates the room today. In her self conscious agitation, Maggie hardly speaks while her friends chew. She focuses on counting the corn rolls lining Lila's scalp. Twenty-eight braids that must have taken forever. Maggie likes them but feels only a momentary wave of relief looking into her friend's pale scalp. When Mr. Phillips blows a whistle and calls "Time for recess," Maggie exhales and throws away the remaining third of sandwich she couldn't stomach then gladly runs outside with the mass of laughing sixth graders.

Maggie and Eleanor zipper up similar Easter hue spring fleeces. Maggie's is yellow, Eleanor's blue. They're always dressed the same, though coincidentally because even though their mothers say they're best friends, they rarely go shopping together. Lila doesn't have an Easter fleece to zip up. Instead, she slips a bright green and purple sweater that her mother crocheted over denim blue bellbottoms. Maggie imagines it must be Lila's clothes, as well as her hair, that always make her stand out in their group. Today as they enter the windy, damp, outside air and trek their normal path towards the monkey bars at the end of the playground furthest from the cafeteria door, two seventh graders with wind strewn, waist long hair and similar floral, wavy skirts, stop Lila to ask if she wants to come have a secret meeting with them under the oak tree.

Maggie assumes Lila will want to go, so she looks to her feet to avoid displaying any disappointment. Maybe Eleanor wasn't quite as discrete though, because after a short pause,

Lila's loud piercing voice replies, "No thanks. I already have plans today. Maybe tomorrow?" The older girls don't invite Eleanor or Maggie along. They just run away, towards the tree where four other longhaired seventh graders are already sitting cross legged.

Ariel recently joined a female rights group that meets weekly over potluck dinner. Lila tells her friends that this is how she knows the older girls. So, it's not just her sweater that makes her interesting. It's her mother. Maggie and Eleanor must look too young to join the club. Or maybe their mothers just aren't interesting enough.

Anyways, it doesn't matter. Maggie thinks they all looked boring and the same. At least Lila's hair and Adidas shoes make her stand out, and that she always chooses Maggie and Eleanor over the other hippie children. So looking like an ad for Kool cigarettes isn't the most important thing. Regardless of the girls, Maggie's happy just to be walking with her two best friends and running towards the monkey bars. Only a few months ago, they would have been running into the trees to climb, but Eleanor recently told them that only the little kids play in the trees. If they were going to fit in, they had to stay on the playground. The monkey bars were Eleanor's and Maggie's compromise. They still can climb, but they won't look like little children now.

Maggie has always liked climbing. While it's true that hours on the Tree perfected her technique, the love sprung up long before she ever entered the Forest. When Maggie's family still lived in Ringwood, off of Skyline Drive in the yellow farmhouse that her mother's parents owned, they would spend every weekend hiking in a forest next to the highway that was magically secluded from sound. In the afternoons, after school, while Grandma sewed and made dinner, Grandpa read, and Maggie's father was still at work, her mother would take Dennis and Maggie into the woods behind their house and the three of them would climb the trunks together, playing games like the bird and robbers or 3D tag. Maggie became immune to scrapes. Her brother became afraid of heights. Maybe that's why Grandpa gave her the bed and not him.

Resting on top of the monkey bars, Maggie discusses plans for her upcoming birthday party with her best friends. “Make sure you get there early, okay? My mom invited a lot of people I'm not friends with and I want to be sure you guys are there so I don't have to talk to them by myself.” Maggie likes her mother's friends, but she gets nervous talking alone to people she doesn't know well. Lila is way better at it, and it comforts Maggie to have her there when she has to socialize.

When Eleanor asks Maggie what she did for her birthday, Maggie opens her mouth, ready to describe her father's tree house. She catches herself before any words come out. Neither of her friends knows about the divorce because Maggie's mother says it's improper and family secrets should not be shared with others. Others would judge. Though the end of their dinner parties and the fact that Maggie's father's car has been absent from their driveway for about six months now likely means that all the neighbors, including Eleanor's family, have caught on by now, it is easier not to talk about their fighting or the new house. So Maggie doesn't talk to her friends about the divorce. She won't talk about the tree house, either. If she brought it up, then they'd want to see it, and if they wanted to see the tree house, they'd have to go to her father's house. If they went to her father's house, she'd have to explain the divorce. All family privacy would be lost.

“My mom made me a dress and we played backgammon and ate some cupcakes.” The reasons for a fruit tart would also be too much to explain. “I'm going to wear my new dress on Saturday. It's pretty and yellow with a satin ribbon. You'll like it.” Soon, the subject sways to planning out Lila's hair and Eleanor's shoes for the event. Before long a teacher blows a whistle from the school door and the girls descend the metal structure. They lock arms and slowly return to the brick building, Mr. Phillips's classroom and time tests.



5:

The house already smells of bananas and nutmeg when Maggie hears the first doorbell ring. Maggie finishes the final of fifty brush strokes through her hair and yells to her mother across the hallway, "I'll get it." Behind the front door, Eleanor and Lila stand waiting with brightly wrapped presents in hands outstretched. Lila is wearing a tie dyed t-shirt that looks like it belongs to D. with polyester orange pants to match. Her hair stands up straight in two ponytails tied at the top of her head. Yellow bows hold them in place. Eleanor looks dull in comparison, though pretty still, in a navy blue wool jumper with pink stockings and brown mary-janes. Her hair is tied tightly behind her head to calm the frizzy curls growing with the threat of rain tugging in the cool spring air. Behind them, Mrs. Cook stands with a large blue bowl, which has purple grapes and green honeydew poking through the Saran Wrap stretched over top.

Maggie spins before the door to a chorus of awes complimenting her new dress. Her mother's steps creak through the stairs now, and she arrives to thank Mrs. Cook for the bowl of fruit and the girls for their gifts. Taking the perfectly wrapped flat boxes from their hands, she says, "Come in. Come in. Get out of the rain." Maggie shuts the door as they step inside, after first sticking her head out into the mist to be sure no one else is waiting behind them.

As her mother carries the gifts to the kitchen, Mrs. Cook asks if Maggie's dad will be here soon. "I noticed his car wasn't in the driveway." Maggie's mother's face drops for a second, but then she catches herself. She relights her mascara lined eyes and turns up bright red lips, preparing her facade.

"He's just at Dennis's baseball game. They'll be back pretty soon." She gives Maggie a cautionary glance then turns back towards the kitchen. Her tightly curled hair bouncing above the yellow A-line dress she and Maggie finished sewing at midnight last night.

Mrs. Cook nods and her stringy black hair shines, but does not bounce as she follows Maggie's mom into the kitchen. "So how have you been lately? We haven't seen you at

potluck in *so* long.”

Maggie places her nails in her lips, ready to bite down, as she climbs the stairs, leading her friends to her bedroom. Lila apologizes for her parents being late. Ariel's Woman's Warriors had a breakfast meeting today and since D. is currently unemployed, they're working off of one car for the time being. He has to wait for her. “You're lucky to have two cars, Maggie. I always have to wait for Minnie to pick me up because one of them is always driving one place or the other. Thankfully Ellie here doesn't mind chauffeuring me.” Lila pats Eleanor's back, grinning. She looks like a kid's birthday party clown. Maggie just rolls her eyes, not wanting to think about two cars or two houses today. It's her birthday and her two best friends are here and her mom and dad promised to play pretend to be sure that Maggie is all that matters today.

“Eleanor, guess what?” Maggie tugs her friend's dress as they run into her room.

“What?” Eleanor walks immediately to Maggie's record player to put on King Harvest. She then goes to Maggie's dresser and picks up a brush to tame her hair and check her reflection in the rectangular, pink wood framed mirror.

“My mom made banana cake.”

“My favorite.” Eleanor licks her lips and stares at her face. She runs her fingers across the padding of her rosy cheeks.

Maggie's mother is notorious for her cakes. They're the best in the neighborhood. Last year, Maggie had six girls over plus their parents and despite the fact that her own parents had been fighting every night for the two weeks leading up to it, when her mother pulled a carrot cake from the oven and slathered it with pure white cream cheese frosting, they actually looked happy. It had been especially hot for spring that afternoon, so Maggie took the other kids into the backyard to climb the tree and play freeze tag. When they came back inside, sweaty and laughing, her mother was sitting on her father's lap, her hair frizzed and her lipstick smeared, sipping from a plastic tumbler. They didn't fight for three weeks afterwards. Maggie's parties seemed to have that effect. Even in the years before their fights

began, even while they still lived with her grandparents and life was quieter, something about a loud afternoon celebration always made her parents smile better. Maggie knew it was because of the cakes.

So when Eleanor pulls away from the mirror and, looking sadly at Maggie, tells her, “I can't eat it though. My mom says I have to go on a diet.” Maggie doesn't blink before responding.

“Me too. But birthday cake doesn't count. We can eat it trust me.”

Eleanor looks skeptical, but eventually smiles and agrees. Lila scans Maggie's dresser, picking up one by one the porcelain doll figurines, bows, brushes and the wooden squirrel, cat, bird and frog Maggie's grandfather carved for her as a good luck charm for her sixth birthday. Lila drops them when she overhears her friends' conversation. “You're both beautiful. Why are you dieting? That's what fat old men do.”

“My mom diets.” And Maggie's mom is not old or fat.

“And I have pudgy cheeks.” Eleanor glances back in the mirror, frowning now.

“No you don't.” Lila flips her ponytails to pull the hair back from her face and hits both of her friends lightly on their shoulders. “Plus, you've got inside beauty. That's what matters.”

Eleanor rolls her eyes and walks to Maggie's closet. Maggie can't help but feel a little warmth inside even though she knows Lila's comment was silly. She walks to the mirror herself and stares at her own face, the deep black eyes and thin arched eyebrows, her slightly crooked nose and pale pink lips, the one gray freckle beneath her right eye. Her cheeks aren't chubby like Eleanor's and Maggie knows her diet isn't as vain as her friend's. It's just her chest and the bed and if she gets too much bigger, she won't fit under her bed and then she won't be able to visit the Forest. She looks at her bed, quickly so her friends won't realize that she doesn't want to be in her room with them. Maggie's not vain. It's just that she *has* to stay small.

Past her own reflection, Maggie sees Eleanor rifling through her dresses. Maggie doesn't know why. If those skirts won't zipper over her waist, they certainly won't fit on Eleanor. "What are you doing?"

Maggie turns and leans her back against the dresser to stare at the closet. Lila leaves Maggie's bed and walks over to take the blood orange turtleneck sweater dress Eleanor holds a foot from her body. "Playing dress up as Maggie?"

"No." Eleanor turns back into the row of neatly hung garments and takes out her next victim. "My mom says I need to start dressing more grown up. Maybe you do too." Maggie's stomach clenches with the insult. She steps forward and yanks the purple plaid skirt she knows doesn't fit from Eleanor's hands. The skirt is plenty grown up.

Lila looks carefully between both of her friends, and she must notice the hurt gripping Maggie's face because she steps closer and softly runs her palm across the skirt. "I think this is beautiful." She turns back to Eleanor and puts on her crazy face, arms crossed. "What about me Ellie? Do I need to grow up?"

"No. No. You're fine." She doesn't acknowledge Lila's laughter but turns once more to the closet.

Maggie pushes past Eleanor to hang the skirt and dress back up. As soon as she steps away, Eleanor returns to sorting. Maggie asks, "What are you doing now?"

"Pot luck is at Gary's house this week. I want to look pretty."

"Why not wear one of your grown up dresses?" Maggie meant this as a joke, but no one else laughs. She walks to the bed and lays flat, staring at her ceiling, leaving them alone to her closet.

"Don't you think he's cute?" *Nope.*

"Sure." Lila grabs hold of Eleanor's curls and twists them between her fingers. "I can do your hair if you like."

"Okay. Maybe you can make it less frizzy." Eleanor tugs at the same curl, again. Frowning makes her cheeks pudgier. Maggie rolls her eyes and curls onto her side.

Lila pats Eleanor's hair with her palm. "I like Ellie's curls," she says as she hops to the dresser and returns to sorting through Maggie's possessions. When Maggie looks up, Lila is holding Squirrel's red leaf and twirling it between her thumb and long nailed index finger. "This is beautiful! Where'd you find it? I didn't know any leaves were red right now. It'd be a neat bookmark if we pressed it."

"A friend gave it to me." Maggie looks down at the mattress and chooses not to comment on pressing the leaf between wax paper. D's obsessed with pressing things into bookmarks lately. Maggie would just as happily leave it where it is, unchanging on her dresser.

"Maggie's got a *friend*?"

"A boyfriend?" Lila drops the leaf now and jumps on the bed beside Maggie. She tickles her arm. "Who is it?"

"I bet it's Mark. I saw her lend him a pencil in math the other day."

Maggie rolls her eyes at the thought of Mark giving her a leaf. He can write about as well as a chicken pecking letters in the sand. No way could he fold origami. "I didn't lend him a pencil. I lent him an eraser." Maggie turns her head, signaling the end of the conversation.

The record fades into silence behind them and Lila stands up to fix it. Maggie assumes she'll restart the album, like they always do, but today she doesn't. She takes King Harvest off the turntable and returns it to its sleeve. She looks around Maggie's shelf for something else. "Do you have any Grateful Dead?"

"I don't know what that is."

"Leann played them for me. I think you'd like them."

"I don't know who Leann is."

"Yes you do."

Fortunately, Maggie doesn't have to listen to the explanation. The doorbell rings and Maggie screams, "I'll get it," then runs to the door without waiting for her friends to follow.

Running down the stairs, Maggie crosses her fingers, hoping it is Ariel and D. waiting outside. Instead she finds her father's best friend, Mr. Schaeffer, his pretty blond haired wife who rarely talks and never bakes, and their daughter, Cindy. Mrs. Schaeffer is a counselor Mr. Schaeffer met after Cindy's mother passed away two years ago. She looks only ten-years older than Maggie, but Mrs. Cook guesses she's at least twenty-eight. Mrs. Cook says Mr. Schaeffer has a lot of money and that's why his young wife likes him, but Maggie's seen their house and she doesn't think money's the reason. Besides, Ariel says working women fall in love for better reasons than money. It can't be for looks though. Mr. Schaeffer has two large moles on his neck and a big beer belly with super skinny limbs. He's not attractive.

Maggie used to like Cindy but lately they don't have much in common. Cindy's only eight and acts spacey whenever she talks to Dennis. Since this is Maggie's party, though, and her mother taught her that it's rude to leave guests alone, Maggie takes Cindy's hand and thanks her for coming today. When Mrs. Cook and Maggie's mother walk into the foyer, smiling and joking like real friends, Maggie leads Cindy into the living room and leaves the parents to themselves.

"I like your dress, Maggie." Cindy's voice is small and shy, just like Luna's, like the high notes of a flute. Maggie smiles at her, trying to want to be here.

"Thanks. My mom made it for me. I like your pig tails."

Maggie's living room is neatly organized today. Yesterday, her mother made Maggie and Dennis carry all their mess up to their rooms, leaving the glass coffee table empty. She set out containers of beads and crayons and board games for Maggie and her friends to play with because it isn't supposed to be as warm today as it was last year. Cindy and Maggie settle at the table and Maggie cuts some string for the two of them to make necklaces with while Cindy tells Maggie all about her new swing set. Maggie bites her tongue once more not to mention the tree house.

They're halfway done with the necklaces before Lila and Eleanor come downstairs and enter the living room, whispering and giggling. Maggie wills them to sit with her, but

since she's still a little upset about the Grateful Dead, she doesn't say anything. Maggie keeps her attention focused on Cindy's pink cheeks, bobbing brown pigtails, and upturned nose. Eleanor and Lila keep talking and laughing, and even though she knows she must pay attention to Cindy and that's not her friends' obligation, she can't help but feel upset that they haven't chosen to come and make necklaces as well.

Dennis and her father are the last guests besides Lila's parents to arrive, following eight girls, one younger brother, and nine adults Maggie hasn't seen in months. Sure enough, when Dennis arrives, sweating and muddy in his track pants and neon green team t-shirt, Cindy abandons the beads and runs to Dennis, laughing about nothing. Again, she describes her new slide and asks him to come play on it sometime. Maggie wants to play on a slide, but Cindy doesn't invite her.

Maggie looks around the room to see who needs entertaining, but all the girls are sitting in circles talking. No one's playing a game, but even the only boy other than Dennis, her classmate's older brother, looks amused. Maggie flushes, not knowing where to stand or what to say. Eleanor and Lila are sitting close and whispering on the couch. There doesn't seem to be any room for Maggie. She pulls herself up from the floor and decides to walk to the kitchen to greet her father.

Her father, Mrs. Cook, and her mother are the only adults still in the kitchen. All the rest seem to have taken their tumblers and filed into the dining room. Maggie's mother sets yellow paper plates around their aluminum kitchen table, crowded with six extra maroon folding chairs. Her father, dressed in a navy golf shirt and baby blue plaid pants, stained with mud, pours Beefeaters into a plastic cup. He looks out of place between Maggie's busy, well put together mother and the always perfect Mrs. Cook, who pretends to help but really just pushes crackers around a plate while staring at Maggie's father's drink. She periodically sweeps loose strands of hair out of her eyes, back behind her ears. It only ever takes them a minute to fall. Maggie thinks she should run upstairs and offer Mrs. Cook some of her mother's hairspray, but for all the manners she teaches her children, Maggie's mother rarely

wants to share.

Instead, Maggie pauses in the doorway, waiting for her parents to pay attention to one another. Maggie's mother seems intent on only looking at the table. Ending her flirtation with a buttery Ritz, Mrs. Cook licks her lips and walks over to Maggie's father to help him measure out the Vermouth.

"Why on Earth did you ring your own doorbell?"

"Silly me. I forgot my keys." Her father smiles at the back of Maggie's mother's head. Maggie wishes she would just look up and share this little secret.

"Seems to happen more and more these days."

Maggie's father's eyes light with amusement, and he shifts his gaze towards the dining room. He taps her mother's back and whispers something into her ear. Maggie's mother stiffens, but stays silent, tightlipped. She turns to the stove and then the refrigerator, pausing for a moment before she pulls out a banana that needs to be sliced to finish off the cake. Her father pushes forward the swinging door into the dining room. He places his hand on the small, lower section of Mrs. Cook's back to lead her away from the kitchen. Maggie can only think of Mrs. Cook's pink lips and butterfly bruises dancing across her father's neck. Her stomach has its own pulse. She pauses, frozen in place, staring at the swinging dining room door.

Her mother looks up from the cake now and spots Maggie standing wide eyed, silent. She picks a cheerful voice. "Hey, birthday girl. How's your party?"

"Good, thank you." Maggie takes a seat at the table to calm her flushing body. "Need help?"

"Go back to your friends, baby. I've got it covered in here." Maggie doesn't move. "Did you say hi to your daddy? He brought you sparkling cider." She must think the other adults can hear her. Why else would her voice be so high pitched and fake?

Maggie shakes her head. No. No, she didn't talk to him. "Go see him in the dining room, baby. The Bradleys are here, too." Maggie stares at her mother staring at her now,



beautiful and skinny in her new dress, holding out a small paring knife to cut through the banana peel. Maggie wishes the knife were bigger. She wishes, but no that's an evil thought. Bird wouldn't like that thought. Maggie swallows it whole and does her best to smile at her mother. Her mother smiles back with sincerity that forces Maggie through the swinging door, into the room of adults and secrets. She wraps her arms around her father and kisses him *hello, thank you, happy birthday to me.*

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Before Maggie can make her way back to the living room, the doorbell rings again. Maggie races to answer, knowing this time it has to be the guests she wants to be here. She twirls to show off her new dress as she swings open the door.

D. cheers, soaking wet in the now heavy rain. "Beautiful! Just beautiful."

Maggie runs to wrap her arms around D.'s wide stomach and peers behind him, searching for his wife. "Where's Ariel?" She also wants to ask him why he's wearing a salmon button up and a leprechaun tie but holds back that question.

"Her meeting ran late. She's very sorry."

Maggie pulls back and frowns, but quickly straightens her lips, not wanting to look as pudgy as Eleanor does when she's upset. How could Ariel miss her birthday?

"Don't worry, though. Ariel will have an ice cream celebration with you this week. And look!" He holds out a clearly hand painted bowl covered in tight saran wrap. "I made Jell-O salad." He leans close to Maggie and whispers, "Think I'll fit in?"

Maggie giggles as her mother enters the foyer, wiping wet hands on her pure white half apron. She gives D. a huge hug and takes the bowl from his hands. "Where's Ariel?"

"She's still with the Warriors. She is sorry but sent me as a surrogate. They're all excited to meet you next week."

Maggie's mother's face flushes as she looks quickly around her. No one else is in earshot. She taps Maggie's shoulder and tells her to join her friends in the living room.

Not wanting to wind up back in the dining room, Maggie obliges. She flops beside Lila and Eleanor on the couch. "Your dad's here, Lila."

"Do we match?" Lila's eyes light up as she peers into the kitchen.

"No. He's dressed like Eleanor's dad."

Eleanor looks too now. "Why would he do that?"

Maggie shrugs but they don't have to speculate. D. enters the living room and Lila jumps up to her father's arms. She unfolds his collar, popping it up and around his neck.

"My dad matches better than that." Eleanor tugs at D.'s tie and gives him a hug as well.

"Dad. Why are you dressed like that?"

D. drops his daughter and puts on an expression of insulted shock. "I'm a suburban dad. I always dress like this."

Dennis runs from behind and tries to tackle D., who turns and lifts Dennis, spinning him in the air. "D., your tie's lopsided." D. tilts his head and looks down at his knot.

"No it's not."

"D., Why did the knot cross the road?"

"For a bet?" D. plays with his knot, looking confused and trying to straighten it.

"No." Dennis pauses looking around at his audience of child eyes. "To get to the other tie!" Even Maggie laughs at this joke, relieved for once to understand her brother.

They settle into making friendship bracelets with the whole group now seated in a circle while D. teaches them a new style of twisting he just made up. His style looks to Maggie like just a bunch of unmatched knots, but the other kids don't object, so she keeps her mouth shut and follows along. As she finishes her first bracelet and is just about to start a second, her mother calls from the kitchen that it's time for dinner.

At the table, which her mother covered today with a decorative birthday candle table cloth, Maggie takes the plastic chair in her normal spot facing the stove. She saves the seats on either side for her two best friends. She's about to beckon for D. to come sit with them,

but as she does, Mr. Schaeffer pushes through the swinging door and clasps D. on the shoulder, reaching out his black hairy paw for a handshake. "David. How are you?"

"Bill!" D. lowers his voice and Maggie can see laughter dancing behind his wide blue eyes. "How's sports?"

Mr. Schaeffer backs away, looking confused. D. wanders to the sink and pulls a crushed glass cup from the bottom of it. He turns on the faucet and fills a glass of water, then turns and leans against the counter to wink at Maggie.

Maggie looks away, blushing, and searches for her father in the crowd of laughing adults. Normally at cake time, her father will fall in step next to Maggie's mother, following her from the counter to the table, so they can light the candles together. He usually likes to be the first to start singing *Happy Birthday* to his children. Today though, he let's Maggie's mother carry the cake alone. She keeps looking to her side, as though she's waiting for Maggie's father to step close and help her. He doesn't. He stands against the wall behind Dennis's seat, running his hands over his gelled in place hair and chatting with his friends. Mrs. Schaeffer brushes past her husband and approaches Maggie's father with a martini in hand.

Now she's standing too close. Her long hair periodically sticks to the sweat on Maggie's father's glass as she leans in to whisper secrets. Her face is well powdered and painted, but there are undertones of blemishes transparent in this light. She's not nearly as beautiful as Maggie's mother. Inside or out. Still, there are butterflies between them now, fluttering past he father's arm over to Mr. Schaeffer's chest, which is touching Mrs. Cook's arm. The butterflies fly past Mrs. Cook and her careless laughing eyes over towards her husband, who arrived late, still dressed in a suit. They land on his fat, bulbous nose and once in place, their wings can touch Mrs. Bradley's long batting eyelashes. She's older and though her children have all grown up, she's good at picking outfits to fit in with her young friends.

Two dozen butterflies have taken up residence in this kitchen, nesting in the adults' palms, chests, shoulders, hair. The only ones they refuse to touch are D., standing, grinning,

staring at the ceiling, and Maggie's mother, holding a flamed cake alone as she trots from the kitchen counter, past her once husband, over to Maggie at a table full of children.

When Maggie's mother opens her lips to start singing *Happy Birthday*, D. flicks off the lights and, for an instant, the butterflies disappear. Maggie can still hear them though, invisible in the passing air. Maggie tries to swallow the insects, or at least bite off their wings. They keep flapping, even after she swallows. A wave of heat and discomfort passes through Maggie's stomach so intense she'd like to throw up all over these guests.

Maggie's father leans away from the wall and Mrs. Schaeffer tells Maggie to make a wish and blow out the candles. Maggie makes a promise instead. She promises never to be an adult and blows out all thirteen lights with a single breath.

After the singing and merriment end, D. turns on the lights and rainbows fill the air. The adults take their drinks and file into the dining room to light up their evening cigarettes with a stench that once calmed Maggie but now makes her chest hurt. Even D. gets dragged with them, though he whispers to Lila before he leaves, "This is what we've been practicing for." Another wink to Maggie and only Maggie's mother and Mrs. Cook remain in the kitchen. They spread out fruit and Jell-O creations, helping one another as though they're real friends. Maggie wants to ask her mother how she hides her hate so well.

The room quiets and her mother carries the banana cake back to the counter. Maggie inhales a deep, sweet scent. She does her best to think only about the beautiful food the women made while they were still acting like mothers. She does her best to think about her friends, who are laughing and talking in a group around the table. Maggie feels a brief wave of excitement pass through her. If parents fail, at least she has her friends and her cake to save this birthday party.

Lila stares at Maggie's face from the next seat, squinting her cheeks in concern. She asks Mrs. Cook if she would mind putting on King Harvest while they eat cake. King Harvest, not the Grateful Dead. Things are getting better, especially because this means Mrs. Cook has to leave the kitchen. While she's gone and Maggie's mother cuts the cake, a task

only she's allowed to do, Maggie tries to memorize the patterns of all the desserts to describe to Luna tonight.

Maggie's mother is the only one allowed to cut the cake because her birthday cakes are no ordinary desserts. When Mrs. Cook turns on Maggie's tune with her father's record player, the kids begin to eat. "Be careful. There's something special in each piece." Her warning's unnecessary, though. All the guests know the ritual by now. They've been coming to Maggie's parties for three years.

Maggie presses her steel fork flat on the cake while sticking her pointer finger into a dollop of icing and licking sugary icing from it. A sliver of wax paper reveals itself in the center layer of icing. Maggie hears the music. She tastes the sweetness only her mother could bake, wrap around her tongue and she truly feels like she's abandoning all worries, dancing with the security of every party, every memory, within the space of her mouth.

She looks up then to see her father entering the kitchen with his arm wrapped around Mrs. Schaeffer's waist. Security dissolves fast in foul tasting saliva. She looks at her plate and realizes her cake has only given way to a penny, the smallest coin gift the cake has to offer.

Maggie feels heat well in her ears. The words of her song stop making sense. She refocuses her attention on her friends, hoping to find light in the merriment. Dennis finds a nickel. Cindy and Eleanor both uncover dimes, and Maggie tells them all good job, but when Lila uncovers a clear, big quarter, the best prize, Maggie's voice shuts off. She knows she's being childish and it's impolite to be jealous, and she knows she loves Lila, but Lila is happy and she gets D. and Ariel. She doesn't need a quarter. Maggie and Dennis need the quarter.

But it's Lila who uncovers the highest prize, Lila who her father pats on the head to congratulate, Lila who never stops smiling, Lila who has crazy, pretty hair. Maggie drops her fork on the plate, releasing a clang that echoes through the room, outdoing King Harvest and all the adults' whispers. Cake may get a special place in a girl's stomach. It still makes Maggie want to throw up.

Mrs. Cook, who now stands laughing between Maggie's father and Mr. Schaeffer, looks over to the table. She asks if Eleanor has stolen Maggie's appetite. Both girls drop their gaze to the table, and push their plates away. Lila tries to start a conversation about school to distract the other children from their careless laughter. Eleanor and Maggie remain silent. Maggie bites her thumb. Dennis and her father look to one another, concerned, and Maggie's mother asks if anyone would like some fruit instead. Only Mrs. Cook fails to react.

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After all the guests have left, Maggie hugs her mother to thank her for the party. "You're welcome, baby. We'll do *Thank You* cards tomorrow, okay?"

Her father hugs Maggie too as he loosens his black, straight knotted tie. He runs his hand over Maggie's mother's arm. "I like this dress, Lucy." Her mother blushes and turns to the table to begin collecting plates and empty glasses. Dennis smiles from his seat at the table and shifts his eyes up and towards the right. Maggie nods her head to him. "We're going to go play upstairs for a little while."

"Okay, Maggie. You'll say good night if you decide to go to sleep early?" Her mother shimmies her skirt while she turns on the water in the sink. Maggie wonders why they're pretending to be nice, if that's something adults have to do while they're drunk.

Maggie and Dennis ascend the stairs and hear their mother's voice, whispering yet shrill. The sound of fighting feels more appropriate for the night. Maggie sprints. Dennis turns on the record player in his room, and Maggie stands on tiptoes to retrieve the backgammon board from his closet's shelf, humming to the tune of *Ben* and the familiar voice of Michael Jackson falling out of his sound system. Maggie's certain this sounds better than any Grateful Dead.

Today, Dennis wagers for Maggie to give him her dessert if she's too chubby to eat. Maggie wagers for him to stop making jokes that make no sense. They don't speak much for the rest of the night, and Maggie is relieved when her father knocks on Dennis's door asking if Dennis is ready to head out. Before leaving, he kisses Maggie's cheek and whispers,

“Remember quarters are more money, but a penny is good luck.” Maggie thinks there’s no luck left here, but maybe hers all went to the Forest. She feels a small wave of hope as she closes the door behind them.

Maggie walks into the kitchen and helps her mother pile pieces of wrapping paper and pink satin bows into the trash. Then she thanks her mother again and asks if she can eat a piece of cake in bed.

Her mother raises her eyebrows but then resigns her face to its tired stance. “I guess so. Just don’t make a mess.”

With the final piece of cake set on a ceramic plate, balanced on her left hand, and a new red crocheted sweater in her right, a gift from Eleanor which is apparently “a more *grown up style*.” Maggie climbs the stairs to her bedroom.

“Just be sure you bring the plate back, okay?”

Maggie doesn’t know if she’ll be able to, but she calls back, “Of course,” anyways.

In her room, Maggie places the sweater over her new dress, prepared to leave it with Bird’s Eggs to eventually disappear in the Forest. She lies on the floor with the cake balanced on her stomach.

As she pulls herself beneath the bed, the cake catches on the bed’s frame and tumbles onto her dress. Maggie feels her face flush and slips back out, replacing the cake on the plate and rubbing her hands across her stomach to clean the icing from her dress. She slides the cake in before her and follows after it. The frame presses lightly on her breasts before she gets completely under the bed where a gap between her and the mattress allows her to reposition the plate on her stomach before she presses her chest to the boards.

A moment of dark. When Maggie sees the purple swirling airs and feels gust of heat on her bare arms, she also sees the cake fall from her with the plate. The slice’s penny separates from the golden crumbs, falling into the unending depths of the amorphous space. Maggie screams without sound. She cannot move to recapture her gift. A moment of black.

When her sight returns in the grass of the forest, the cake is nowhere to be seen, but there are icing stains on the front of her new dress.



*May 1976*

1:

When Maggie's mother receives a phone call offering her the job, only Maggie is around to celebrate. They dance in the kitchen while they cook vegetables and boil chicken for dinner, working from one of *Woman's World's* March recipes for healthy families. Instead of a fruit and cream dessert, Maggie's mother calls Ariel to tell her the good news and asks if they'd like to have tea to celebrate. Of course, Ariel accepts. Maggie is grateful, not only to see Ariel but also to skip dessert. As her chest has shrunk to fit under the bed, so has her appetite. Halfway through her chicken breast, carrots and celery, her stomach screamed for her to stop eating. She didn't even touch her rice. Luckily, her mother was too preoccupied with excitement to ask Maggie to finish the plate. She only ate three quarters of her own dinner.

Maggie and her mother pack tea bags and raspberries into a brown shopping bag and drive fifteen minutes to the Johnson's green and black house. They are halfway to the front step before Maggie's mother's panic sets in. "What will you do after school?" Maggie shrugs and lifts the metal knocker on the front door. Maybe Maggie could just stay here after school, but that's an adult decision, not hers to make.

When Ariel answers the door with a hug to greet both Maggie and her mother, the panic gives way to celebration once more. At the kitchen table, which has a new set of yarn woven placemats, Ariel places a large pot of water and four mismatched mugs that D. and Lila painted last summer. In Maggie and Lila's cups, Ariel measures out two heaping spoonfuls of instant cocoa. In the other two, she places the herbal tea bags and then fills all the cups with steaming water. In the center of the table, she places the washed raspberries. Maggie's mother would have put them in a fancy serving bowl, but Ariel leaves them in their

plastic container. As soon as they're in front of her, Lila reaches for a handful of berries. Maggie wishes she had been given tea.

"So tell me about your job." Ariel grabs a berry herself and settles on the low seat.

"It's mostly secretary stuff, like answering phones, getting coffee. But when Mr. Palmer saw I was at Rutgers for a year, he asked me what I studied. He said if I am actually good at math, he'll help show me the tricks of accounting. I won't necessarily stay as a secretary. That's good, isn't it?" Maggie's mother smiles tentatively through the steam of her tea.

Ariel looks as though she's just learned that cats can talk. "Really?"

"His wife's a Warrior."

Ariel laughs. "That explains it then." *Men aren't that nice on their own.* Maggie watches the mothers as they talk. Ariel's hair is still wet from her evening shower and curling at the split ends. With pale, smooth skin, her face glows under the faint light of the lanterns. Maggie looks to her mother, seated across the table, and notices something different in her today. Though her hair's still curled smoothly and held in place with bobby pins, and though she's still wearing too much powder, she doesn't look out of place at the low set table. Maybe it is because she's wearing black slacks and a pink cardigan instead of a puffy dress. Maybe it is because, without Mrs. Cook next to her, she can slouch without feeling self-conscious. Whatever the reason, it makes Maggie smile as she turns to look at Lila.

Lila's hair is also wet and falling freely across the damp shoulders of her white tattered nightshirt. Without school or expected social plans, she mustn't have needed a big hairdo. Or, Maggie thinks, maybe she just doesn't feel like she needs to dress up for Maggie. As she finishes a long gulp of hot chocolate that leaves a dark stain across her pale upper lip, Lila glances over the table to look at Maggie's mug. "Why aren't you drinking?"

"It's too hot." Maggie blows over the steam, pretending to cool it down. Lila grabs another handful of berries and stares at Maggie while she does. Maggie takes a handful and, when Lila looks away, quickly shoves them in her jean pockets. She'll give them to Luna

later. Right now, she's still too full. Maggie tries to change the subject. "Did you finish your homework?"

"Yep. Did you."

Ariel looks at her daughter, eavesdropping on the conversation. "Did you really? Without any help?"

Lila squirms in her seat and looks down at the berries. "Yes."

"Really?"

"Well, I didn't understand *some* of it, but I did the rest."

"Why didn't you ask me?"

"You were reading a folder."

"So?"

"So you were working."

Maggie interrupts, wary of the fight she may have just provoked. "What was it?"

"Cell division."

"I can help. We did that last week."

"Really?" Lila pushes the half filled hot chocolate mug away and runs to her room to find her homework. Ariel smiles and stares so closely at Maggie's face, it makes her nervous.

"You're good at biology?"

Maggie shrugs. Her mother answers for her. "She's excellent at it. Mr. Phillips says she's his star student." Her mother's smile makes Maggie even more uncomfortable.

"When did he say that?" Maggie asks.

"I ran into him at the grocery store last week. Didn't I tell you?"

"No."

Ariel leans forward, smiling. "You're going to be a scientist."

"Maybe." Maggie shrugs again.

"You can be a doctor. You'll be great at it."

Maggie thinks about this for a little while as she takes a small sip of her lukewarm

cocoa. "I think I'll be a veterinarian."

"Even better!" Ariel claps her hands as Lila returns to the table holding a creased and crinkled white sheet of paper. "Lila's going to be a painter like her dad. Or a poet. She's a brilliant poet."

Maggie shakes her head. "I didn't know that." She stares at her friend carelessly trying to flatten the white sheet. Maggie wonders what Lila writes about, but Lila doesn't seem to want to offer any answers. Lila pushes the paper in front of Maggie. "I'm supposed to draw what happens but I don't know what happens."

"Do you have your notes?"

Lila blushes and glances quickly at Ariel, who is now staring at them. "I didn't want to carry too much today. They're in my desk."

"It's okay. I can show you." Maggie glances once more at their mothers. Even though Maggie's not sure she's ever actually seen Lila in trouble for more than a minute, she still doesn't want a minute of trouble to be her fault. Ariel looks stern, but as Maggie begins explaining mitosis and cell signals, she turns back to Maggie's mother.

"When do you start?"

"Next Monday. Not tomorrow, a week from tomorrow." Her smile drops a little. "That's why I'm nervous. I have to work until six, but what do I do with Dennis and Maggie? They get home at three."

"Maggie's twelve. She can watch him."

"I don't know." Maggie's mother sighs, glancing over to her daughter. "I guess. Maybe?"

"Lila stays home after school and she's fine."

"I thought D. was here."

"I didn't tell you?"

"Tell me what?"

"D. got a job. He's an artist for a landscape project."

Maggie's mother looks towards Maggie for an explanation. Maggie looks up from her notes, but shakes her head. She doesn't know what that means. "What does that mean? I'm sorry. I don't know."

Ariel looks sternly at Maggie's mother now. "Don't apologize for not knowing things." Then her face softens and she laughs at herself. "It's just for a month, but he's designing gardens for the town."

"That's great."

"Just for a month. Then he starts teaching art at Kids Retreat again." Kids Retreat is a summer camp in Pennsylvania that Lila goes to each year. She goes for free because D. teaches kids how to glue together bird feeders and weave the type of place mats now decorating Lila's kitchen table. Ariel says it's important to teach young kids how to be independent, which is why summer camp is so important. She never sent Minnie and now look at her. She's a great person, but she's far from independent.

Last summer, Ariel talked Maggie and Eleanor's parents into sending them as well, for all of July and two weeks in August. Maggie got homesick after two days. For five hours, she sat in D.'s art room and alternated between crying and staring at him like she was possessed so he would feel sorry and let her go home. In desperation, by the end of the day, he agreed to drive her back to her house. Four days later, Eleanor threw a tantrum about having to spend so much time in the woods and in the midst of flailing her arms, she was stung by a pack of wasps. D. rushed her to the doctor and after the inflammation died down, she was also returned home.

"So Lila's going to camp again this year?" Maggie's mother looks at Maggie questioningly. Maggie shakes her head, *No*. She will not be leaving her bed for six weeks. She returns to her tutoring and erases the last line Lila made, which was a mistake. "Do you think Deb will watch them for me?"

"Sure. She'll take any chance to prove she's a better mother than us."

"She's not that bad." Maggie's mother can't help but smile as she says this.

“Yes she is. Last week she told Lila she eats too much. That’s why Lila’s staying at home alone now.” Maggie’s mother’s face tightens and she tilts her head looking over to Lila and Maggie, as though she’s worried they might be listening. Ariel doesn’t stop speaking. “Oh, they’re fine. Who keeps secrets from their daughters now a days? Have you seen what Debbie’s doing to Ellie? Poor girl must have lost ten pounds because her mom’s making her run before school each day. It’s unhealthy. They’re twelve-years-old. They should be worried about figuring out who they are not what they look like. They certainly don’t need to be dieting.” She pauses and Maggie’s mother blushes. Both of them look at Maggie, but Maggie keeps her eyes steady on Lila’s homework, refusing to look at them. She doesn’t run. She takes a sip of cocoa so they’ll stop looking at her even though she’s still not hungry. “She’s teaching them superficiality.”

“Maybe.” Maggie’s mother lifts her tea bag and walks to throw it away beneath the sink. When she returns to reconfigure herself awkwardly in her short seat, she attempts to change the subject. “I think I might want a dog.”

Ariel shakes her head as she picks up her teacup. “You need to figure out your schedule first, Luce. If you’re worried about not having time for Dennis and Maggie, how will you have time for a puppy? They’re not much different from kids.”

“I know.” Maggie’s mother twirls the ends of her curls. “I know that but sometimes when they’re with Drew on weekends . . .” Maggie looks up as Lila draws the final lines of her diagram. Did she tell Ariel about the divorce? Maggie’s mother glances quickly at the girls, realizing her mistake. Lila doesn’t seem to have noticed anything. “What I mean is sometimes during the day I just get lonely is all.” Maggie stares at her mother who responds with a squinting face. Maggie knows that face. It means, *I don’t want to talk about it.*

“With a job you won’t be lonely. You’ll be an accountant in no time and you won’t have time to worry about dogs.”

Lila leans back in her seat, smiling to be done with her homework. She grabs Maggie’s cup. “If you don’t want this, I’ll drink it.” Maggie shrugs even though Ariel scolds

Lila softly.

“It’s okay. I don’t care.” Maggie glances down at her still sore stomach. “I want a dog.” She smiles at her mother.

“Trust me, Luce. With a full time job, you won’t have time. It’s nice to help animals, but it’s cruel to leave them home alone all the time.”

“What about a cat?” Maggie’s mother smiles at Maggie as she asks this, even though she’s clearly asking Ariel. Before Ariel has a chance to answer, Minnie and D. come through the front door and into the kitchen.

D.’s wearing a white tunic with red and purple paint stains splattered across his sleeves. Maggie can see all the hair on his chest behind the see through fabric. “Did I miss my party invite?”

“We’re celebrating.” Ariel smiles and claps as she stands to kiss her husband on the lips before returning to sit cross legged on her chair. “Lucy got a job!”

“Congratulations Mrs. L.” Minnie leans in to give Maggie’s mother a hug. Minnie’s twenty and a student in Rutgers Nursing School. Ariel thinks she should have been a doctor, but Minnie insists she doesn’t want to be a doctor. Ariel says that’s because she’s afraid, but Maggie’s mother always defends her by saying a nurse is better because you get to work closer with the patients.

Maggie’s mother and Minnie have been close since Lila and Maggie first became friends. Three summers ago, when Ariel went to an Environmental forum in New York State and D. and Lila were still at camp, Minnie stayed with Maggie’s family. Maggie’s mother taught Minnie how to sew dresses from patterns and even bought her a razor. Though Ariel didn’t say anything about the dresses, Maggie knows the shaving drove her crazy. Ariel takes the fact that Minnie subscribes to Vogue and hasn’t been without a boyfriend since she was sixteen as a sign of her failed parenting. D. defends her and their parenting skills by saying, *At least she is kind. That’s all that matters in a person.* He had his appendix out six months ago while Minnie was doing her rotation in internal medicine, and D. said she was the best

nurse, student or not, that he's ever had. At least now that she's in pediatrics and comes home with stories of how she's directly helped children, Ariel seems to be growing accustomed to her daughter's job.

Still, her opening comment to her daughter is, "Minnie, why's your shirt so tight?" Minnie rolls her eyes as she and D. pull two tree trunk chairs from against the wall to join the table.

"I think it's pretty, Minnie." Maggie's mother smiles at her, then looks tentatively at Ariel as though she's afraid to have offended her.

Ariel just shakes her head. "Lucy's right. It's pretty and I'm sorry. You should wear whatever you want to wear."

"Thanks." Minnie smiles with pink painted lips as she pushes feather straight hair back from her powdered cheeks. Ariel cringes but doesn't say anymore, just twists her own, untreated hair.

"What's the job?" D. leans over the table and presses a calloused thumb against his raggedy sideburn. "I just got one too!"

"Ariel told me. Congratulations!"

Minnie smiles from across the table. "The old housewives are going back to work." As the adults continue describing the intricacies of their new positions, Minnie scoots her chair closer to Lila and Maggie. "So what's your hair plan for tomorrow?"

"I don't know yet." Lila looks concerned as she grabs at the ends of her blond strands. "I'm running out of ideas. Do you have any?"

Minnie shakes her head. "That plastic snake thing was my best idea. I don't have any tonight. How about you?"

They both look at Maggie, who suddenly feels nervous being put on the spot. "Maybe braids?"

Lila bites her lips and closes her eyes. When she reopens them again, she smiles. "I have an idea for braids. Will you help me in the morning Minnie?"



“Of course. What about you Maggie? What’s your hair plan for tomorrow.”

Now it’s Maggie’s turn to scrunch up her face. “This?”

“No. No. You get braids too.” Minnie stands up and walks behind Maggie. She immediately starts twisting Maggie’s hair so hard at the roots, the pain in her scalp distracts Maggie from the pain in her stomach. As soon as Minnie secures the ends of the two braids with pink rubber bands, D. rubs his eyes and stretches his arms behind Ariel’s back.

Maggie’s mother says, “I’m getting tired too, D. I think we might head out soon.”

Ariel looks upset to lose the company. “Do you want to spend the night here Maggie?”

Maggie smiles to show she appreciates the offer but still shakes her head. “No, it’s okay.” Her mother smiles down at her, clearly not wanting to be left alone. Maggie just has to go home because she has berries still in her pockets and she can’t go to sleep before she gives them to Luna. They’ll rot by tomorrow. But if her going home helps her mother to be happy, that’s a bonus.

2:

In school the next day, a new idea for the Forest comes to Maggie. It's science fair day for the upperclassmen, so the sixth graders have the afternoon off from classes to examine student projects and begin thinking about their own. Maggie, Lila and Eleanor meet by the gym water fountain to wander through the rows of dioramas together. Maggie's hair is still in the French braids Minnie tied last night. Lila's hair is also in French braids, but instead of two, she has eight spread unevenly around her scalp. She looks like an octopus. Eleanor's hair is gelled and pulled back in a tight bun. When Eleanor mentions the similarity between Maggie and Lila's hair, they glance quickly at one another and say it was a coincidence, so they don't hurt Eleanor's feelings by letting her know she was left out.

"I want to see Leann's presentation. Want to come?" Not really, but Maggie says yes because she doesn't have any seventh grade friends. Leann is one of the blond girls with floral print skirts who sit beneath the tree during recess. She's prettier up close, mostly because with bare skin, Leann's beauty appears effortless. It makes her jealous, both of Leann for being so pretty, and of Lila for being friends with such a pretty girl.

"Is this about your flowers?" Lila asks and Leann nods enthusiastically. Maggie thinks this is a stupid question. There's four-potted amaryllis on the table. Of course this project is about her flowers. "I helped her plant them." Lila smiles proudly between her friends.

"What kind of flowers are they?" Eleanor holds a red and white flower between her fingers and sniffs the petals.

"Amaryllis."

"Oh." Eleanor drops her hand and stares across the room at a group of boys laughing loudly and leaning against an animal mural painted wall.

Maggie looks closely at the Polaroids glued crookedly between glitter paint on the poster board. "What were you studying?"

Leann steps forwards and smiles, clearly excited to explain her project. “I wanted to find out what music flowers will grow best to.”

If Leann were any one else, Maggie might have rolled her eyes at this. Instead, she looks to Lila and copies her friend’s enthusiastic nod.

“We were learning about the scientific method and we did real world projects using it. Do you know what the scientific method is?”

Maggie shakes her head.

“The scientific method is all about hypothesizing and testing your result with recorded data. When one hypothesis fails, you make a new one and try again. Look, you can read about it here.”

Leann points to a bright piece of construction paper on the left corner of her board. Maggie nods and does her best to read the description but has trouble deciphering the purple pen on a navy blue background. “Cool.” Maggie smiles up at Leann and tries to think of something clever or insightful to say, but can’t come up with anything.

Eleanor returns her attention to the table as she presses her skirt to flatten its wrinkles. “So what songs do amaryllis like?”

“Railroad spirituals.”

Eleanor does roll her eyes and she starts laughing as she backs away to go talk to the group of boys. Lila apologizes and begins asking more detailed questions. Maggie tries to copy Lila, but her mind is already in the Forest and mostly, she just stares at the petals of the least developed flowers.

So tonight, before she crawls under her bed, Maggie puts a pen in her pocket and tucks a new notebook under her shirt so it won’t fall out in the transition. In the Nest, Maggie tries to explain the hypothesis to her friends.

“Leann says this is about testing one hypothesis after another until you find an answer. You record data to keep track of everything.”

Bird pats Maggie on the arm and smiles encouragingly, but clearly does not listen to the science. “Who is Leann?”

“Lila’s friend, but that’s not important.”

“Is she one of the girls who never invites you over?”

Maggie blushes then shakes her head. “It’s not important. What’s important is that I brought this notebook and I think we should write down every escape plan you’ve tried then systematically sort through them. If we see something we haven’t tried yet, we can try it. Or if we see where we had bad procedures in our experiments, we can retest those hypotheses.

“That’s a nice idea.” Bird pecks at the air but doesn’t make any moves to help Maggie. Luna yawns and licks her cheek, then curls her legs into her chest and closes her eyes. Only Squirrel pays any attention.

“This is smart. I have a list in my head.” Squirrel settles next to the Nest and strokes his chin thinking of failed plans. Maggie smiles and runs to sit beside him. When Bird and Luna turn their backs, she sticks her tongue out at them.

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*They haven’t missed anything. They are stuck.*

Maggie flips the words around in her head, trying to determine a way to say this that won’t make Squirrel run away. This notebook was a bad idea. Maybe she can come up with a new purpose for them, so they won’t feel trapped or useless when they discover they’re stuck in this world. Her father always says, *If you don’t like your situation, change it. Don’t run from it.* Too bad he didn’t take his own advice. Fortunately, Luna wakes from her nap and stares at Maggie as Maggie stares into the sky.

“Maggie, didn’t your grandpa tell you stories about the Forest?”

“Yes. He said sometimes animals get trapped in their trees. How does that help us?” Maggie’s still annoyed with Luna. She looks up. Squirrel isn’t annoyed, so he considers what she says.

“He knows.”

“He knows what?”

“He knows an Exit.”

Maggie bites her nail, pausing in thought. Maybe her grandfather does know. She never thought to ask before. “But he lives far away, how am I supposed to ask him?”

Luna swishes her tail and raises her head. “When I was at home, my people wrote letters.”

Maggie thinks about it but still refuses to look at Luna. Bird opens her eyes and peers over at them as Maggie strokes her cheeks. “I guess I could.” She looks at Squirrel. “What do I say?”

“I can help you write.” Bird flaps off the Nest and comes to sit beside Maggie, periodically glancing up at the Sky.

Maggie doesn't quite forgive Bird, either, but she doesn't say anything. She tears a piece of paper out of the notebook. They spend the rest of the evening constructing a letter to send to her grandfather. It takes them three drafts because Maggie is afraid everything they write might show her grandfather too much. In the end, they produce two paragraphs of life updates and one single sentence to ask their question. *You once told me tales of magic and forests, but there's something you always left out. If an animal were trapped in the wood of their tree, how long would they have to stay there and how could they leave?*

3:

Maggie's mother decides to let Maggie and Dennis stay at home while she's at work after school. Dennis plays at the park or at Nicolas's house, so this gives Maggie the house to herself. The first day, Maggie stared at her bed and contemplated going underneath, but since her mother said she would be home by six, and since Maggie can only return home after falling asleep, Maggie doesn't go. Even when she spends her afternoons at home, she's rarely tired until ten o'clock. There's no way she could make herself fall asleep in time to be home for her mother. Her mother's finally happy, for the first time Maggie remembers in over a year. Maggie doesn't want to ruin her good mood by giving her a missing child.

Each afternoon, Maggie finishes her homework quickly. Since Mr. Phillip's started teaching polynomials, she hasn't needed much help with her homework. When she's finished, Maggie sews. She wants to be able to do more than cut the pieces out and when she works with her mother, that's all she is allowed to do. Over the past weekend, Maggie and her mother went to Fabricland during Dennis's morning game and now, she's working on teaching herself all the steps.

Maggie is starting to think Eleanor may not have been completely wrong when she said they need more grown up clothes, though she would never tell her that. The clothes she has acquired over the past year have begun slipping off her new form and Maggie wants to make an outfit that fits both her body and her age. Yesterday, she figured out how to baste the pieces, but today, while sewing in place the first seam of the bodice, the thread bunches and the needle refuses to move. Maggie is wishing for the first time that her mother were here to help when the phone rings.

Relieved, Maggie drops her fabric on the floor. A thread holds a corner of the purple fabric onto the machine. She lifts the pale yellow receiver from the wall and holds it to her ear. "Hello. Lawrence residence."

“Hello, baby.”

“Mom?” Maggie pauses. No, the voice is too deep to be her mother. “Dad?”

“Hello, baby. How's your afternoon?”

“The machine's stuck.”

“I'm sorry. Can you fix it?”

“No. It's stuck.”

“I'm sorry is your brother home?”

“No. He's with Nic.”

“When will he be home?”

“Six. Probably the same time as mom.”

“Your mom's going to be at work late tonight. So I'm going to come over after I finish here and I thought we could go to a special dinner.”

“Why?” Maggie wants to wait for her mother to come home so she can finish the top of her dress.

“She is going to a meeting. We will have fun. I promise.”

Maggie doesn't have a choice. “Okay. What time?”

“I'm trying to get out early. Hopefully by six. It'll be fun. I promise. Dress nice, okay?”

“Why?” Maggie looks down at her sweat stained pink t-shirt and white shorts. She doesn't have anything nice that fits. That's why she's making this dress.

“We're going to Verve with Jenny.”

“Who's Jenny?”

“You know, my friend, Jenny. I've told you about her, Maggie.”

“No.”

“Yes I have.” He's mentioned Jenny, but he has not *told* Maggie about her before.

“Why is she coming to dinner?” Maggie's stomach clenches. She wishes her father could see her face right now. He would feel terrible and then he would let her stay at home. As it is, he only hears her voice and that's not displaying her emotions well enough.

“Because I want you to get to know her better, Maggie.”

“Why?”

The receiver muffles on the other end and Maggie hears two voices warble in the background. “Look, baby. I have to go back to work, but I'll be there a little after six. Make sure your brother dresses nicely too, okay?”

“Okay. I love you, Dad.”

“Love you too.” Click.

Maggie looks around at the tangled strings and fabrics spread across the table. She would like to leave the mess and crawl under the bed. Her father wouldn't be able to find her and she wouldn't have to go to this dinner. But her mother would come home from a late night at work and any enjoyment she accumulated over the day would fade upon seeing this mess and learning she has a missing child.

Maggie picks up a small pair of gold scissors and clips the knotted thread at the base of the needle. She folds the fabrics and thinks about having dinner at Verve. It's Maggie's father's favorite restaurant because they have outdoor seating on a sidewalk across from a water fountain park. It's the type of place where men can enjoy smoking cigarettes with their drinks and desserts. Maggie's father used to go there so often, he had his own table the owner always sat him at, a wrought iron table right next to the door. Last year, Maggie's father took her mother there for their anniversary. Mrs. Cook babysat Maggie and Dennis for the evening and took them to get ice cream. As they walked together with chocolate and vanilla dripping down their wrists, they passed by Verve and the whole group, except Eleanor and Mr. Cook, paused as though wanting to say hello to Maggie's parents, but no one did. They all kept walking, silently. Maggie was silent to preserve the happiness and love she saw taped across



her mother's face, an emotion that was so often buried under wary lines. Mrs. Cook's silence likely had different reasons. She wouldn't touch Mr. Cook's hands for the rest of the evening.

When all the fabric is put away, Maggie tries to carry the sewing machine back to its home in the front closet. She only walks a foot with it in her arms before she remembers why she usually leaves it for her mother to carry. She lowers the machine quickly to the floor, successfully dropping it only a second before it would have dropped on its own and shattered over her toes. Maggie's arms shake and sting. If this were six months ago, she would have run into the cupboard and shoveled Oreos into her mouth, comforted by quick consumption with no one nearby to criticize her speed. Today, she leaves the sewing machine on the center of the kitchen floor, weighing into the linoleum, and climbs slowly up the stairs. In her room, Maggie lies on top of the purple bed spread and tries to speak to Bird through the bed frame.

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Maggie finds an orange cotton dress she wore to Lila's birthday party last fall. It is a little short, but mostly it fits. Dennis arrives home twenty minutes before their father and with a short argument, Maggie is able to convince him to shower and put on nice clothes. Luckily, Dennis likes Jenny. Apparently she comes to almost all of his games. Maggie is not happy to hear this, but she is happy to learn she won't have to sit next to a sweaty brother in the back of her father's car today.

Maggie opens the door at six twenty-seven to find not only her father, but also a young girl waiting on her front step. She does not invite them inside. The girl looks about ten years older than Maggie in a lily printed silk shirt, with long black hair, narrow shoulders, a flat chest, and tan, muscular arms. Her father has his own flabby arm far too close to this woman.

“Jenny said she could help you fix the machine if you like, before we go.”

“It's okay.”

“She's good with machines.” Maggie's father smiles. Maggie's stomach stings.

“It's okay. Mom will fix it.” Maggie slams the door decisively and walks to the car.

Maggie has heard her father mention Jenny exactly four times before, but each time it was in an offhand comment and he covered up by saying she was his friend. *His friend*. So why is she going to a nice dinner with them? Why does she get the front seat? Why is her hand so close to Maggie's fathers as she leans to look in the back seat and ask Dennis how Nicolas is doing?

They park on the street just a block from the restaurant. Maggie watches her father reach for Jenny's hand as they walk. Jenny pulls it into her pocket and turns to look at Maggie. "So I hear you like biology, Maggie."

"Not really."

"I studied biology at college."

"Good for you." Maggie turns to her father as they approach the restaurant. "Can we sit inside?"

"Why? It's nice to be outside." Maggie's father turns to the waiter, standing just outside the door. "You're new, but that's my regular seat." He points to the right of the open door. "Can we take it?"

"Certainly, sir. Your menus will be out in just a moment."

Maggie doesn't look at the rest of the group as she takes her seat closest to the window. They shouldn't be here. Maggie shouldn't have to share the crowded square table with any woman who is not her mother. Jenny doesn't get the cue. She keeps talking, quickly.

"Your father tells me you like birds. I work at the Raptor Trust. Have you ever been there? I take care of birds. They come in injured or as babies, and we nurse them until they're healthy and release them into the wild.

Maggie has never met an adult who likes birds this much. She can't help but ask a question. She makes sure not to look up from the lines in the black table, so Jenny doesn't think she is that interested. "What kinds of birds?"

"Lots of birds. Big brown hawks and small little song birds."

Maggie's father stares at Jenny's face so intently, Maggie looks up to try and find what he sees in the pale, lightly freckled cheeks. She doesn't see it. Her father is smiling now as he leans his elbows on the table. "And pigeons."

"Lots of pigeons." Jenny laughs. "Do you like pigeons? Lots of people don't, but I think they aren't looking close enough. They're beautiful."

Maggie nods but doesn't smile. She wants Jenny to keep talking, but she wants to remain silent.

Jenny pauses, waiting for Maggie to say something, Maggie doesn't say anything. Her father opens his menu and smiles down at the menu. "So what are you all going to eat? Jenny I think there's some vegetarian food, but if you don't see anything, we can ask. I'm sure they'll do something special."

Maggie and Dennis both look up from the table, staring at Jenny. Maggie is thinking the question but Dennis is the one to ask. "Vegetarian?"

Her father nods. "Jenny here doesn't eat meat."

Maggie can't help but ask. "Why not?"

"Chickens and cows in factory farms are locked up tight and closed off from sunlight and fresh air to feed our overindulgent carnivorous habits." She pauses and looks down in her lap. "I'm sorry. That's too much. I'm sorry."

Their father is laughing now. "Well it's true. It's not too much. Tell them about veal."

Maggie listens to half of Jenny's explanation then shudders and shuts her ears. Why would her dad ask her to explain that? Maggie thinks about chickens with feathers just like Bird's locked in cages. Maybe not eating them is logical. If Jenny had stayed just her father's friend, she may have listened as Jenny kept explaining. If Jenny weren't sharing this special table with them, feigning a member of their family, Maggie may have considered giving up meat herself. She might even have liked Jenny. But seeing as her father called this a family dinner, and Jenny didn't even care enough to trade her black pants for a bright homemade

dress the way her mother would have, Maggie looks straight to the *Pollo* section when she opens her menu.

Overwhelmed with the long lists of *cons...* and other words she doesn't understand, Maggie looks up to her father, beautiful and sweet with greased slick brown hair and a maroon golf shirt, and asks, "What should I get?" Winking at Jenny, he replies, "The veal." Maggie shudders. "I think I'll get this first chicken."

Dennis, still unashamed to order off the children's menus, gets spaghetti and sauce, which sounds so much simpler and better than the adult dish she had to mispronounce. Her father and Jenny request special vegetarian pasta. "Tell him it's Drew Lawrence asking. He won't mind." Even though she knows she had principle backing up her decision to order her meal, Maggie doesn't feel comfortable being the only overindulgent carnivore at the table. She wishes her overindulgent mother were here to keep her company.

As a bonus, her father orders everyone a bowl of French onion soup. The inclusion in this vegetarian appetizer makes Maggie feel like part of the group once more. She even feels a hint of hunger at the thought of a burning ceramic bowl full of savory brown broth and piles of fried onions. Later, when she tells her mother about the dinner, her mother will point out that French onion soup is made with beef stock and that will make them laugh and it will make Jenny less enviable, just for a moment, but for now, Maggie is happy to have the soup, to not be alienated from this new budding family. Even if she doesn't like Jenny, she doesn't want to be cut off from whatever club Dennis and her father are forming.

Dennis looks younger today, sitting, bouncing and staring lovesick and creepily at Jenny. Maggie doesn't understand why. She has no breasts and looks like it would feel like hugging a Popsicle stick man to be close to her, but Dennis looks head over heels. He's wearing a blue button up shirt and continually fussing with the buttons. When he appears as though he is going to start drooling, staring so wide eyed, smiling with such a toothy grin, Maggie kicks his shin under the table to pull him back together. She wants him to look up at her so she can stick out her tongue at him or tell him to think about mom and not this woman,

but he's too caught up in Jenny and her stories about Costa Rica and Mexico to notice that Maggie's cheeks have faded to a starch white and she is only one unwarranted laugh away from ripping off her stupid, stiff, orange sundress and running all the way home. And home means to her mother's home. Not her father's.

The soup arrives before anyone has a chance to laugh again. The waiter carries two bowls at a time so as not to spill boiling brown soup across his wrinkle free white collared shirt and black apron. Maggie is polite. She hears her mother's voice chiming through the back of her mind, *Let guests have the first and the best*, so after Dennis raises his hand to have one of the bowls to be placed before him, Maggie gestures for Jenny to take the second. Not that it matters, because they both wait for Maggie and her father to be served before they take a slurp or a bite. Still, Maggie's cordiality feels to her like she's making a point, even if she's the only one who gets it. Jenny's a guest. This is not a family dinner. This arrangement is not permanent.

When all the bowls are set before them, Maggie places a forest green fabric napkin in her lap and looks up to her father, waiting for him to say grace before they start their meal. To her surprise, he lifts his silver spoon without saying a prayer or any form of thanks. Neither Jenny nor Dennis appears surprised. They also dig in without hesitation, but Maggie gives her father a look of confusion and then a quick glare, so he knows both God and her mother are judging him right now. He doesn't notice.

Maggie reluctantly picks up her silver scissors and cuts the cheese as she lifts it up with her spoon. She feels too young to be sitting at such a nice restaurant with such fancy silverware. What if she drools or spills the soup all over her clean dress? Her nerves take control and in trying to be careful not to spill broth or dangle cheese down her chin, Maggie suddenly forgets how to use these scissors. She even forgets how to use the spoon. How is it she normally holds the handle? Does she grip it with a fist or pinch it like a pencil? All her family is talking and eating and laughing and Maggie can't conjure enough muscle memory

to do even one of those acts. She drops the spoon on her plate and leans back to watch them instead. Maybe without the spoon in hand, she can remember how to talk.

As she leans back in the iron chair, shifting to prevent the metal from bruising her bones, Maggie's father puts down his own spoon and leans forward looking concerned at Maggie's bowl. "Don't you like it?"

Maggie shakes her head. "I'm not hungry." Her father looks concerned and stares at her bare shoulders. Maggie wraps her arms around her chest, wishing she had remembered a sweater. She tries to distract him. "I want to save room for my chicken." She glances quickly at Jenny to see if she caught the joke, then returns her gaze to her father, so she doesn't appear too rude.

Dennis taps the table three times, asking for Maggie's attention. "It's good. You should eat *some* of it. Who cares about your diet. Mom's not here to notice."

Maggie and her father both blush, and her father coughs loudly, but it's too late to cover up her brother's comment. Maggie shakes her head and drops her eyes to her waist. "No. I'm really not hungry." Maggie wishes they would stop talking about the soup. If they keep twisting her stomach, soon she really won't have any room for the chicken.

"I'll eat it then." Maggie looks up to see her brother sipping the last spoonful of overcooked onions and salty broth from his brown ceramic bowl. Happily, she pushes hers across the table towards him. He lifts his spoon without the scissors and chews on a piece of cheese, unconcerned that it dangles and sticks to his chin.

Jenny dabs her lips and returns the napkin to her lap. Maggie wants to criticize the speed at which she consumed her soup but doesn't say a word because, really, she is just jealous, remembering how good it feels to chew and move your hands as quickly as you can, to build a hurricane behind your lips that you can swallow and end whenever you want. Somehow Jenny manages to eat this fast without any repercussions. If Maggie wasn't intent on hating Jenny for stealing her mother's seat, she might have asked her how she does this. She and Eleanor could use the advice. Maybe it has something to do with the vegetarian

thing. This soup's not really vegetarian, though. Maybe it will make her fat then. Maybe tomorrow, Jenny will wake up with huge boobs and Bird's bulbous stomach. The image of Jenny with wide hips and a bird stomach, her long black hair entwined in the Indigo feathers, makes Maggie want to fall over laughing. She settles for smiling silently to herself instead.

Her father takes notice of Maggie's glowing grin. While the black and white waiter clears their bowls from the table, he asks Maggie what she's laughing about.

"I'm not laughing."

"Okay, baby. What are you smiling about then?"

Maggie turns the smile off. She hates when her dad calls her baby. It's her mother's word, not his. "Nothing, Dad." She shakes her head and stares across the table. Her father and Jenny look at each other with a concerned, soft gaze. It makes Maggie nauseous for him to be looking at anyone but her mother like that. They keep their eyes locked for a dozen seconds, maybe more. Even though Maggie's counting them, the seconds feel too long. When they finally break apart, Jenny twists her head to catch Maggie's eyes instead. Her gaze is still soft, so soft it makes Maggie's eyes sting. She averts her own gaze towards her lap.

"Your dad says you love animals too, Maggie. I know you love trees." Maggie nods, still refusing to look up. "What's your favorite animal?"

"Squirrels." Maggie answers without hesitation but wishes she had thought. Is her favorite animal a secret? Should she be revealing this information?

"Do you like birds? Seagulls are my favorite."

"I've never met a seagull." Maggie puts her fingers in her mouth to bite down. Maybe if she looks busy, Jenny will stop trying to talk to her. If they keep talking about animals, Maggie runs the risk of liking her father's new girlfriend. If she likes Jenny, then there's no hope left.

"I love them. You should come to my work one day and I'll introduce you to my

favorite seagull. You can even feed him some frozen fish. Do you like birds? I was afraid of them when I was your age, but I love them now.”

Maggie pulls her fingers from her lips, just for a second. “I’m not afraid of birds. I like them.”

Her father leans forward and rests his head on his hands and his elbows on the table. That’s impolite for such a nice restaurant. “Baby, tell her what your favorite bird is.” He looks giddy, like a sitcom father once again. Jenny fits the role beside him even though she isn’t dressed exactly right. Dennis fits in too, sweet and innocent. All of them are. Dennis is Beaver and they’re the Cleavers and only Maggie’s sunken face, bleeding fingers, and thin drooping hair aren’t fit for television. Only she belongs here in the real world with her mother.

Maggie answers with a suddenly cheery voice. “Indigo Bunting.” If she sounds happy, if they can’t see her burning monologue, her silent unrest, maybe she can fake it until she really fits on the set with them.

“I’ve never seen one, Maggie. What do they look like?”

Maggie describes Bird in detail, leaving out indicators of her size and ending with, “They’re way more pretty than pigeons. I have a bird book! I’ll show you a picture.” They’re all smiling, laughing, leaning close together. It’s working. Maggie’s fitting in. But with her fear of being left behind pumping adrenaline, she’s also sweating now and can’t make her arms sit still. She hides her hands beneath her burning thighs and focuses on breathing deeply, relieved when the adults shift their attention towards Dennis.

“What’s your favorite animal Denny?” *Denny?*

“Puff the Magic Dragon!” Jenny laughs deeply, sweetly at him. Maggie rolls her eyes. Her father looks like he’s about to scold Maggie, but fortunately the waiter carries out their entrees just then. Again no one says grace.

Maggie’s overenthusiasm dies down while they dig into their meals. She only gets through a quarter of her chicken before she’s ready to vomit.



“Maggie, you can't be done,” her father says as Maggie takes her napkin off her lap and places it over the plate. She knows that's rude to do. She doesn't care.

“I'm not hungry.”

“You didn't eat anything.” Her father speaks, but Jenny nods along, staring wide eyed and Maggie's mostly untouched food. Her stare sends a chill through her back.

“I told you. I'm not hungry.”

“You can't only eat that.”

“I'm not hungry.”

“You have to eat at least the green beans.”

Maggie stares down at the mound of beans on her plate. She hates green beans and there are thirteen. That's unlucky. “I'm not hungry.”

“I don't care. You have to eat them and at least half of your chicken.” His voice is growing angry and frantic. Maggie's afraid if she argues anymore, he'll raise the stakes and she'll be sick before she gets home. Then she won't be able to go to the Forest tonight. Reluctantly, she sighs and places the napkin back in her lap. She lifts the fork and slowly finishes her beans. They taste like winter. They taste terrible.

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At her father's house, Maggie feels as though she has run two miles. She's so tired, she can hardly breathe. She asks to go the tree house to escape her father's house. Dennis asks if he can come play too and Maggie wants to say no, but he pouts so much, she has to give in. Outside the house, a calm descends her body. There's a tree and quiet night air. She decides she is going to actually play with her brother tonight. If she can't play with him, then she's an adult. If she's an adult. . . Well, she doesn't want to be an adult.

Maggie shows Dennis how to claw his way up the base of the tree without needing a rope. Then they play two games of backgammon without placing any bets. When Dennis decides to start telling jokes again, Maggie can't take it. She needs to be alone. She tells him

she'll be back and that she has to pee. She shimmies down the ladder and sneaks through the backdoor so no one inside hears her enter.

While in the bathroom, Maggie can hear Jenny's voice laughing loudly from the next room. When she leaves, she flushes slowly and tries to make all her steps quiet. She moves the door methodically to be certain it will not squeak. She sneaks next to the wall and looks into the kitchen where Jenny and her father are sitting, staring at one another, passing back and forth a lit cigarette, laughing after every sentence. Maggie watches them and it occurs to her what is so different about watching her father with Jenny instead of with Maggie's mother. Every time her father makes a joke to her mother, all she would do was roll her eyes and tell him to *just sit down* or *just say grace* or *just go shower*. She never laughed or joined him in conversation. Jenny always laughs. She even makes her own jokes, just like Bird and her mate's back and forth songs.

Maggie sneaks back through the kitchen, back through the back door. She climbs up the ladder and tells Dennis she doesn't want to talk. She wants to sit and stare at the trees. She looks for an animal but can't find any. She is relieved twenty minutes later when she hears her mother's car pull into the driveway.

But when Maggie sees her mother's face, tired though forced into a smile, Maggie is overcome with every emotion she hoped seeing her would push away. This wave is slightly different though, because in the car, watching her mother, Maggie doesn't feel pity for herself but pity for her mother. Even though she'd never tell them, Maggie does like her father's new girlfriend. She likes his new life. That brings another wave of nausea because now it's not Maggie, only her mother, who's being left behind in the real world, off the television set.

*June 1976*

1.

Maggie tugs at her cotton shirt while sitting in a stiff wooden chair and counts through the slow final minutes. It's the last day of school, and while Mrs. Turner would have given up trying to teach by this point, Mr. Phillips is still talking about the article he had the class read about the Black Panthers. Maggie feels her anticipation building, unable to listen to political statements with her impending release into summer. All she can think about is the sweat building on the sleeves of her shirt. Maggie tugs her hands from their hiding spot on her stomach and crosses her arms to mask her musky, dirty scent.

As the clock's hand ticks towards twelve, Mr. Phillips concludes a long winded monologue, takes a breath and tells the class how much he has enjoyed them this year. He glances at his watch. His rough beige lips curl into a smile that dimples his smooth cheeks. "You're free."

The students walk towards the door. Mr. Phillips reaches his hand out to each one as they pass, patting them on the shoulder and wishing them a good summer. As they walk out the door, Maggie watches the legs of the other girl students, smooth and long beneath plaid skirts. They're all getting curved bodies, grown up limbs. One gangly boy presses his hand discretely against a curly haired girl's smooth thigh and Maggie looks into her own lap, suddenly blushing. She stares at the small black hairs on her own exposed legs and, despite the thick humid air, Maggie wishes she had worn pants today. Though she fit easily under the bed last night, staring at the ripples in her thighs, she predicts that there will soon be problems with her legs getting underneath. She wishes no one else could see them. The boy removes his palm from the girl to shake Mr. Phillips's hand. As the final students push through the door, Maggie looks up from her body and stands to pick up her books.

Mr. Phillips gives Maggie an elongated handshake before she leaves. Maggie inhales his cigarette smell and ashy cologne, thinking he must use the same brand as her father.

“Thanks Mr. Phillips.” Maggie trips over her left foot as she pulls away and walks to the door.

“My pleasure.” He pauses and looks down at her legs, clearly also noticing how large they’ve become. Maggie blushes. “And you know, you can call me if you ever need to talk.” Why would she want to talk to him about this? His blue eyes compliment the coral color of his shirt. Why is blue such a sincere color? Maggie looks towards her feet and her fat hairy shins, wanting to run away.

“Thanks.” She pushes open the classroom door and pauses outside the frame. She’s not sure if she should sprint towards the exit doors, towards Mrs. Cook and Eleanor waiting outside, waiting to take her back to a quiet, awkward afternoon with Eleanor. Or should she turn around and slink back into the classroom, refuse to leave the oak seat where sometimes boredom haunts but every lesson taught was one she wanted to know.

Maggie leans against the eggshell painted bricks, considering her choices. She knows she only really has one. She inhales thick particles of chalky dust and the lingering musk of adolescent bodies. If only she could run home. If she slipped into the Forest this early in the day, she might not be home for dinner but maybe just for one day, it would be okay if she disappeared there for a whole afternoon. Eleanor’s house isn’t safe anymore. Family dinners aren’t special anymore. Maggie wants her last day of school to be a celebration. The Forest is the only place where she wants to celebrate.

The bathroom door slams shut down the hallway, pulling Maggie from circular thoughts. At the heavy clack, Maggie leans away from the cold wall. When she looks towards the noise, she sees Mark walking over to her. He pauses for a moment at a metal hung water fountain then looks back to Maggie and continues walking. He’s smiling as he approaches. His white slacks are beaded with thigh sweat. He has a drop of water on the front of his shirt. He must have sprayed himself with the water fountain, or he drooled. When Mark reaches Maggie, she can’t take her eyes off the image of longhaired men printed just under the drops of spit and water.

“Do you like it?” Mark asks while wiping his lips with the back of his hand.

Maggie shrugs and shakes her head, wishing her thin hair wasn't tethered with sweat to her forehead. To wipe it back though, she would have to use her hands, and she doesn't want to remove them from their tight grip on the black tape binding of her composition book.

“My older brother got it for me. It's his favorite band.”

Maggie nods and presses her arms flat against the sides of her body, willing her scent away. She begins walking towards the double doors, suddenly conscious of how rude it is to keep Mrs. Cook waiting when she has been so nice agreeing to watch Maggie and Dennis for the summer.

Mark turns and asks Maggie if she needs help with her notebooks. Maggie walks faster, glancing at her legs and hoping Mark doesn't follow her gaze. Why'd she take so long to leave? Mrs. Cook will be upset.

When Mark starts walking quickly too, keeping pace beside her, Maggie gives up and turns her head to finally make eye contact with him. She nearly trips over her dangling shoelace. “What's the band called?”

“AC-DC.” Mark makes a smile that falls crooked on his sunken, pale cheeks. “Heard of them?”

“No.” Maggie's at the door now and releases one hand from her books to press it open. Mark beats her to it. He leans against the door with his side and, after exposing the bright green grass and blaring outside sun, gestures with a flat palm and twiggy arm for her to exit.

Maggie mutters, “Thanks,” and glances outside to see if her friends are on the front step. Not seeing them, she stands on her tiptoes and searches over a row of small green bushes with dots of blue flowers to see if she can spot Mrs. Cook's red Chevrolet.

“So. Who do you like?” Mark stares at her face. She can feel his mucky brown eyes burning her cheeks.

Maggie flattens her feet and turns to look at him. “Huh?”

“What music do you like? What records?” He pushes greasy shoulder length strands behind his flat ears.

“Oh.” Maggie turns away from him to look at the parking lot again. “I like the Bee-Gees. And *Ben*, the Jackson Five.”

“Hey. I just got that album.” Maggie barely hears him as her eyes settle on Mrs. Cook’s car in the third row of the lot.

“Have a good summer.” Maggie steps down the cement steps to cross the road. His squeaky, “You too, you too” trails behind her. His voice sounds so much like Squirrel’s, Maggie turns around and smiles at him. Then she walks through the bushes to avoid having to make it to the sidewalk.

Mrs. Cook sits behind the wheel, smirking as Maggie approaches. Maggie pulls open the back door and slides onto the felt bench, beside Eleanor, who is also giggling. Mrs. Cook turns to face Maggie and tells her to put on her seatbelt, then nods towards Mark, who is now sitting on the steps in front of the two-story brick school. “He’s cute.” That sets Eleanor back into hysterics. Once she finally calms down, she leans against Maggie’s shoulder, letting her mousy curls fall onto Maggie’s chest. Maggie pushes Eleanor off and stiffens her body.

“I don’t like Mark.”

Mrs. Cook smiles into the rearview mirror, but Eleanor has already lost focus. Maggie wishes D. were picking her up. He wouldn’t have laughed at her like this.

Eleanor glances out the window and falls silent. Maggie looks at Eleanor’s kneecaps, which are smoother than those of all the pretty girls in Maggie’s class. At lunch a month ago, Eleanor showed Lila and Maggie her newly shaven legs and told them how her mother taught her to use a razor and rid her body of all its hair. Lila told them that Ariel says shaving is a form of imprisonment. Ladies should never shave to impress a man or a boy. Maggie knows Minnie shaves. Seeing the contorted frown on Eleanor’s face after this explanation, Lila reached out a hand and stroked Eleanor’s smooth legs. She told her she did like the way it felt, so maybe her mother didn’t know what she was talking about. Still, Lila has yet to start

shaving and Maggie used Lila's same excuse when Eleanor and Mrs. Cook prompted her to start. Really, though, Maggie doesn't feel like she's making a stand by not shaving. She just doesn't see why she should spend more time showering than she already does.

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Since their parents stopped attending the same dinner parties and Maggie's mother stopped asking Mrs. Cook to regularly babysit, whenever Eleanor and Maggie have spent time together, Lila has been with them. They tried to invite Lila along today, but Lila already had plans to go to Leann's house. So Maggie and Eleanor must learn to be friends without Lila around. It shouldn't be this hard. Even though Lila and Eleanor have been friends since they were in kindergarten together, when Maggie and Eleanor first met and their mother's became best friends, Maggie and Eleanor would spend at least two nights a week giggling and playing in each others rooms while their parents got drunk in the kitchens below them.

Today, though, something feels wrong. They listen to Paul Simon in Eleanor's bedroom, which is identical in layout to Maggie's own only decorated more classically with a white four post bed, a quilted bedspread, lilac walls, and grown up dresses hung in the closet. Maggie has to focus on the music instead of her friend because every time she listens to Eleanor talk, Maggie finds herself biting back half the words that come into her head. She has no desire to critique Eleanor's antifeminist vanity or prompt her to analyze Maggie's own sloppy immaturity. What do they talk about without Lila around?

Maggie thumbs through three books on Eleanor's dresser. "Did you get these to read for fun?" She doesn't recognize their titles, but when she opens to the middle page of one of them, she's shocked to find a list of anatomical words interspersed with verbs and adjectives she doesn't quite understand. She shuts the book and quickly backs away from the dresser.

Maggie watches Eleanor smile and giggle through the mirror. Eleanor puts down a brush and walks to her bed. She pulls a fourth book from under her pillow. "No. Well, my mom said I'd like them, but this is the one I actually want to read." She hands Maggie *Two Towers*. Maggie recognizes the cover from her grandfather's living room table collection.

“I want to read this, too.” Her voice comes out two pitches higher than normal and she has to breathe deeply to calm her relief. She reads the back flap quickly to make sure this book and her grandfather aren’t also secretly trashy. It sounds classier, at least, than the paperbacks on Eleanor’s dresser.

“Okay, but you have to start with *The Hobbit*. Bring your card tomorrow and my mom will take us to the library.” Maggie nods and smiles, looking through Eleanor’s piles of clothes, unsure what else to say. Eleanor searches through her closet behind Maggie and adds, nearly whispering, over her shoulder, “Just don’t ask her for suggestions. She’s not great at that.” Maggie wants to curl on the floor laughing but is afraid acting too happy at this small connection will make her look immature again. She doesn’t want Eleanor getting annoyed on their first afternoon together.

As one track slows and breaks, fading into the next, Dennis’s voice squeaks through the door and Eleanor responds, “Come in.” He peaks shyly from the door. Maggie rolls her eyes and beckons him forwards. He reluctantly steps inside. “What’s up?”

Maggie knows Dennis’s reluctance to step into Eleanor’s room has to do with its similarity to Maggie’s room and her privacy rules. She knows it’s unfair that she won’t let him into her space when he lets her hide out in his room all the time, but she is older. And, he doesn’t have a secret gateway under his bed. For all she loves Dennis, she doesn’t want him sliding across her floor. If he were to crawl into the Forest, if she had to share her friends, then her secret would become a family secret rather than a personal secret. All family things fall apart too easily.

So, despite being told he’s allowed in Eleanor’s room, Dennis stands close to the door and bounces uncomfortably the whole time. “I’m bored and Nic is at the field. Your mom said I can’t go alone and she’s busy. Maggie, will you come?”

Maggie considers an hour spent here with an hour spent playing tag in the park. Neither sounds ideal, but one option definitely sounds better. Maggie stands up and walks to



the door, careful not to walk too fast or insult Eleanor by showing how much she wants to leave this room. Before she reaches the door, though, Eleanor stops her. "Wait up."

Eleanor stands, backs away from the closet and examines her reflection in the princess mirror above her dresser. She frowns and shakes her head. "But I can't wear this. And Maggie, you can't wear that. Dennis, we'll meet you downstairs in five minutes." Surely, Eleanor can't think Nicolas is cute.

Dennis smirks as he backs out of the door and Maggie's heart lurches, wishing she could run after him and shut the door on Eleanor. But Dennis shuts the door on her and Maggie's forced to turn around after the quick wooden bang and watch her friend tear off her old shirt and paw through hangers of grown up fabrics.

Maggie can't help but stare at her friend's pale stomach, which despite having grown a thin layer of black fuzz, seems to have shed about an inch of fat. It's flat and muscular now. Maggie thinks to comment on it but knows how much she hates when Lila points out how narrow Maggie's stomach is, so she swallows the sentence and instead asks, "What's wrong with my clothes?"

"You have an ink stain on your pants, Maggie. Not to mention your shirt makes you look like you're nine."

Maggie looks down at her pink and white smocked shirt and olive green shorts. Sure enough, there's a dot of black ink smeared over the right pocket. Maggie pulls an uncapped ballpoint pen from her pocket and drops it on Eleanor's dresser. She'll admit the stain doesn't make for the nicest outfit, but they're just going to play in the park, so she doesn't care. Besides, this is Maggie's favorite shirt. Her grandmother made it for her for her birthday two years ago and Maggie only recently realized it still fits. She has no intention of changing out of it. "Eleanor, I don't think I'd fit in your clothes."

Eleanor sighs, exasperated, as she tugs a green plaid, collared, dress over her head. The dress is way too nice for playing tag, but she doesn't seem to notice or care. Her face sinks as she continues getting dressed and keeps touching her stomach. If Lila were here,

she'd say something nice. Maggie says nothing. Eleanor flattens the fabric over her stomach and turns to the mirror to twirl the curls of her frizzy hair. "For my birthday, my mom says she wants to get my hair professionally straightened."

Maggie shrugs, but doesn't say anything.

"Do you think it'll look good straight?"

"I guess."

"Lila says she likes it curly."

"I know."

"But I think she's just being nice."

"I don't think so." Maggie chews her pinkie, anxious to leave.

"I don't know." Eleanor pauses and lets her lips dangle open if she looks into the mirror. "I like it curly."

Maggie smiles softly, meeting Eleanor's eyes in the sun glowing mirror. "Me too." She steps close and flattens the top of Eleanor's head with her left palm. "Leave it down."

"Okay." Eleanor lifts her fingers to her lips and chews on one nail before pulling it quickly away and wiping the drool on her pleated skirt. "I'm ready to go now." She walks towards the door, but before she reaches the handle, she turns and takes a rubber band off her wrist and holds it out to Maggie. "Here. You should put your hair back." Maggie feels her thin hair scratching over burning ears. She wants to kick her best friend. Instead, she pulls her few hairs into a ponytail and follows Eleanor silently out of the room.

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Arriving at the familiar, wide open green of the neighborhood park, Maggie's heart rises to see her brother's best friend sweating and running circles around the field. She doesn't know what game he's playing alone out there, but she's sure Dennis can teach her the rules. Even though it's humid and she's slightly dehydrated and normally hates running, the energy she's stocked up from reserved physical attacks on Eleanor this afternoon should fuel her for at least two or three hours.

But as they step on the grass and Dennis says, “Thanks”, and runs to Nicolas without waiting for Maggie to follow. Maggie spots a large group of her classmates sitting cross legged in the grass. Eleanor walks towards them, and Maggie realizes she’s meant to follow her twelve-year-old friend, not her eight-year-old brother. Her heart falls fast. The air becomes sticky, the heat intolerable, and Maggie’s legs become lead weights, nearly impossible to make walk. Somehow she manages to lift them, though, and they carry her body slowly towards the familiar faces of the neighborhood middle school girls and boys, mostly boys. When she finally catches up with Eleanor, who’s laughing and twitching and tapping John Griese on the shoulder, Maggie settles in the grass beside a girl whose name she forgets. She remembers sitting beside her in their fifth grade class. The grass cuts half moons in Maggie’s bare sweating thighs. Within a minute of sitting down, she’s uncomfortable, but doesn’t know where to move to relieve the itching.

The girl smiles at Maggie. “What are you doing for the summer? Any plans?” Maggie considers lying about a hiking trip in the woods, but worries that comes too close to sharing secrets, and if Eleanor were to hear she would certainly point out the lie. Not that Eleanor’s likely to listen to anything Maggie talks about this afternoon. She’s currently seated between Gary Reeds, a chubby boy with greasy black hair and sweat stains on his tight blue NY Giants t-shirt, and Eric Sanders, a skinny boy with long blond hair falling past his shoulders and stubble spottily lining his upper lip. If he weren’t always smirking, Maggie might think Eric was cute but looking at him today paired with sweaty Gary and a maniacally laughing Eleanor, the sight of him makes her feel dizzy and chilled. And a little nauseous.

The girl next to Maggie keeps talks without waiting for Maggie to reply. “My grandparents have a glass house in North Hampton. Do you know the Hamptons?” *No*. “It’s this pretty place in New York. My grandma takes me to the swim club each day and I take tennis lessons. Do you play tennis? We also have a boat and they take me riding and swimming. Have you ever been on a boat?” Maggie thinks Toronto sounds nicer. Maybe Maggie can convince her mom to take her there for vacation. She knows her mother misses

her parents, especially her mom. Maggie better not tell this girl about her Toronto vacation until she asks her mom for sure. It's best not to lie. Unless you're covering up secrets.

“After the Hamptons, I'm going to Camp Wakakoko.” *Is that a real word?* “Do you go to camp?” Maggie is about to tell her about camp last summer, leaving out the part about her homesickness, but the girl doesn't wait for her response for long enough. “I have two best friends there. We go every summer. It's in Pennsylvania. Have you ever been to Pennsylvania?” Maggie tries to remember the girl's name. Anna? No. Hanna? No. Something like that. She does remember the girl's mailbox is painted like a West Highland Terrier with wooden ears sticking out of it, which is strange because Maggie's almost certain her family has a Border Collie.

Maggie realizes that if she nods and smiles, the girl will keep talking and Maggie won't seem rude or antisocial, but she also won't have to listen. Maggie's lack of interest in the girl's descriptions and quick firing questions makes her head pound and time slow so significantly, she's certain the anxiety and desire to run away will make her vomit or scream if she has to listen any longer.

So Maggie nods and the girl keeps talking. Maggie's eyes wander to the center of the field, towards her brother. He has six children standing around him, laughing and clapping their hands while he hops on one foot, makes a silly face and eventually rolls on the ground, bubbling with laughter. Maggie wants to walk over to them. She wants to sit beside her brother and he's her best friend again. She wants their mindless jokes to save her from the screaming in her brain. But Maggie knows she has to sit here. She has to keep her best friend company. She has to act her age. Mindless Dennis jokes likely couldn't save her today, anyways. In her confusion, she'd likely be just as bored with him as she is sitting here.

Maggie's head spins while she watches Dennis play and tries to shut out Eleanor's cackle and flirting laughs with lanky boys. It's so easy when you're eight. All you need is a field or a song or time to be kids together, and that's it, you're friends. Best friends. Not that it's only situational. Maggie rejected many girls she was left alone to play with, so

befriending Eleanor and Lila was special. Still, it was easier then. Being eight or nine or ten, your friends just had to like the same songs or the same games and that meant love. There were no secrets or hippies or boys drawing space between you. There was no internal voice making you lonely. Now Maggie has a hidden world. Lila has modern friends. And Eleanor has dirty books and grown up dreams. Adults say girls can't talk about these secrets, so how can we ever expect to truly love one another again? With age, does *best friend* simply mean proximity when really we're all alone standing on this field?

At least for Maggie, there is the Forest and Bird, Luna and Squirrel. She can tell them about her parents and the tree house and Eleanor becoming Mrs. Cook. Those are real best friends. With them to visit each night, Maggie can make do with whatever she's left with out here.

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Their mother picks Maggie and Dennis up at five o'clock promptly. In the car, Maggie lets Dennis take the front seat because her mother's hair is sweat stained, and Maggie doesn't want to be the one who has to listen to her mother complain about work today. Her excitement about the job lasted exactly three weeks before she realized it is difficult to be out of the house all day and running errands for someone else, even if her boss is relatively nice. Every night, it takes only ten minutes before she starts ranting about some small incident that ruined her day. Without a husband to complain to, her kids are the ones who have to listen. Maggie doesn't want to listen anymore. Dennis got to play at the park. He can take the front seat.

Dennis doesn't seem to understand the trade, though. He beams as he climbs in the passenger's side door. Maggie's slides onto the backbench beside six brown grocery bags. Maggie shoves her hands in the bag's open mouths and is relieved to find only fruit and vegetables, a carton of eggs, no sugar or salts. Maggie doesn't want there to be too many tempting foods in the house. Lately, she's been getting cravings at night. They are one thing if she doesn't want to eat the food in the cupboard, but they are worse if she knows there are

cookies and pretzels in the kitchen. She has to hide in the Forest to keep herself from binge eating.

When the engine rumbles, Maggie's mother starts talking. To Maggie's surprise, she doesn't complain. She's actually smiling. "Guess who I ran into at Pathmark today?"

Dennis bounces up wanting to respond. "Mr. Potato Head."

Maggie's mother smiles at Dennis but Maggie can see her rolling her eyes in the rearview mirror. She turns her head to look at Maggie. "No. Mr. Phillips. Your teacher."

Maggie curls her legs and looks out the window, past Eleanor's stucco house and white fence, into the distant woods and the falling sun. "How is he?"

Maggie watches her mother blush and smile in the rearview mirror. "He looked good. I mean, he is good. We talked about his summer job, and he asked me about my new job, and I told him all about the office and what Clinton's like and how I might get to go back to school next year." Maggie's only half listening to the rant, until her mother pauses at the end. "He asked about you and one thing led to another." She twirls the ends of her hair as she turns onto their road. "I ended up inviting him to our house for dinner. Next Friday. I'm going to call your dad and make sure he's free but otherwise we have a date."

Maggie sighs, "Great," and leans her head against the cold glass window while Dennis turns around and pokes his pointer finger through the gap between his chair and the headrest. Maggie returns his forced smile but then glares back out the window. She likes Mr. Phillips fine. She still doesn't want to sit through a long, fake family dinner.

The car bumps over the curb as Maggie's mother overshoots the turn into the driveway. Dennis's head crashes into the headrest. Maggie's head collides with the glass and in between the impulse to scream and closing her eyes, she finds a sudden feeling of hope. Maybe acting normal for her teacher will remind her parents how nice it feels for a family to be whole. Anyhow, they haven't fought in nearly nine days, so maybe all their problems have started to heal.

2:

Five weeks after Maggie sent a letter to her grandfather, her mother comes inside carrying a gold square envelope addressed to Maggie in his block handwriting. “What does it say?” she asks as Maggie tentatively unpeels the envelope's seal. Before it's completely opened, Maggie shoves the letter into her shorts pockets.

“I don't know. I'm going to read it later.”

Maggie's mother's eyes widen, questioningly, but she doesn't say anything as she carries the sewing machine into the front foyer. Maggie walks to the sink and begins cleaning off vegetables for dinner. They all wrote the letter. They should all read the response together.

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Before she slides under the bed tonight, Maggie takes the note out of the envelope and folds it to place it in her baggy shorts' pocket. In the purple in between, she leaves her hand over the note to keep it from falling into the swirling abyss. She lands in the field of green with thick stationary still cooling her palm.

Squirrel and Luna wait over Maggie. As she opens her eyes, their voices fade into Luna's long purr. “We found something today. Maggie, you have to stand up so we can show you.”

“Quick.”

Maggie rubs her eyes. It's taking longer than normal for her sight to adjust. She wishes her friends would calm down. At least in this frantic state, Maggie doesn't have to come up with an excuse to reject Squirrel's acorns.

“Get up. Bird's meeting us.”

Maggie rubs her hand along the envelope in her pocket. Now is not the right time to read it.

Last week, Maggie left a towel she stole from her father's linen closet. She hid it in her duffel bag and tied it around her dry hair to keep it attached to her body through the purple space. She gave it to Bird so she can cover her Eggs and be free to explore with Squirrel and Luna even when Maggie is at home. So far, the towel hasn't disappeared, but Luna doesn't let Bird leave the Nest for long. She's afraid the towel will evaporate while they are away and the Eggs will freeze.

When Maggie asks what happened, Luna rumbles a purr of pleasure and says, "It's great Maggie, you have to see. This is incredible and we have to go quickly. I want to show you what we found."

"Where?"

"By the two green leaves." Maggie runs ahead to lead them on the journey. After only a few quick strides, Maggie's head starts to pound and shivers run through her stomach, her arms, her feet. She pauses for three deep breaths.

Luna bolts past Maggie and yells, "We can't pause, Maggie. It might disappear. Run faster." Squirrel stops beside her, though, and tells Luna a few extra seconds should be okay. He pats Maggie's arm and Luna crouches into pounce position. Squirrel's eyes glide over Maggie's body. She feels his gaze rest on her hair, her cheeks, her slipping off pants.

He puffs up his cheeks and opens his mouth, revealing iridescent buckteeth. He slips two fingers into his wide mouth and pulls out an acorn, glimmering with his saliva. "Here. Eat it."

Maggie shakes her head and her thin hair scrapes across her sunken cheeks. "I'm not hungry."

Squirrel grunts and taps his front paw on the plastic stranded grass. "We can't run until you eat and we need to get going. Eat or we have to wait. We don't have the time to wait. So eat."



Maggie reluctantly sticks out a hand. The spit encrusted acorn cools her skin, prompting a second trill of shakes to pass through overheated body. She wipes the acorn on her cotton shirt and places it on her tongue.

It has been three weeks since Maggie last tasted the sweet warmth of an acorn. She clamps her teeth on the flakey outside, lets the bark like shell crumble beneath her cheeks. An acorn likely equals about eight almonds, which her mother says is healthy for a breakfast. Eighty calories. She'll eat just four almonds for breakfast tomorrow and then it will even out. But even with eight almonds, sometimes Maggie is dizzy by lunch. Maybe she needs all eight for the morning. Maggie pushes the chewed rinds to the front of her mouth and purses her lips to spit them out.

Squirrel screams, *No*, and Maggie inhales deeply. Doesn't he know that if she gets too heavy, she won't be able to come see him anymore? She glares at him, her eyes begging for him to let her exhale her food, but Squirrel shakes his head, *No*. Maggie tells herself to concentrate on the taste not the fat. The mush rubs against buds at the base of her tongue as she swallows. The acorn tastes of firewood and summer, seasonal warmth she gets all year round. It tastes of the air, of the Forest and Squirrel's musky scent, preserved comfort and nightly escape. It tastes like eighty calories.

"Okay. I ate. Now we can go."

Squirrel looks at Maggie's hair, her stomach, her legs, once more. "We have to go. But you can't run."

"Yes I can." She jogs ahead of him, but the shivers shake her head, her stomach. The haloed trees and shimmering air blurs before her gaze. "Fine. Let's walk."

Luna trots before them. "Quick. We're losing time and it might disappear."

"What might disappear?" Maggie's tone flattens as her eyes focus on her feet to ensure she doesn't topple over. She tries hard not to give into the spinning buzz that fills her ears.

Squirrel yells back at Maggie from ten feet ahead. "Me and Bird went to the hole today."

"Tell her about the twig," Luna interrupts.

"I will." Squirrel pauses. "Bird wanted to stick a twig through the hole. She thinks she could send him something on the end of the stick if it reached."

"A letter. She thought she could send a letter, remember? Like the one Maggie wrote but to him not her grandpa."

"I know. It's not important." Luna shrugs back, and Squirrel continues. "It wasn't long enough. It disappeared. Bird got upset and pecked at the wall."

"You did too!"

"Yes. I did too. We kicked and screamed and then."

"It broke!"

Squirrel glares at Luna and continues the story himself. "We kept hitting the wall and eventually it broke. Just like that."

"They could see his beak. Just through the wall." Squirrel lets Luna talk now.

"Squirrel peaked through and saw rain drops. Rain drops, Maggie. He saw the real world."

"Really?"

Squirrel nods confirming Luna's story.

"Where was it?" Maggie's voice rises now and the burst of energy causes a gripping pain to sear through her pounding head. Her stomach clenches and she feels the acorn mush begging to make its way back up and return to her mouth.

"I don't know, but it's a real world, a real world out there, Maggie. I could go home. I could drink milk and sleep in a bed." Luna's voice falls deep and she rumbles a purr at the thought of a mattress and cans of fish.

"But did you see anyone? Is it my backyard?"

Squirrel quickens the plop of his feet. "Come on. Save your energy for walking."

Luna darts ahead, but Squirrel stays behind with Maggie. He loops his warm, stumpy arm around Maggie's pale one. When Squirrel finally drops his arm, Maggie feels for the note in her pocket again. She contemplates reading it out loud to them, but they're all preoccupied. She leaves the note where it is, safe in her pocket, and walks to join the party at the Wall instead.

Her two friends press their faces and limbs against the Wall, analyzing every inch of ceramic blue. Maggie pauses to analyze every inch of fur on Squirrel's body and every spot of color on Luna's back. She hears feathers flapping and Maggie turns to look at Bird's eyes, to analyze the hue of each of her feathers. Bird flaps her wings, *Hello*. "Is he back?"

Squirrel sighs from the wall, refusing to let his hands lose contact. Maggie picks a leaf from the tree overhead and crumbles it between the two plates of her palms. Luna squeaks with a cry of frustration. "It's gone." Luna turns and slides beside Bird now, wrapping her tail around her twig ankles. Bird closes her eyes and releases three mismatched notes that send a new chill through Maggie's cool limbs. Squirrel continues tracing the arc, groaning as he rises to his tiptoes. His hands stretch above his head and he runs them across the porcelain Sky.

Maggie leans against the wall and silences the sigh of relief that falls from her lips. Yesterday, Bird's mate poked his nose through the hole. Bird's mate sang from the other side. Today they could have left her, but now they're staying here. While they flutter about and try to break through, Maggie tugs the letter out of her pocket to read herself.

*There once was a tree that stood eight feet tall. During the days, this tree housed creatures in the shades of its leaves and the twists of its branches. At the same time that there was this tree, there was also a man, the Lumberjack. The Lumberjack wanted to build a bed for his daughter, and so he picked up his ax and went into the Forest where the Tree lived. The Lumberjack said a thankful prayer for the gift of the Tree then swung his arm and chopped it down.*

*There were two things the Lumberjack was unaware of when he first chopped down this tree. The first was that there were animals in the Tree. The second, that there was magic in his hands. When the Lumberjack swung his ax, all of the Forest was absorbed as a still image in the wood of the Tree. All of the animals were absorbed into the Forest, trapped in the world created between the newly made bed. The animals could not get out.*

*For years the animals lived this way, in the perfect autumn Forest. The daughters of the Lumberjack, who absorbed traces of his magic in the blood he gave them, were the only people who could enter the Forest and transport between the two worlds. When they crawled beneath the bed, the girls made the trip to meet the animals. The animals loved the girls.*

*Yet, for all they loved the girls, they did not love the Forest. Living forever in one perfect place is not a true life, and all day long the animals thought about the families and adventures they lost when the Lumberjack cut down their Tree. They longed for the lives they had lost.*

*So the animals sought and sought after an escape, but they couldn't find one. The Lumberjack's magic was not permanent, though. There was always an attachment to the world they had left. But no matter how much they searched they would never find an exit alone. The only chance the animals had was for the girls they loved to break apart the world the Lumberjack built.*

Maggie feels her face flush reading through the note. There is a way out, but the way out is destruction. And Maggie knows Bird's mate never lived in the seventies. Their outside world is not with her. Watching them grow angry, sad, frustrated at the wall, she feels all the same emotions boil inside her but for different reasons.

The others don't understand how good life is here. They don't realize that she couldn't survive her house if they weren't here, under her bed.

Maggie crushes the letter and shoves it back in her pocket, then closes her eyes. She lets the buzzing in her ears carry her away. She lets her head and body fold over, curling up

in the ground. She'll let them be sad tonight. Tomorrow, she'll show them why they don't want to leave.

3:

One week into summer, Maggie and Eleanor fall into a daily routine. Today they are sprawled across her living room floor, peacefully reading beneath the midafternoon sun glow.

The window has white lace curtains which blow with the warm air filtering through the open glass. Though their houses have the same layout, Mrs. Cook finished decorating her house a year ago and did hers so differently than Maggie's own mother that laying on the carpet feels like existing in another world. While Maggie's living room relies on the stone fireplace for warmth and still holds the unweathering memory of their last family conversation, Eleanor's living room is painted blue and filled with a collection of white wicker and yellow fabric seats. Mrs. Cook has managed to successfully reject contemporary styles yet still fit in beautifully with the adults of the modern world.

Even though Maggie was at first reluctant to spend her days with a woman who laid her lips too close to Maggie's father's skin, when Maggie sits down in the Cooks' living room and her own parents are out of sight, she can't help but feel safe, at home. In spite of everything else, Mrs. Cook plays the role of mother and babysitter perfectly. She makes them healthy lunches. She always picks them up on time, and today, she has built a perfect rhythm of summer and serenity to her living room. It feels as though she's orchestrated the air blowing sweet pollen perfume with humid gusts that ripple white curtains, as though she composed the songs of Glen Miller floating from the record player and harmonized it with her knitting needles clicking from the kitchen, as though she painted Eleanor flipping through a magazine, Dennis drawing with crayons, and Maggie holding *The Hobbit*. The effect is beautiful. Right now, there's nowhere Maggie would rather be.

So when the doorbell chimes, cutting jaggedly through the house's pristine atmosphere, Maggie shrinks low beneath her book and pretends not to hear the ding-dong, ding-dong on repeat. Unfortunately, Mrs. Cook doesn't shut her ears. She responds to the call. Maggie waits until Dennis finishes packing his crayons into their box before she picks

herself off the floor and walks towards the foyer, expecting to walk into her mother's arms and a night of sewing and helping to cook. Lately, when her mother says she's too tired to make anything but frozen lasagna, Maggie will cut real vegetables and pour her mother a drink. With this routine, Maggie has learned how to save the nights from descending into complaints and extended bouts of exhausted silence.

But when Maggie strains her ears to catch the tone of her mother's voice and determine what mood she's going to find her in, Maggie's startled to hear not her mother's daily round of *thank you's*, but instead her father's throaty laughter. Maggie leaves her book on the white carpet and runs through the kitchen, into the foyer, pausing just a foot from her father. He never picks up his children.

"What are you doing? Where's mom?"

"She's running a little late at work today, so she asked if I'd pick you up so we could start cooking."

Mrs. Cook's eyes pause questioningly and she steps a foot closer to the heat seeping through the open door, a foot closer to Maggie's father's arm. "How is she doing at work? Lucy never talks to me about her job. We're all curious to know what career is so great it could draw her back into an office after all these years." Maggie doesn't think this reflects a good mother. She's making Maggie uncomfortable. Maggie locks her eyes on her father's face, willing him to remember the vow of silence that holds his friends together.

He smiles at Maggie. "Well you know, Lucy didn't want to go, but Maggie here begged her for some space. Maggie said she needed an excuse to be at the Cook's house more often." Maggie exhales and rolls her eyes, turns and walks towards the kitchen to pick up her book but finds Dennis already walking towards her, holding out *The Hobbit* and smiling to see his father in the doorway.

While Maggie and Dennis sit on the tiled floor to lace their sneakers, Mrs. Cook leans too close to Maggie's father and offers to keep the three of them for dinner. "Lou's going to be working late and Eleanor and I would love the company." She holds the last word too

long, too breathy, and for a second Maggie fears the reincarnation of past relationships. The tomato soup the motherly Mrs. Cook made her for lunch after Maggie rejected grilled cheese bubbles in her stomach, threatening to come up and fall all over the careless Mrs. Cook's perfect floor. The nausea subsides when her father shrugs away and walks towards Dennis to tousle his son's hair instead of the babysitter's.

Maggie's father laughs his charming laugh, smiles his carefree smile, then looks at Maggie as he responds. "That's very sweet, but maybe another night when Lou's around we can all eat together. We have to talk about what his Yankees have been doing. Tonight, though, I have dinner plans with Lucy and the kids." He takes Dennis's hand to lift him from the ground. Maggie smiles and grabs his other palm to leave the house. Mrs. Cook steps away from the door, biting back rejection with an over illuminated, painted smile.

Before they reach the door, Maggie turns around, remembering to wave goodbye to her best friend who always walks to the foyer to see her out. Today, Eleanor leans against the dandelion painted hallway walls, arms crossed over her stomach. She's holding her breath to keep her body pulled tight. If Maggie were Lila, she would tell her she looked beautiful and to take a breath. Maggie says nothing. Eleanor's eyes are trained on her mother's face, half in distrust, half in confusion. Maggie finally decides to yell, "I'll see you tomorrow," but Eleanor doesn't seem to hear. She stays rigid, in place, bewildered and scowling.

In the car, while Maggie buckles her seatbelt, she asks her father what their special dinner plans are.

"Didn't your mother tell you?"

"What?" Maggie has special plans for the Forest tonight that she has to prepare for. She doesn't have time for special plans at home.

Dennis claps his hand from the backseat. "I remember."

"Remember what?"

"Your teacher's coming over for dinner. Didn't your mother remind you?"



Maybe. Maggie didn't listen to her well this morning, she was too distracted trying to stash away presents for her friends. "Oh. Yes. She did." Maggie stares at the red barn mailbox as her father pulls into the driveway. It's only been five months and yet he looks out of place parking at their house. Maggie doesn't have time for this today. "So what are we cooking?"

"Nothing." Her father laughs as he waits on the front step for Maggie to open the door. "No. Everything's already made. We just have to heat things up and Dennis, you get to set the table." Maggie removes her keys and lets them inside.

"Why doesn't Maggie set the table?"

"She has to help me in the kitchen. Don't complain. You have the easy job."

As Maggie pours vegetables from their containers in the refrigerator into pots on the gas lit stove top, her father fiddles with the dishes in the sink, not really helping with anything. "Maggie?"

"Yeah?" Maggie responds without taking her eyes off her cooking.

"Your mother and I needed to talk to you about something before dinner, but since she's not here, just you and I are going to have to talk."

"Okay." Maggie stares at a pile of cold mashed potatoes and horrible memories flood her. They couldn't possibly be getting divorced again.

"We're concerned about this diet you're on."

Maggie steps back from the stove and looks down at her legs. Has he also noticed how wide they're becoming? Like trunks. Maggie wants to climb trees. She doesn't want to be a tree.

"We think it's become unhealthy, Maggie."

Maggie looks up, squinting at her father. He said *we* but there's no *we* anymore. He's just *he* and she's just *she* and *she* can't possibly agree with him because *she's* on this diet too. Maggie returns her attention to the stove and says, "Okay," hoping to put a stop to the conversation. It doesn't work.

“Maggie, when Mr. Phillips is here tonight, we need you to eat everything on your plate.”

So this isn't really about her diet. It's about looking perfect for strangers. That makes more sense. Maggie shrugs and says, “Okay,” again but doesn't take her eyes off the food even as her father leans over to kiss her on the cheek and tell her he loves her. He walks into the dining room to check on Dennis's progress. Maggie feels her face flush, stained red with the steam of the recooked potatoes.

\*\*\*\*\*

Maggie's mother arrives home ten minutes before Mr. Phillips rings the doorbell, which is just enough time for her to freshen her face, slip into an appropriate red housewife dress and set in criticizing Maggie's father's new hair. Maggie doesn't say that she likes the longer curls. She feels all hopes for their reunion fading away from her before Mr. Phillips even steps through the front door.

At the table, Maggie sits across from Mr. Phillips. She stares at him while everyone begins eating their salads. He's underdressed compared to the rest of the family, wearing acid wash jeans, brown loafers and a forest green thin tight t-shirt with a large white tree on the front. Maggie thinks it is a red wood tree, but doesn't ask so as not to draw attention to the comparison between his outfit and Dennis's slacks and button up plaid, her mother's scooped neck, short sleeved, A-line dress, her father's suit and tie, and her own shiny purple jumper, which she finished just yesterday. His hair has grown significantly since she last saw him. His once smooth chin and neck are now covered in a forest of red and brown twines. His long blond hair's no longer pulled behind his ears, but falls loose and thick around his shoulders, which in this shirt, rather than the plaid button ups he wore in class, Maggie realizes are broad, strong. His torso is rippled with muscles. He looks like a tree.

Maggie's mother seems to have noticed this as well. She kept looking at his torso and touching his bulging arms when she leads the family from the door to the table. Dennis who was uncomfortable at first, continually tugging at his buttoned sleeves and scratching his chin

as though he can uncover his own forest underneath his baby pink skin, is now eating carelessly and telling jokes while he chews.

“What's the difference between a dog and a pig?”

Maggie's father scratches his bare chin and thinks. “The tail?”

“Exactly!” Dennis sprays a mist of tomato juice when he laughs.

Maggie's mother dabs her lips with a napkin before she speaks. “Dennis. Cover your mouth.” She laughs awkwardly and sweetly, staring doe eyed at Mr. Phillips. “Did you know Mr. Phillips is working at a humane shelter this summer?”

“Really?” Maggie looks up from her meal. Mr. Phillips isn't trying to butt into her family. She can be nice to him and look at him when she asks questions.

“Yes. It is fun. I don't do any of the dirty work. I just take dogs on their walks and sign people up for adoption.”

“I see.” Maggie nods at Mr. Phillips but keeps her eyes trained on her mother. Why does she keep tugging at her hair? She should let the loose curls falling freely over her bare collarbone. She'd look less childish that way. And she shouldn't blush every time he smiles at her.

“John was talking about some of the dogs and I was thinking maybe we could adopt one. What do you think?” *Who's John?* Her mother is still smiling at him. Maggie understands. Though her mother clearly intended this question for Maggie, she remains quiet, staring at the palms folded in her lap and it's her father who fills the silence now.

“I love dogs. What kind are we getting? A Chihuahua? I love them.” He flashes a smile at Mr. Phillips.

Maggie wants to ask if that's because Jenny looks like one. She keeps her eyes trained on her lap but opens her mouth. “I thought you were allergic to dogs.”

“I was, but that changed. Don't you know, when you turn thirty you lose all your childhood troubles?”

“And get mental disorders instead?” Maggie looks up at her father then returns her

eyes quickly to her sweating palms, wishing she had bit back her words. Her father laughs loudly and taps his foot. Her mother coughs nondiscretely, and Mr. Phillips shifts back and forth, causing his denim pants to swish against the wooden seat. Now it's Dennis's turn to break the awkward silence.

“Mr. Phillips, what's your favorite animal?”

“Seals. What about you?”

“Puff the Magic Dragon!” Lucky for Dennis, with two families now, he can repeat jokes. Mr. Phillips and her mother laugh sincerely, fresh eyes to the act. Maggie's mother is draped in butterfly wings, clinging to her sheer sweaty skin. The air burns with heat. Maggie wishes her mother would have more money just for the summer. They could turn up the air conditioner, and they could stay home all day together. Well, if she could wish for anything, really she'd only wish for one thing. She looks up to her father. For the first time, he seems to wish for the same thing. Every time her mother's smile breaks open and Mr. Phillips winks at her, Maggie's father's head tilts further towards the right. A grimace expands slowly, discretely. Maggie certain she's the only one who notices. He drops his silver utensil, releasing a clang that shatters their conversation.

Maggie's father straightens his back and lifts a cloth white napkin to dap his chin.

“Mr. Phillips.” He smiles, widely, too widely to be sincere. “Teaching is an interesting profession. How'd you choose it?”

Mr. Phillips produces his own smile, equally wide, equally insincere. Maggie's mother coughs. Dennis doesn't understand enough to shift uncomfortably. “I studied math in college but didn't want to go into graduate programs, so I took up teaching.”

“When did you start?”

“Four years ago.”

“Didn't want to be a seal or a soldier either, I guess.”

Her mother coughs. Mr. Phillips smiles, eyes locked on Maggie's father. “Nope. But I guess neither did you, huh?”

Maggie sees her mother's smile fade and a small spark blaze in her father's eyes. Jealousy is a new coat on him. Maggie doesn't like it. She lifts her fork, but eating and smiling won't solve this discomfort. She drops her fork and smiles widely, alternating her glance between all three adults. "Dennis learned a new joke at the park today. Want to hear it?"

Dennis bounces up, happy to repeat his newly learned trick. "What's the difference between a chicken and a turkey?"

Mr. Phillips says, "Turkey tastes better with gravy?" Maggie laughs imagining repeating the joke to Jenny. Her father frowns, probably imagining the same thing.

"No." Dennis pauses, looking around the table for a second guess. Everyone smiles. No one speaks. "Their feet!" The joke makes no more sense at awkward dinners than it did at Eleanor's house. Dennis is never going to be a biologist. Or a comedian.

Maggie's mother made a hot red tomato soup, minute steak bubbling with steak sauce, cauliflower, peas and stiff mashed potatoes. Maggie gets away with only eating two spoonfuls of soup because her dad's preoccupied with questioning Mr. Phillips, but as conversation wanes through the second course, he begins prodding Maggie under the table. To get him to stop, she eats the peas and cauliflower and some of the steak. She refuses to touch the potatoes no matter how long he stares at her. She knows he won't say anything about the diet as long as they have a guest.

After she clears this round of plates, Maggie's mother puts out a tray of store bought cookies and a bowl of fruit. "I'm sorry about this dessert. I've been stressed at work this week, but they are from a great bakery in town."

"Don't apologize. This meal has been fantastic. I haven't eaten this well since I moved out of my parents' house." Maggie's mother's face flushes at this comment. Maggie's father starts laughing. Maggie takes three cookies from the tray and places them on her plate. This makes both her parents stare at her, finally smiling and settling back at the table. Every ten minutes, when her parents look away or at each other, Maggie shoves one cookie in her

pocket and smacks her lips to pretend she has just eaten it. Maggie's pretty sure Mr. Phillips sees her doing this with the sugar cookie, but it's not school. He won't say anything.

Because they think she ate three cookies, Maggie's parents don't pressure her to eat any fruit. When she asks to be excused at nine-thirty for bed, they let her go without question. Dennis asks if he can stay, but Maggie's father insists he go to bed too, a fact that makes Dennis pout and kick Maggie in the shins before he runs into his room. Even though she has to limp across the hallway, Maggie doesn't say anything or retaliate because she can't afford the time. She needs to get to the Forest.

**4:**

In her room, Maggie finds a pair of two-year-old overalls curled in a ball at the bottom of her closet. She has to sort through six layers of handmade sweaters before she uncovers the desired garment. She pulls a pleated dress over her head and slips on a white t-shirt, then tugs the short khaki overalls over her hairy legs. She avoids the mirror, instead stares at the mess in her closet while buttoning and buckling the overalls. She has to loosen the straps to fit them over her shoulder blades. Though she's too tall for the outfit, it hangs wide around her thin frame, leaving empty space in the baggy pockets for her to fill.

She walks to her dresser and shoves cookies and two small jugs of milk in the pockets around her body, gifts she stole from the cupboard while her father wasn't looking. In the back pockets, Maggie shoves eight almonds and a clump of eggshell colored twine she took from the macramé Ariel gave to her mother. Finally, Maggie slips on a sweater to hide the unsightly bulges of her body.

As she lies on the floor, she hears Mr. Phillips's voice carried through the carpet. "Sometimes these kind of eating disorders are caused by..." Maggie grabs hold of her ears, blocking him out. Then she forces herself across the carpet. She fits easily today, but the almonds crackle and break under the weight of her body. When she presses her chest against the boards, Maggie crosses her fingers that Squirrel and Bird haven't performed their disappearing acts yet.

In the amorphous purple, crumbs fall into the air, rising then falling before Maggie's eyes, but nothing more gets lost.

On the grass in the Forest, Maggie pats her chest and her legs while she opens her eyes to look up at Squirrel's sullen face. She stands up and pats her back pockets. Everything is still there. She doesn't wait for Squirrel to begin complaining, simply takes his hand in hers. Today, she gets to be the excited one. "I have something to show you. Quick. Let's go to the Nest."

When they arrive at the Tree, Luna is curled in a ball over the Eggs while Bird flies in circles over head, getting her daily exercise. Maggie knows this means that they haven't left the Tree all day. She whistles out to Bird, asking her to come back down.

As Bird flies to the branch, Maggie can feel the air descend heavy on her tongue and swallows the warmth like chalky syrup. Her stomach ripples, and she must pause before reaching into her pockets. The dizziness takes control of her limbs. Her head burns with an impulse to close her eyes. She inhales deeply, hoping to find an instance of cold around her. The fabric of her shirt provides the only relief. She wraps it tightly around clenched fists. It is soon drenched with sweat.

She looks up to see three sets of still eyes trained on her face, waiting. They expect something. Maggie's hands glide low into her jeans. She inhales deeply, exhales slowly. The bulges in her pants are gifts. She remembers and is swept by the impulse to entertain her friends. Bird's wings patter past her ears. The sonic drumbeat propagates through her sides. The waves coincide with those of the dizzies. They amplify. She inhales, exhales.

"I have something." Their eyes drift towards her palms, looking at the crumbs falling to the ground. The straps of her overalls dig into her shoulders. "Ask me what I've got."

Bird's eyes fall and her face feathers wrinkle. "What Maggie?"

"Quick. Luna, ask me what we had for dessert."

"What'd you have for dessert?"

"Cookies!" Maggie tears the treats from her pockets. Luna's eyes widen and Bird coos a soft melody. Maggie gives a cookie to each of her friends: sugar for Luna, caramel almond for Squirrel, oatmeal raisin for Bird. They thank Maggie as she places the gifts on their paws and the edge of the tattered Nest.

Bird sighs as she pecks at the cookie. It breaks apart. She pauses and looks up to Maggie who's panting now and removing the treats from her back pockets, piling them into the Nest. She leaves the eight almonds in their place and sits beside Luna on the Nest, careful



not to break them anymore than she already has. She rests her head on a tan patch of Luna's fur, which encompasses her like a mattress, begging her eyes to close. She inhales, exhales.

Bird asks Maggie to eat some of the food too. Luna frowns at the suggestion.

"No. It's for you. Besides, I don't feel too well. Eat. Eat." Maggie closes her eyes to silence the drums beating through her head then forces them open. She must stay awake. She has to show them why the Forest is beautiful, but the sky is dimming. The colors are dulling. She widens her eyes to let in more light. Inhale, exhale. "I've got more!" From her leg pockets she withdraws the small jugs of milk. Her thigh feels bruised.

Luna squeals and her tongue laps across her pearl pink nose. Squirrel just nibbles at his half eaten treat, staring at the blue Sky. He stares directly into the Sun, a light bulb fixed in place. Maggie pours milk into her hand and it pools in the fleshy divot, spreads through the creased lifelines. Luna laps up the lukewarm streams.

Without looking up, Maggie screams. "It's great. It's great, isn't it? Bird, Squirrel, I brought the milk for Luna, but do you want some too? It's delicious."

"No, dear. Will you please drink my share?"

"No. It's for you." Luna's tongue bumps scrape across Maggie's cupped hand and a shivered fever flares over Maggie's skin. Inhale. Exhale. The milk dissolves into her skin. "No! No!" Maggie shrieks. Luna startles and sits into pounce position, her eyes fixed on the crumbs and Maggie's hands, darting between the two. She sticks out her long rippled tongue, bringing more crumbs to her mouth. The cookies dissolve in a burst of glitter and wind.

Maggie's urge to cry is only subdued by Bird's approaching wind, encompassing her in a feather cardboard embrace. She hums a lullaby. "It's okay. It's okay, Maggie. Food's not really what we miss about the world." *It's what Luna misses.*

Maggie bites on her thumb, trying to split the nail in half at the center. She accomplishes nothing but sear stinging her molars. She knows it's not food. Food was just the start. She can still make them happy. She pushes Bird's wings away. Inhale. Her eyes flicker black.

Exhale. “I know that. Squirrel you wanted adventure. Here. Go find these.” Maggie shoves her hand in her back pocket and tosses the almonds over the branch. She doesn’t look to see if they disappear or not. If they disappear, it’s just more searching for him to do.

“Bird. You want to be loved. Well, I love you. Don’t you see? I love you more than your mate ever could. Don’t you see? Men don’t come home every night. I do. I do.”

Three pairs of glossy eyes are trained on her. They bend and flow with a wind growing in the shimmering air. Squirrel’s fur shudders with new imperfections. Bird’s feathers fluff and soften. Luna’s stomach expands and distorts. She looks like a curled pretzel. Inhale.

“And Luna, you want a family? A house? Don’t you know? We’re it. This is home. Why can’t you like it here? It’s quiet here. It’s beautiful. We’re nice. Luna this is better than home. It’s better. Come! I want to show you why. Come. Come on. Come on.” Exhale.

Maggie runs past Squirrel, across the branch. The wood tremors like an earthquake. Luna cries, “The Eggs!” Bird whispers, “Maggie, sit. Maggie, calm down. It’s okay. It’s okay. It’s okay.” Bird’s voice fades and Squirrel’s arm brushes across Maggie’s shoulder, just for a moment.

Cerulean blue swirls and fades. Maggie sees only black, feels a gust of wind under her feet, no longer attached to the papery branch.

There is no purple in-between tonight. When Maggie’s eyes open, there is a board above her face, overwhelming silence and air conditioned cold that chills her fevered skin. She forces her body easily out from under the bed, wanting to run to her mother’s side. As she stands up, a sharp pain strips her stomach in half. She pauses and grabs clumps of skin with sweating fists. She tries to move her feet. She tries to run to the door. But there’s a high note strung between her ears and flickering lights covering her eyes.

Maggie inhales to pray for strength to run. She receives only blackness and a loud thump before she exits consciousness.

5:

Light fades in, gradually illuminating the daze behind Maggie's shut eyes. As she flicks her lids open and looks about the room, the fluorescent lamps convince her that she's in the Forest. Then the scent hits her. Rather than nuts, grass and heat, she inhales disinfectant and starch detergent. Rough cotton rubs across her bony arms. She looks to her left and sees her mother, father and Dennis, dressed in their worst pajamas, huddled on two plastic chairs in front of a pale blue wall.

A tick, tick, blip and Maggie opens her mouth to speak. She wants to ask where they are and why her parents are sitting so close together. She opens her mouth and gags on a cold plastic tube. All she musters is a sputter.

Her mother whispers, "Hey. Hey. Sweetheart. You're awake." Her father mutters, "Thank God," and Dennis stares wide eyed, half drooling, looking up from his place on her father's chest. Maggie wants to rise and place her head beside him. She tries to stand but is held down by plastic wires. She sputters and her mother stands for her, comes to her side and places her hand on Maggie's forehead to brush away thin strands of hair. She presses a button to the left of Maggie's bed and within two minutes, a dark haired, stick skinny nurse in baby blue scrubs walks into the room.

"The patient's up?" She smiles kindly at Maggie with parched brown lips as she takes out the tubes and wires. Maggie rubs her hands against her neck, but it doesn't ease the aching in her throat. "How are you feeling?"

Maggie coughs. "Horrible."

"Well you gave your parents quite a scare." She smooths the pillows and Maggie repositions herself. "I'm going to give you a little something to help you sleep through the night." She changes a bag hung beside Maggie's bed that connects to her left arm. Maggie is suddenly aware of the sting in her skin where the needle is taped. The nurse looks up at

Maggie's parents. "We find kids tend to be a little uncomfortable for their first few nights here, so this is just a little sedative."

Her parents nod and her mother instinctively reaches out to grab Maggie's father's hand. He reaches back and doesn't let go. Maggie smiles as cold liquid flows through her wrist, tensing the muscles in her forearm. She looks around the small room and tries to memorize the shadows of the room. She memorizes the square boxes and wired cabinets near the door which glow with cracks letting through hallway fluorescents. She memorizes the swinging table beside her bed, the shelves across from her, and the curve of her mother's thin frame held in place by her father's strong arm. She closes her eyes.

6:

Maggie wakes to a blue glow falling through the hospital's thin fabric curtains. She expected disorientation upon waking after she fell asleep in a stiff, unfamiliar bed, but waking here feels strangely natural. It mostly looks the same as it did before she closed her eyes, except that in the dark, Maggie memorized the outline of two thin chairs which held the silhouettes of her whole family but looking again to them today she sees only her mother, stained red and white beneath the morning sun, asleep with her head leaning on her fist with her arm propped against the chair's plastic frame.

Maggie calculates the day in her head. Midweek, maybe Wednesday. Of course her dad isn't here, why is her mother? Maggie stretches her arms past her face and loosens the cramping in her biceps. She rotates to her stomach, pointing her toes, and reaches out to the side table, just as she would the table at home. Her father placed her book there last night, in case she couldn't sleep and wanted to read. As she picks up the book, she notices a new outline, different from the shadows of last night.

Behind *Fellowship of the Rings* stands three wooden figurines: a squirrel, a bird, and a cat, her good luck charms. Maggie's heart beat ripples through her arms and neck, a thick heavy rhythm. Last night, in her confusion and sedative haze, she forgot to worry about her friends. Did they know she survived? They must be terrified, worried sick. Maggie fell from a bough. What if they think she died?

With trembling limbs, Maggie places the book back on top of the metal side table and lifts Luna's statue instead. She holds the figurine close against her flat chest, pressing hard to imprint the form into her sweating skin. Slowly, she releases and lifts Squirrel and Bird. Maggie needs to skip through the day to tonight. She needs to get home now. They need to know she's awake, unhurt and missing them. She'll apologize for any anger she showed the night before. She didn't mean to make them worry. She needs to tell them. She has to see them.

Staring blankly, watery eyed, at the table, Maggie sees a red shimmer glittering behind the books. Squirrel's leaf lies flat and glowing in the room's subtle light, asking her to return to the Forest. Her arms shake, so she clenches them against the figures, hoping the act might stabilize her. It doesn't. Maggie sits up and turns to her mother prepared to scream and wake her, but when she parts her lips, only a chopped, squeaky voice releases, barely understandable as *Mom*. She opens her lips wide and the voice comes out only slightly louder. "Mom." Her left eyelid drops and lifts in speedy repetition. "Mom. Mom. Mom. Mom." Louder and louder with every utterance so that the last comes out a shrill, piercing scream.

Her mother startles and sits up. Her eyes widen and she quickly stands to shuffle across the clean, gray tiled floor. She is no longer wearing her housecoat and curlers but is instead dressed in a cotton blue sweater set and black trousers, her hair frizzy and carelessly pulled behind her ears. She rushes beside Maggie and holds her daughter against her soft chest. "What's wrong, baby?"

Maggie rocks back and forth. Her mother steps away and looks at Maggie's white knuckles gripped so tightly, the wooden creatures would surely snap if they were any weaker. Maggie's mother wraps her hands around Maggie and leans close, whispering, "Here. Let go. They're fine. I promise you, they're fine." Lifting her eyes to the door, Maggie's mother pleads one more time, "Calm down now. We'll talk after."

Maggie follows her mother's eyes towards the doorway where a middle aged, already graying, nurse stands holding a plastic tray covered in mute colored mountains of food. Reluctantly, Maggie unclenches her fists and turns to stare into the center of the nurse's stethoscope. If she acts unkind, the hospital won't want her around and she'll get to go home faster. She wipes away sadness and fear, replaces the expression with a look of true unpleasantness, tight lips and squinted eyes focused only on the steely blue of this woman's stethoscope.

The nurse steps into the room without bothering to ask if it is okay to enter or why Maggie was screaming. She simply says, "I thought I heard voices. Patient's up and I have breakfast. Swing that table out." Maggie looks at the scuffs in the shining tiles while she listens to the squeak of the table as her mother follows orders. After the nurse sets down the tray, which wafts cafeteria scents, she pushes against Maggie's shoulder to sit her upright in bed. Without warning, she takes a Velcro black cuff hanging on the wall and places the cool metal eye of her stethoscope on Maggie's bare arm to test her blood pressure. She looks at Maggie's mother after she retracts. "It is a little high but I'm sure it's fine." Then she looks at Maggie. "Time to eat now. It's already eleven."

Maggie's stomach, still knotted and bruised with last night's force feeding, prompts her to decline. "I'm not hungry."

"Well until you get your weight up, it's either you eat this or I put you back on the feeding tubes. I don't care either way, so just let me know." She puts her hand on her hips and forces Maggie to meet her almond eyes. Maggie attempts to harden her stare and match the nurse's demeanor. Unable to do so, she blinks and rolls her eyes instead, then picks up a black plastic fork and glares at the tray. Besides the tray, there is a foam cup of thick orange juice and a paper napkin. The plastic silverware and the cup remind her too much of holiday parties. She wishes she could close her eyes and transport herself to one right now. Unfortunately, she is stuck in the glowing white light and antiseptic scent.

Maggie's mother, standing a foot behind the nurse as though relinquishing control, twists her hair tight between her fingers and watches Maggie take her first bite. "That's not too bad is it? You love eggs." Her voice quivers in mock strength.

Maggie loves eggs. These are not eggs. They're a blend of water and rubber dye and a trace of uncooked yolk that tests the strength of her gag reflexes. The more she tastes the food, the more she feels her throat constricted, her stomach hardened. She remembers her grandmother criticizing the speed at which she ate when she was six-years-old. "How can you even taste your food?" and something she was told about how if you eat too quickly, you

don't realize you're full until after the food is all gone. Maggie takes one deep breath and focuses her glare on the yellow putrid mess, then devours the eggs so quickly, she nearly chokes on a hard, flaky strand.

As she moves onto the gray mush, deciding to save the Wonder Bread toast for last, the nurse nods and mutters, "Good," then redirects her heavy stare to Maggie's mother. "After she eats, I'm taking her down to talk to the psychologist on staff. She's moving into the pediatric ward, a double room, so someone will tell you the room number. You should bring her stuff there while we're gone."

"Shouldn't I go with her?"

The nurse appears to be straining not to look impatient. She fails. "No." She turns back towards Maggie, who is choking on something almost like a potato and trying to get all the food in before she asks whether or not she'll be going home tonight. The nurse tells Maggie to hurry then looks back at Maggie's mother with the smallest drop of sympathy hung between her wrinkled eyes. "It won't be more than an hour."

Maggie's mother nods slowly, twists her hair quickly, then walks back over to Maggie's side, resting her palm gently on her daughter's back. "Is it okay?"

Maggie shakes her head but refuses to look up from the food. Finally, all that is left is the toast. She lifts it and takes a bite, letting it sit on her tongue for a moment to absorb the aftertaste of grits and plastic. She swallows. Six more times and she pushes the table away from her chest, looking neither triumphant nor disgusted, simply resigned.

"Okay, let's go." The nurse motions for Maggie to stand up as she lifts the tray and prepares to leave. Maggie pulls her legs from the thin gray sheets and places socked feet on the cold tiled floor. The blue thin hospital gown falls over thin knobby knees, which look slightly bent without fabric coverings. "She booked eleven thirty for you, so you're already late. Walk quickly."

Maggie feels her feet slide as she swiftly follows the wide framed nurse. Her mother whispers, "I love you," before Maggie reaches the door, as though she doesn't want the



nurse, or maybe even Maggie, to hear. They don't talk as they slide past the gray countered station, covered in colored sticker tabbed manila folders, and a dimly lit waiting room, filled with rows of the maroon and black chairs, four patients and family members, bright children's toys and a black wide television streaming a staticky rerun of *Leave it to Beaver*.

The nurse presses a metal button requesting the elevator to carry them down. Down to floor five. She presses a second numbered button once they're locked inside the wide yellow box and Maggie can finally breathe normally. She scans the nurse's navy scrubs searching for a nametag. There is none and Maggie doesn't want to ask or give any indication she might be pleasant enough to care for this woman's name. As they fall through eight floors with a beep at every one, the nurse looks at Maggie's thin frame condescendingly, clearly not searching for a name tag, but something less tangible. "You don't have to keep that gown on you know. Your mom brought your clothes."

That's not helpful now. Maggie rolls her eyes and crosses her arms to cover the outline of her chest, but the stance only emphasizes the shape of her thin, pale arms. The nurse scowls. Maggie drops her arms. The elevator beeps and the doors slide open to a new floor. They exit and walk past neither a waiting room nor a cluttered desk, but rows of oak doors hung on a light blue wall. If Maggie were to lean against it in this gown, she could fade into the paint and hide from the nurse.

At the sixth door, labeled *Dr. Greene, Childhood Psychiatry*, on a black engraved plate, the nurse knocks three times. A young dark skinned woman, in a silk suit dress and red heels, opens the door and gives both the nurse and Maggie a wide smile with vibrant stained teeth and chapped lips. She leans forward and beckons for Maggie to enter then asks the nurse to come pick Maggie up in an hour. She shuts the door with a gentle shove.

"Maggie. I'm Sandra. Please get comfortable while I find your file."

Maggie looks around an eggshell painted room covered in posters of smiling children and soft looking animals. Dr. Greene walks to a metal shining desk with a black cushioned chair pressed against the back wall. A single window reveals the street and a three story brick

building outside, beneath a slightly clouded bright sky. Besides her desk, there is an orange corduroy couch, three neon bean bags and a single wooden chair. Maggie walks across a purple shag area rug and takes a seat on the edge of the orange couch furthest from the doctor's desk. She leans against the rigid arm.

Dr. Greene sifts through her stack of manila files decorated with more colored stickers than any of those on the nurses' counter, pausing every now and then to peak at a thin one and read black ink names scrawled across the top. How many crazy children were there in Somerville anyways? "Andrea's a sweet woman, isn't she?"

Maggie stares at Dr. Greene's ringed eyes and perfectly arched eyebrows. She runs her fingers over her own brows and feels a stray mess. "Who's Andrea?"

Dr. Greene looks up for just a moment before she resumes sorting. "Your nurse."

"Oh. I guess." If she guessed that Andrea was anything near sweet, she guessed wrong. Maggie leans back into the couch and moves her arms, trying to figure out the best orientation to make herself look bigger. If only she had changed out of this gown.

Finally settling on a nearly empty folder, Dr. Greene scans a single sheet of paper, takes out a purple neon pen, then faces Maggie. She blows a strand of straightened hair from her face then smiles widely. "So, Maggie. How do you feel today?"

Horrible. Her stomach ripples with rejection of the grease she was just forced to consume, she looks like a stick doll pinned in this dress and her best friends are stranded in a world where they must believe she died last night. She looks to the paneled ceiling. "Will I go home tonight?"

Dr. Greene looks surprised and alternates her stare between the page in front of her and Maggie's sunken cheeks. "Oh. Well." She drums her fingers on her thighs and averts her eyes. "Well, no. Not today."

"Tomorrow?"

"No, probably not tomorrow. You have to get healthy again and that can take some time. Didn't Andrea talk to you about this?"

“Next week?”

Dr. Greene smiles, causing dimples to form in her flushed cheeks. “Maybe. We’ll see. But what’s important now is that we talk about how you’re feeling. You are young for such poor eating habits, Maggie.”

Yes. That’s true. Unhelpful, though. There is a long silence.

“Now, why don’t you tell me what your home is like?”

Maggie’s brain flickers into action as soon as Dr. Greene asks her question. How did Maggie’s mother know to bring the leaf? Maggie didn’t think of that before. How did her mother know she would want her wooden statues here?

“I see you have a brother. Do you get along well with him?”

Dr. Greene continues prompting questions, but her voice fades behind the speed of Maggie’s own forming, unspoken, ones. Why out of all the things cluttering Maggie’s dresser did her mother pick up Luna and Squirrel and Bird to comfort her? Did she mean to comfort her or to make her worry? She mostly made Maggie worry, but Maggie is pretty sure she didn’t mean to do that.

“We can talk about anything you want. It doesn’t have to be about family.”

What did her mother mean when she said, *They’re fine*. She promised they were, didn’t she? How could she promise that.

“Maggie.” Dr. Greene sighs, clearly frustrated. “You’re not going to go home any sooner if you don’t talk to me.” Maggie looks up at Dr. Greene, who quickly covers her frustration with another cigarette stained, toothy smile.

“She knows.” Maggie doesn’t elaborate but focuses her attention straight on Dr. Greene.

“Who knows?”

Maggie catches herself. Do not reveal family secrets. Confused, she leans forward and wraps her arms in an embrace around her bony stomach. “Lucy does.” Maggie proceeds to summarize the last *I Love Lucy* episode she saw in such detail, the hour passes without any

betrayal of family history. Dr. Greene lets Maggie leave, but only after first making her promise to talk about herself next time.

When Maggie opens the door, she sees a familiar face smiling and waiting. Minnie is dressed in yellow scrubs with her normally feathered and flipped brown hair pulled back in a tight bun. Maggie wants to run close and give Minnie a tight hug, but she doesn't want Dr. Greene to see her being friendly, for fear of elongating her stay here. Maggie closes the door quickly behind her and leans in for a quiet embrace. "What are you doing here?"

Minnie lowers her voice to match Maggie's. "I heard you were sick, so I asked to switch my rounds so I could visit you."

"I'm not sick," Maggie says as they walk through the hallway of doors towards the elevator."

"No? What are you doing here then?"

Maggie blushes and looks at her feet. "I don't know."

"You are sick." Maggie doesn't lift her eyes and Minnie changes the topic. "I hear you have a good roommate."

"I do?" Maggie was going to press the button once in the elevator, but staring at the lit white numbers, she realizes she doesn't know where she's going. Minnie presses fourteen for her.

"Gabby. She's my regular patient."

"I haven't met her yet."

"Oh. Well, she's sweet. Promise me something?"

"Sure."

"Be nice to her okay? She needs a good girl friend here."

Maggie nods to agree and thinks of her friends outside the hospital. Maggie feels a pang of longing to leave and see them. This lasts only for a few seconds before she feels a flush of fear. "Minnie?"

"Yes, Mags?"

“Did you tell Lila I’m here?”

“No. I just found out this morning when I was filing the new patients.” She leans against the wall and adjusts her hair. “Do you want me to?”

“No.” Maggie thinks about this for an extra second. She doesn’t want any more secrets, but if Minnie tells Lila, Lila will tell Eleanor and then Mrs. Cook will find out. Maggie’s mother would hate that. “I don’t care, but my mom...” Maggie lets her voice trail off, but she is certain Minnie understands.

“Don’t say anymore.” Minnie shakes her head as they step out of the elevator.

“Mothers can be ridiculous. Trust me, I get it.”

Maggie’s mother is not being ridiculous, she just likes her privacy. Well, maybe the lies are a little too much, but what about Ariel? She doesn’t lie like this. “*Your* mom is not ridiculous.”

Minnie rolls her eyes as she checks something on her clipboard. “Really? She spent a full hour last night explaining how my hairstyle undoes years of her strides in feminist rights.” Minnie knocks on a room door twice and Maggie hears her mother call, “Yes?” from behind it.

“Look who I found.” Minnie steps into Maggie’s new room, smiling. The new room is identical to the last except that it is in reverse orientation and has a duplicate of each piece of furniture. There are still only two maroon chairs.

“Minnie!” Maggie’s mother runs across the room. “I’m so glad to see you.” She says nothing about keeping secrets. Good thing Maggie already asked Minnie not to tell for her.

“How are you doing, Mrs. L.?”

“Great.” Maggie’s mother exhales then glances down at Maggie. “Well, we’ve been better. But we’re settling in.” She reaches out to give Maggie a hug. “How was your appointment, baby?”

“It was okay.” Maggie looks towards the two beds, trying to decide if it would be rude to take a nap.

Minnie picks up the conversation where Maggie stopped. “Oh, Dr. Greene’s great. Maggie is in good hands here. I’m sorry. But I have a busy schedule this afternoon, but I promise to come check on you before I leave, okay?”

“Of course.” Maggie mother gives Minnie another hug. “Have a good afternoon.”

“I will, thank you. And Maggie, you feel better, okay?”

Maggie nods and forces a smile. When Minnie shuts the door, Maggie walks slowly to the maroon chair, still in her blue gown, and crosses her legs then leans forward, accusingly. “You know.” The words come out more softly than Maggie intended.

“How was the psychiatrist?”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

Maggie’s mother sits in the second chair. She closes her eyes and twists her hair.

“How could you not tell me? How could you stop going?”

“Maggie. It’s complicated. Some things change, you’ll see one day.”

At the thought of ever not going into the Forest, Maggie’s eyes swell and flicker.

“But how could you not tell me?”

“I didn’t know you were going. I really, really didn’t. Not until, well.” She chews on a red painted nail, but quickly pulls it from her stained lips and twists her hair again. “Not until I saw that red leaf. I knew then. And Maggie, when I went home last night, I went to the Forest. They were panicking, but I told them you were here. It’s okay. They know. They know...” She breaks off talking and looks to the door. Maggie’s mother whispers, “I’ll tell you soon.” She grimaces briefly then forces a smile.

Nurse Andrea walks abruptly through the door, just as sweetly as before, and drops a tray of crusty bread and thin bologna on the table before Maggie. “Okay. I’m late. Do this

quick like before and we'll both be happier." Maggie looks pleadingly at her mother, then breathes deeply and lifts her lunch to her clenched teeth.

7:

Maggie spends the afternoon shuttled between different doctors for preliminary evaluations. Two weigh-ins with physicians, a dialogue with a nutritionist, and blood work taken by a new nurse. She barely has time to change out of the gown let alone ask her mother the questions forming behind her pursed lips. How long ago did she go to the Forest? Why didn't she ever tell Maggie, and how could she have ever left the animals alone there? At least Maggie's friends know she is alive. At least Squirrel isn't pacing, fretting. At least. And in a few days, she'll go home and she'll be returned to the Forest. Maybe in her absence, the animals will realize how good their home is. Maybe they'll learn to stop trying to find a way out and simply appreciate the comfort of them all being together, peaceful, not fighting, together and happy. Maybe they'll learn to appreciate their family.

After her second weigh-in, when her mother has already left to pick up Dennis, Nurse Andrea drops Maggie back to her room and tells her she has an hour of free time before dinner. Maggie lifts her book off a new, unfamiliar, white side table and crawls onto her mattress on the left side of the room, right next to a window revealing a small park outside. Flipping to the middle page, Maggie attempts to settle the stress of today by falling into someone else's fantasy. Tolkien's words are quickly overpowered by the hum of doctors and nurses that have flowed past her ears throughout the past seven hours. "How are you feeling? What have you eaten? You could have seriously jeopardized your development, you know. Such a pretty girl, why are you doing this? There's more to life than beauty, don't you know? But food is so good." Old voices and pudgy bodies, a whirl of adult faces, cold hands, strict advice.

Maggie stares blankly at a printed period and wills her memory to shut down when a new voice enters her room. "If you don't get your period, that's a good sign. It means you're under target and you aren't gonna bleed twelve times a year." A pretty girl with long, dark brown hair pulled in a loose twisted bun, steps through the single door. Her neon blue and



pink dress hangs like a thick bag over her narrow chest, making her look like she might only be limbs and a head sewed into empty fabric. Her eyes have dark rings around them, like Maggie's mother, but this girl's eyes are dark brown, not nearly as pretty as Maggie's mother's hazel eyes, and hers are embedded in deeply tanned skin, which seems to make them even blacker. "Now, if your hair starts falling in chunks each time you shower, well that's no good. I've got a few strands to spare, so it's okay, but it doesn't look like you do, so be careful. It doesn't look like you're anywhere near hair losing weight, so don't worry. Do you still get your period?"

Maggie tugs her hair behind her ear and sits up in the stiff bed, crosses her legs and leans forwards to examine the girl. "I've never gotten it before."

The dark haired girl pauses at the edge of her bed and smiles with thick chapped lips, a smile that manages to force a single dimple in her left, bony cheek. "How old are you? It's hard to tell in places like this, you know?"

Maggie crosses her fingers and looks at how thick and pale her own arms look juxtaposed with the weight of this girl. "Twelve."

"Oh. You look your age then, huh? Want to learn a trick?" The girl slides across the white tiled floor on her thick blue socks and lands beside Maggie without waiting for a response. Maggie mumbles, "Yes," but isn't sure the girl hears her because her hand is already outstretched. "Okay. If you can wrap your right fingers around your left wrist, like this." She wraps her right thumb and pointer into a cuffed finger bracelet. Her thumb nearly touches the middle knuckle. "Then you can watch how much weight you're gaining and losing."

Maggie looks down to her white wrist and wraps her bleeding nails around them. The thumb barely overlaps the edge of the nail. Does this mean she's fat? The girl smiles at her and pats her on the back. "You're getting there." She stands up and laughs as she walks across the three feet to the second bed in the room. "So, I guess we're roomies, but not for too long, yea? Cause I've been eating a lot today and I swear I'm going to be out of here

before the end of the week. Though, maybe you'll beat me, huh? You look pretty good. I'm Gabriella, but don't call me that. Say Gabby." She reaches her hand to the gap between the beds and gestures a shake but withdraws her hand and falls into her bed, laughing high and crazily at herself. Maggie tries to reach out her own hand, but now it dangles awkwardly in the empty air.

Maggie hides her hand under her shins as heat rushes to her cheek and she pretends she knew the shake was a joke all along. "I'm Maggie." She pauses, bites her tongue and twirls it in her mouth as she tries to think of something to ask this girl to recover from the shaking fake out embarrassment. This girl doesn't count as hospital staff, so it's okay if Maggie shows her she's nice, right? She tries to steady her voice and make it more sophisticated. Unfortunately, the result is a clearly fake, faux male voice. "How old are you?" Maggie swallows hard, hoping Gabby didn't catch how silly she just sounded.

Gabby raises her eyebrows and smiles at Maggie. "Seventeen. Two more months and I won't be in pediatrics anymore."

Maggie shrugs and smiles, not knowing what else to say.

"Well, are they still watching you eat? When you get as big as me, you get to take your meals in the dining room like a real person. And it's great. All the orderlies swoon over your fashionable figure. They call me Twiggy, or sometimes just the Model." Gabby falls into a laughing fit as she picks herself up from the bed and wanders towards a red plastic suitcase set next to the door. When the laughter falls away, she takes off her t-shirt and Maggie stares at the small lines of ribcage threatening to break through her tanned smooth skin. "I guess they forgot the face. This isn't any model's face." She sets in for another laugh, but lets it fade with Maggie's nonresponse. She steps through at a pale yellow tube top and pulls it over her tiny waist. "Well I got me a date." She smiles at Maggie before gliding through the door. "See you later." She exits with a rising flare of her arms.

Maggie watches Gabby's fading silhouette and the trail of clothes cascading from her half open suitcase. Not wanting Nurse Andrea to trip over them when she carries in dinner, or

give the sweet nurse any reason to stay in her room longer than necessary, Maggie walks to Gabby's clothes and folds three solid colored shirts and one pair of bright green bell bottoms before placing them back into the suitcase, locking down its two metal clasps and sliding it a foot from the door.

Before she can get back into bed, there's a knock on her room's door. Maggie feels tears well up behind her eyelids. If it's Nurse Andrea, Maggie's going to scream nonsense shrieks until she goes away. She needs just an hour, just a minute for all of this to stop. She needs just a second of sleep, just a little to make her eye stop twitching and to let the day's persistent nausea fade away. Rather than asking who it is or beckoning for them to come in, as she knows is polite, Maggie feels a pain grip at her lungs and groans, "What?" then flops flat on the bed, hoping that if she looks like she's sleeping, they'll leave her alone for at least a little while.

The door slides open without any noise and Maggie hears a familiar clap of loafers against tile. "Maggie." Her father's voice rings softly through the air conditioned room as he slips in and walks towards Maggie's bed carrying a white, stiff shopping bag and the smell of baked sugar and stale smoke.

He puts the bag down on one of the maroon seats and sits at the edge of Maggie's bed, gently sliding her feet to the right to give him room. "How do you feel?"

"Tired."

"You scared us, baby." Her father reaches out his hand to hold Maggie's in his. The warmth of his palm against her skin floods Maggie with so many childhood memories, she wishes she could collapse and dissolve in the scuffed tile floors. She doesn't even resent him for calling her baby this time.

"I know. I'm sorry, Dad." Maggie can't look at her father's glistening eyes, but she grips his hand tightly, so he knows she's being sincere.

"It's okay, baby. Don't apologize. We're just all happy you're okay." Maggie looks up at her father's flushed face and wishes she could hold him close to her the way he holds

her whenever she breaks down. She knows she's too small to comfort him that way, so she wraps both her thin hands around his and holds tight to his hand, instead.

When Dennis arrives, sunburnt and sweating behind a bright yellow t-shirt, Maggie's father quiets and walks towards the chair where he initially placed the white bag leaking scents of hidden sugar. Maggie stands and peeks her head into the hallway, searching for her mother. She's dressed well again, hair hung in tight curls, her cream summer dress unwrinkled and well fitting. She's talking to a night nurse and when she turns, there is a smile on her face. That must be a good sign. Maggie sneaks back into her room to hide her attempt at eavesdropping.

Dennis approaches Maggie and offers his arms as an embrace. Maggie accepts even though Dennis is covered in outdoor stink because such a gesture is rare between them.

"What'd you do at Eleanor's?"

"I had to lie about you going to camp." His face holds bitterness until Maggie's father glances worriedly from the wall. "But other than that it was okay." He looks apologetic, but Maggie doesn't know why.

"Well, you know mom. I can make up some stories if it helps." If Dennis makes up the lies, no one will believe him.

Dennis shrugs then takes a seat as their mother slides into the room. Her forced smile is perfectly in place with thick red lipstick. "I hear you did well today. Judy said your dinner will be here in ten minutes, then you are done for the day."

"Did you all eat? I can share."

"Dinner is for you." Her father steps from the wall. "We all ate before we came over. Right?"

Maggie's mother nods and leans against the wall furthest from the window, settled between a dresser and a cabinet. Her eyes dart across the room and Maggie knows she is lying. Maggie has no words to share and an unnerving quiet descends the antiseptic air. No

one breaks the still. Maggie wants to ask her family to sit, just as they were last night. She even gestures with her hands, but no one moves.

Nurse Judy breaks the silence for them but not with any relief to Maggie. She sets the same tray on the hanging table, but now it's filled with gravy, beef and reconstituted potatoes. It takes all Maggie's energy to force the meal down. It takes twice as much to keep it inside after she realizes six steady eyes haven't moved from her through the whole meal. She tries to think of something, anything to start her family talking after Judy clears the table and walks out of the room.

Dennis finds the solution before Maggie. "Can we watch TV?"

Her mother shakes her head, but Maggie's father is the one to respond. "No, buddy. We've only got a few hours a day. Let's not waste them on television."

"But I'm bored." As though to justify his complaint, he wriggles his arms and bounces his feet.

Maggie shrugs and her mother reaches for her purse, looks up as she sorts through the black space, questioning her family with a shaking smile. "I brought cards."

"Great." Maggie's father claps his hands and their mother springs up, finally relaxing once she finds the pack. "Hearts?"

Dennis nods half heartedly, but pulls his seat close to Maggie's bed anyway. Her father pulls out the swinging table once more, renaming it as a game board. Then he sits beside Maggie on the edge of the bed. Her mother and Dennis take the maroons chairs and they deal blue faced cards.

They're halfway through the first hand when Minnie taps on the door and asks if she can come inside. Maggie's father stands up to greet her. "Of course. How are you doing kiddo?"

"Tired." Minnie sighs and Maggie's father winks at her, laughing a little. "But it's been a good day. How are you all doing?" Minnie walks over to give Dennis a kiss on his forehead.

“I’m bored,” Dennis whines, throwing his cards on the tray table. Their mother gives him a warning look, but doesn’t say anything.

Minnie just laughs at him. “It’s not so bad here. You’ll get used to it.”

Maggie’s father walks towards his pile of belongings underneath the window and picks up a white plastic bag that wafts scents of sugar and vanilla as he opens it. “I brought dessert. Would you like to join us?”

“Yes, please. I’m starving.” Minnie glances at her watch then sits on the bed next to Maggie. “What do you have?”

“Sugar cookies and peanut butter brownies. Maggie’s favorites.” Both of Maggie’s parents smile at her, and she has to stare at her hands to calm her stomach.

Minnie says she wants a sugar cookie, Dennis and their mother want brownies, and when Maggie’s father looks to her, Maggie has to look at the ceiling while she shrugs. “I just ate dinner. I’m not hungry.”

Maggie’s father looks like he might finally cry, and her mother won’t look at either of them. Maggie’s brain tells her to eat, but her stomach screams *No* and the stomach is louder, so Maggie remains quiet. Minnie wraps her arm around Maggie’s shoulder, dropping crumbs on the bed. “Don’t worry. Her stomach is actually smaller, so she can’t eat too much right now. Give her some time.”

Maggie looks down at her stomach, trying to see what Minnie sees. It doesn’t look smaller to her. She just doesn’t want to eat sugar right now. Minnie’s explanation sounds better, though, so Maggie doesn’t argue.

Just like Jenny, Minnie is rail thin without ever trying. Minnie’s boobs are bigger, though. Not quite as full as Mrs. Cook’s or Maggie’s mother, but bigger than Jenny’s. Watching her now, Maggie decides Minnie’s body is perfect. Minnie lifts her arm and glances at her watch once more, popping the last bite of cookie into her mouth. “Well,” she says, brushing the crumbs off of hers and Maggie’s laps, “I’ve got to run. My dad is probably outside already. But I’ll come check on you tomorrow, Mags. Okay?”

“Okay.” Maggie smiles then returns her gaze to the cards and the table, still unwilling to look at her father. They all lift their cards as the door shuts. Her father coughs and forces a smile. “So, whose turn is it?” He watches only Maggie as he asks. She twitches nervously.

“Mine.” Dennis says, with boredom still lingering in his voice. They resume playing, mostly in silence, until Gabby prances in the room ten minutes later. She startles when she sees the family focused around Maggie’s bed. Maggie introduces Gabby, happy for a new conversation, but Gabby stutters her introductions. Both her parents are kind, though. Maggie’s mother even invites Gabby to play with them, but Gabby says she has prior engagements. Without a laugh or anymore explanation, she grabs a sweater from her red plastic suitcase and runs through the door.

Maggie’s mother pauses, staring at her cards. “She seems nice, Maggie.”

Maggie simply nods, feeling that Gabby’s reaction must mean her words are secrets too, secrets Maggie must keep.

Her father puts his hand down, ready for a full conversation. “How old is she?”

Maggie shrugs.

“Is she from town?”

Again, she shrugs. The conversation stalls until Dennis speaks.

“She’s skinny.”

Maggie looks down at her own wrist instead of glaring at her brother. Their father picks up his cards, but Dennis keeps going.

“She’s like a paper doll Maggie has.” He pauses and bounces with a giddy smile.

“Want to hear a joke?”

The whole family shakes their heads, *No*. Maggie’s father places a two of clubs.

“Your turn, buddy. No jokes for now. You can tell me later, okay?”

Dennis pouts but plays his card. Their mother wins the game and so she takes Dennis home with a small bit of gloating. Maggie wishes more than ever that she hadn’t lost. As it is, she must sleep alone in this magicless bed.

*July 1976*

1:

Maggie has a meeting with Dr. Greene each day after Andrea watches her eat breakfast. Maggie tells her a little bit more with every session, starting with her confused feelings about liking Jenny and the reasons why she hates when her dad calls her baby. After her parents talk to Dr. Greene themselves, Maggie realizes it is okay for her to reveal some secrets. She is careful never to directly criticize either parent or tell the psychiatrist anything her parents don't already know, for fear of them learning about everything she says.

After her session, Minnie always brings Maggie back to her room and they hang out for about twenty minutes, sometimes alone, sometimes with Gabby, until Nurse Sweetie forces Minnie to return to her job.

Maggie asks Minnie to be her main nurse, but as a student, she is not allowed to be. "Besides," she says, "Nurse Andrea's not that bad when you get past her hard exterior." Maggie shrugs, not wanting any criticisms to make their way back to the food tyrant and get her an extra scoop of grits in the morning. Perhaps a similar fear among the staff perpetuates the *Nurse Andrea is nice* conspiracy.

Today, Gabby is in the room when Maggie and Minnie return. She has a copy of *16 Magazine* that Minnie brought her yesterday and closes it as they enter. She says she wants help getting dressed today. Ariel would cringe if she knew Minnie is the fashion expert of the pediatric ward. At Minnie's advice, Gabby changes out of her "psychotherapy shirt" into a bright pink, loose dress. At the sight of hard dark nipples on her otherwise flat, bony chest, Maggie's face flushes to a putrid pink. Minnie suggests Gabby changes in the bathroom so she doesn't embarrass Maggie, but Maggie insists she isn't embarrassed. Gabby only laughs



and tells Maggie she'll try hard not to scare her in the future. Gabby soon leaves the room, saying she has a smoke date with some boy named Bill, which she has to rush through, seeing as she only has an hour for lunch before afternoon weigh-ins.

After Minnie leaves for afternoon rounds, Maggie reads until lunch and her afternoon appointments. In her break before dinner and the arrival of her parents, she watches reruns playing in the floor's common room. It only took her a day to realize that two hour naps in the afternoon made it too difficult to sleep at lights out. Without the Forest, it isn't easy to sleep even when she is tired. Plus, if she stays awake and in the common room, sometimes Minnie takes ten minute breaks to sit beside her and chastise the television's happy sets as fake realities. Maggie likes when she sits beside her. She smells like hand soap and potpourri. It reminds Maggie of Ariel and is comforting.

Maggie's parents arrive at seven o'clock each night and bring sweets with every trip that Maggie never accepts but always thanks them for. Jenny has yet to visit with her father, and Maggie thanks him for this too. It isn't that Maggie doesn't like Jenny, but her mother has enough stress with a daughter in the hospital and having to lie about a day camp to her best friend. She doesn't need to add competing with a younger woman. Besides, there are only two seats in Maggie's room, so Jenny can't come. She would have no place to sit.

Maggie's parents and Dennis stay in Maggie's room until nine o'clock, when Maggie opens her book and Dennis's eyes show signs of sagging. Maggie reads or walks to the common room to watch *The Munsters* until she sleeps, dreams, and wakes up again. Each day is a stamp replication of the one preceding it, with slight variations, such as the weekend.

On the first Saturday, Maggie's mother shows up at nine o'clock and waits on the maroon seat until Maggie lifts her head. Weekends, Maggie is told, are to be the same as

weekdays except that Dr. Greene isn't in the office and Nurse Andrea has her days off, so Maggie will be monitored by the dark haired nurse who took care of her on her first night. This nurse talks more but is even less lenient about Maggie finishing the food she is given. She invokes images of starving third world children to make Maggie feel bad if she doesn't eat all her eggs.

Gabby is still attempting to sleep after Maggie finishes her breakfast, so Maggie's mother suggests they go for a walk in the park out back. Maggie is nervous her mother only wants to go outside to light up a cigarette, but she doesn't reach for her purse while they walk. She seems to have a different purpose for their stroll and becomes silent and jittery attempting to bring it up.

The hospital park spans a block but fades into the trees only a yard or so back. Except for the windows of the two three-story pastel painted houses on either side, the fence hides the park from the street and gives patients with oxygen tanks freedom to puff at cigarettes with judgment exhaled only from prematurely guilty physicians. Maggie and her mother follow the sidewalk out of the smoke, away from wooden benches, around a white square of garden and into a perfect green lawn.

As her mother stutters, biting the ends of her hair as though they hold an elixir for openness, Maggie fumbles in her loose pockets, calculating the coins accumulated from change for vending machine diet sodas, her and Gabby's nightly treat. The rising sun breaks through steamy air causing droplets of sweat to accumulate on Maggie's chest and arms. Even though they are outside, Maggie wishes she had picked short sleeves today and feels a sudden gratefulness for indoor air conditioning.

Since Wednesday, Maggie has been bubbling with questions regarding her mother

and the Forest. But time has a way of fading curiosity. It's not that Maggie doesn't want to know more, but over three days she hasn't had much time alone with her mother because her father insists on being equally involved. Maggie's curiosity has developed a streak of patience. In their brief moments of secrecy this week, Maggie hasn't begged for her mother's history, but instead let her fill her in on how Squirrel, Luna and Bird were the nights before. Her mother has visited the Forest every night so Maggie's friends won't be lonely without her. It doesn't exactly cure Maggie's restlessness, but it does provide some comfort to know they aren't alone.

Maggie hasn't prodded her mother for three days, but suddenly standing in the park with a free morning without Dennis or her father around, Maggie feels an urgency return to her questions. She prods her mother's shaking arm and asks if she went to the Forest last night. Her mother nods and looks around the park with watery eyes. She pauses at the windows of each neighboring house.

Maggie taps her arm again. "Did they remember you? You look different."

Maggie's mother continues looking around them, this time focusing on the white coated men crowded around a ceramic outpost. She grabs her daughter's hand loosely and leads her away from the garden and the sidewalk. They tread over green grass that stays down once they lift their feet, and cross the barrier between park and woods, finally lowering themselves cross legged on a patchy square. Dust rises as they take their seats, settling with a film over Maggie's mother's dark trousers. She touches the ends of her hair to her chin and gazes around the park once more, arching her back towards the left and the right. Finally, she settles her eyes on Maggie and lets out a hushed whisper. "I went last night like I've been going every night. I don't look that different." Her voice shuts off again and she plays with

tangles of vines and fallen green leaves, breathing heavily.

Maggie lifts her nails to her teeth as anxiety twitches across her tightening chest. She needs her mother to tell her now. “How did you leave them? How could you leave them?”

Her mother twirls another piece of grass, tightening her cheeks and biting her lips, but she doesn't start speaking.

“When did you leave them? Mom, I don't get it, please tell me. What did they do to make you ignore them?” Maggie's voice wanes, unsteady in the last sentence. She stares into her mother's eyes, slowly lifting from the grass. Her mother grabs Maggie's palm and rocks back and forth, just a little, still searching for the right words. Maggie's hand twitches, jumpstarting her mother's story.

“They didn't do anything, baby. They didn't do anything at all.” She twists her knitted t-shirt, giving into a near rehearsed explanation. “I was sixteen the last time I went to the Forest. I had just met your dad.” Maggie's arm trembles again. “But that's not why I stopped going. The last time I went to the Forest, I hadn't been there in two months and Squirrel was mad at me. You know how he can be. Too demanding and critical. He said all the tools I had brought them had disappeared so they hadn't made any progress in the weeks I was gone. I told him they hadn't made any progress in the years I was there, which wasn't the kindest thing to say.”

Maggie grimaces thinking of how much that would have hurt Squirrel and how many times she's had to bite her nails to keep from telling him the same thing. She shakes her head, looking at the ground. “No it wasn't. And Squirrel is not critical.”

“Yes he is. He is bossy. You'll see as you get older, but that doesn't matter now. What matters is that I was frustrated. You don't know this yet, baby, but the world gets really

fun at some point. I had my driver's license and school and friends and I couldn't spend every night in the Forest having the same conversations, always, unchanging."

"*They* are my friends. And my family." Maggie pauses, waiting for the last words to bite. Maggie's mother's face doesn't flinch. She retains her same continuous exhaustion.

"They were my friends too, baby. But they weren't the only ones. Life got bigger." She pauses and looks at a passing walker, waiting until he is out of sight before she continues. "Do you know your grandmother never believed me?"

Maggie almost laughs, thinking of the way her grandmother always pursed her lips during her grandfather's stories. Why would anyone try to explain the Forest to her?

"The first night I crawled beneath the bed, I thought it was a dream, thought maybe I'd hit my head or had some kind of fever. My cousin got such a bad fever once, she swore there were swarms of bees all around whispering dirty words in her ears. I was there through all her screaming, and I swear there weren't any bees. I thought, maybe the Forest was something like that."

Maggie mutters to the grass, "I knew they were real." Her mother doesn't acknowledge her comment.

"The next night, I crawled underneath and they were all there again: Squirrel, Luna and Bird and the babies. She was so careful about the babies back then, even more neurotic than she is now. She had a schedule, but of course with the Sun as it is, she had to guess at times. Still, every "hour", she'd rotate them and sing a little song. She would never let Luna babysit back then but had the cat bring her all her food. In the six months before I met them, I don't think Bird once left the Nest. She said her mate would be coming back soon and she'd get relief then. They didn't like Squirrel when I first met them. Did you know they weren't

always friends?”

Maggie shakes her head, *No*.

“Well, Luna had supposedly taken some acorns from Squirrel’s stash and that’s how they met, while she was stealing. Squirrel had a fit. He refused to come to the Nest and only went into the Tree for food. Mostly he wandered, exploring the Forest. He wasn’t yet looking for an Exit. The first night I landed in the grass, Squirrel was the one to find me. He said he felt a twinkle in his limbs five minutes before and knew instinctively to wander here. He said he was good at that, you know, at finding things. But he said I probably wasn’t there for him and took me straight away to the Tree where he dropped me off with Bird and Luna who were equally confused with my arrival.

“I think I charmed Squirrel, though. He left me with them, but I could hear him on the branches below us. Eventually, he climbed back up and said he had noticed I was way too skinny and he had to give me an acorn. He said it so gruffly, as though the gift were an obligation, not a kindness. I knew he was sweeter than he sounded, though, because I was used to dealing with your grandma and our dog Streak, who had that same kind of impatient tactlessness. So I took his acorn like a patient and obliged to his feedings nightly, even though I quickly realized those acorns could never really make me less hungry and did nothing to my weight.”

“They didn’t?” Maggie wraps her pointer and thumb around her wrist, suddenly feeling ignorant.

Her mother shakes her head and begins whispering again, “Everything disappears.” She looks around the park while recollecting her thoughts. “Squirrel fed me nuts that night. He even let Luna have one, but only if she promised never to go into his stash again. That

night, he also suggested Luna babysit Bird's eggs. Warmth is warmth, he said, and an animal loses the limbs they don't use. It is an adage he learned from sitting near human windows.

"The second night I went back again, they were all there and I knew I wasn't sick, so I started to think the Forest might be a real place. That Sunday, when your grandma grounded me for asking the preacher if God intended him to be boring to test believers, I crawled under the bed, hoping to salvage my weekend.

"That was the day I learned I could only leave by falling asleep and I was so wound up, it didn't happen until nearly ten o'clock. When my parents heard me arrive with a thud, they ran upstairs, red with anger and shaking with fear. They asked where I had gone. When I said, *Under the bed*, I think my mother wanted to hit me. They had apparently called all my friends and the cops twice, who promised to be helpful only if I was still missing in the morning. They said we lived in a safe town. After calling everyone to tell them I was found, my parents made me explain where I had been, for real.

"*Under the bed*. Your grandfather chuckled and asked me what I had been doing under there for all that time. So, I told them. I described Squirrel and the Eggs and the shade of the leaves and the perfection of the grass. I even tried to take them under the bed with me, but when we crawled in together, none of us went anywhere. Your grandfather believed me. That's when he became obsessed with his magic. But your grandmother got so mad. She grounded me for two weeks and made me do the laundry for a month. She said I had not only snuck out but also lied about it, which was apparently too many sins for one Sunday. I only went into the Forest once she had gone to sleep after that." Maggie's mother pauses here, smiling at her daughter.

Maggie likes hearing stories of her friends, but these stories have not relieved her

chest's tightness. There is still too much she doesn't know and between the unanswered anxiety and the sun's growing intensity. Her head throbs in pain. "But how could you leave them?"

Her mother's smile fades. "I thought she didn't know what I was doing. But one night, when your grandfather was sharing his newest theories with me, your grandmother walked in and got mad again. She wasn't mad like she was the first time. It was more like a tired anger. She made my dad leave the room and explained to me the dangers of such fantasies. She said I could have an imagination and that was fine, but I would never find a husband or make a real life for myself if I kept my nights wrapped up in this strange fantasy.

"I was sixteen at the time, but she talked to me like I was twenty. I ignored her at first, but over the next few years, it got to me. Maybe I had concocted the Forest as some lingering childhood dream. It wasn't impossible. No one else could go there. I swear, until I saw that leaf on your dresser, I really didn't believe it was a real place."

"Does that matter?" Maggie pulls her knees to her chest, thinking that if the Forest were all in her imagination, that would really just be better because then no one could ever take it from her.

Maggie's mother wipes sweat from her cheeks and nods, letting her hair shake in the glowing sun. "In some ways, yes. Because when I started having more school and more friends, Bible studies Tuesday night, family dinners on Sunday, Friday dates and Saturday morning hiking club, there wasn't always time for the Forest before I fell asleep.

"Bird and Luna were nice. They asked me about my friends and the boys, but Squirrel didn't deal well with my new life outside of the Forest. He got short with me and mean. And after that last night, it became too hard to go back into my imagination. There was too much



happiness in the world to spend every night dealing with the same frustrations and endless loops in the Forest. I didn't go back.

“But I didn’t accept that they were real. Maggie, you have to believe that if I had known they were real like I do now, I never would have abandoned them.” Her whispering voice shakes as she looks to her daughter, pleading for some kind of forgiveness Maggie is incapable of granting. Maggie pulls a strand from the grass and ties it around her pinky then looks across the park, her chest still heavy. She doesn’t want to look at her mother. A bearded white coat doctor approaches them through the green. Maggie stands up and brushes the dust off her faded jeans, slung loosely around her waist. “I think it is almost lunch time.”

Her mother looks towards Maggie’s watchless wrist, still seated, rocking on the ground. “How do you know?”

Maggie presses her palm against her torso as an emptiness crawls through her. “I’m starting to feel hungry on their schedule.” Maggie reaches out her hand to her mother, who takes it with a thankful gaze, and they walk back from the trees, into the sliding lit doors of the hospital.

After that lunch, Maggie continues her normal afternoon round of doctors. When she returns to her room, Dennis and her father are back, which means she doesn’t have to continue on with her mother. This is good because Maggie isn’t sure she can take much more family history just yet.

2:

On Monday, sitting in the waiting room for her afternoon television fix, Maggie secretly prays that her mother won't spend next Saturday morning alone with her. She doesn't want to say anything mean or encourage her mother to leave her in this hospital any longer than necessary, but Maggie still doesn't understand how anyone could leave the Forest. She doesn't understand why her friends in the Forest want to leave her. The mess of all this ungratefulness leaves her nauseous, making it hard to eat the hospital food, which makes Nurse Sweetie even more frustrated with her. Maggie would rather leave these thoughts out of her mind than deal with that whole chain right now. Anyways, Maggie has five days until Saturday and six pounds to gain before she can go home, so thinking about time alone with her mother and Squirrel isn't yet vital. She focuses on Fonzie instead.

It is already five and Minnie has yet to take a break with Maggie. She is considering walking back to her room and reading until her dad arrives when Gabby lands, laughing, beside her on the couch. Gabby wraps her arms around Maggie's shoulder like they are better friends than they are. "You watch too much TV."

Maggie turns from the television to appear disinterested but secretly keeps her peripheral view and half her sound attention focused on the screen so she doesn't miss the conclusion. "What else am I supposed to do here?"

"Follow me. I know how to make this place good."

Maggie half wants to follow Gabby, to laugh like her and feel as easy in a skinny white romper, smiling at all the staff. The other half of her wants to say she is too young to flirt with all the boys and frankly, she prefers reruns to their attention. "I can't. I have forced

feedings in half an hour.”

Gabby sets off giggling again and arches her back, feigning exhaustion. A father seated with his heavy six-year-old daughter stares blankly but intently at Gabby’s thin, tanned stomach. She doesn’t readjust her shirt when she pulls her arms back down. Maggie secretly thanks her father for never gawking at her roommate that way. “But you must have been watching TV for three hours today. Don’t get me wrong, I like having the privacy in our room, but I just don’t think it can be very good for you. Tomorrow, come wait for me after weigh-ins. You’re going to spend the afternoon with me.”

Half reluctant, half excited, Maggie nods in agreement, then turns her full attention back to the screen so she doesn’t appear too excited. Gabby winks at the waiting room father then stands up and glides into the hall. Maggie glares at the man once Gabby’s back is turned, a fill in for the anger his daughter is still too young to realize.

3:

Thursdays are Maggie's mother's long nights at work because her boss has extended accounting meetings. She used to organize food for easy preparation when she arrived home at seven, but once her boss discovered her hidden talent for tallying numbers and determining ways to save, he asked her to sit through the meetings with him. For the past month, she has stayed at work until nine each Thursday night. For Maggie, this used to mean dinners with her father, but now it means he picks up Dennis and it is only the two boys for visiting hours.

So walking back to her room from the television room today, Maggie expects to find her brother and her father waiting. She expects to play cards or backgammon until she feigns tiredness so she can be relieved to watch more television until she falls asleep. As she reaches her room, though, Maggie doesn't hear Dennis or her father, but three other familiar voices. As a heavy laugh reverberates through the oak door, Maggie runs inside.

"D.!" She sprints to give him a hug. "What are you doing here?"

"What do you think? We're here to see you." D. spins Maggie in the air twice before returning her to her feet. Behind D., Eleanor and Lila are seated on the two maroon chairs. Lila has eight ponytails threaded with differently colored ribbons and three floss hairwraps bulging from her scalp. She is smiling and bouncing her knees, looking up at D. and Maggie. Eleanor's knees are bouncing too, but she is not smiling or looking up. She has her eyes trained on the floor and is tugging nervously at loose strands of hair falling out of her ponytail. She doesn't look like herself. Maggie returns her attention to D.

"What about the Retreat?"

“We took the day off. It's okay. Don't worry. I left the other kids beads and string. They know what to do.” He smiles and turns to Lila. “Right?” Lila nods and D. points to Eleanor. “Is she okay?”

Lila laughs and wraps her arm around Eleanor's shoulder. “Ellie here has never been to a hospital. She's nervous.”

Eleanor glares at Lila then crosses her legs, sits up straight and stares directly past Maggie. “I'm not nervous.”

Maggie shrugs and looks away from Eleanor. Something about her looks different, and it makes Maggie uncomfortable, especially because Eleanor won't look Maggie in the eyes. She settles on the bed and crosses her legs then looks again at D. How did he know she was here? Minnie must have broken her promise. Maggie makes a mental note to call her Minerva the next time she sees her. “Do my parents know you're here?”

“Your dad is here with us.”

“And my mom?”

“Ah.” D. glances behind him at Eleanor who bites down on her thumb nail. “Not so much.”

“Oh.” Maggie bites at her own fingers. She thought something might have changed. It hasn't. She stares at her friend's face until Eleanor meets Maggie's eyes. “Does your mom know you are here?”

“Yes.” Eleanor rolls her eyes, calming down. “Why wouldn't she?”

Maggie shrugs and D. laughs. “No one believed you went back to camp after last year's debacle.”

Maggie blushes. “Does my mom know you know I'm here?”

“She told Ariel, but the rest of us, no. Not so much.”

“Oh.” Maggie bites at her nails some more and stares blankly at Eleanor biting her nails.

Lila jumps up from her seat and tugs at Eleanor's saliva stained hand to pull her up as well. “Who cares? Minnie said she'd take us for cafeteria food.” She starts tugging both her friends towards the door then turns around and asks D. if he is coming with them.

“I'll wait for Drew to come back from the phone. Go without me.” He looks over at Maggie's side table. “I'm going to catch up on my Hobbit.”

Maggie wants to laugh, but Lila is off running to find her sister before she has time to. “Wait up.” She calls ahead and sprints towards her friends.

At the nurses' station, behind three green potted spider plants, Minnie stands making corrections to paperwork with Nurse Sweetie glaring over her shoulder. Lila jumps up to talk to her sister, but Maggie tugs her hand and pulls them all onto the floor. “Wait,” Maggie says, panting.

“Why?” Lila whispers covering her mouth to hide her giggles.

“She hates me,” Maggie points up towards the desk.

“Minnie does?” Eleanor leans back, looking confused.

“Of course not.”

“She means the other one, Ellie.”

Even though they are whispering, Nurse Sweetie leans over the desk counter, and the spider plant leaves intertwine with her gray hair as she rolls her eyes to scold the girls. “We can hear you, Maggie.”

Maggie and Eleanor immediately blush and curl against the wall to hide. Lila pops up and smiles at her sister. "She was just kidding."

"Sure." Nurse picks up a stack of papers as Maggie and Eleanor stand beside Lila and brush the dust off their pants. Nurse Sweetie turns around to leave the station. "Minnie, I'll see you in twenty minutes. Be more careful this time." She doesn't wait for Minnie's response before she leaves the small room.

Minnie puts her folder down and smiles up at the girls. "Hey there."

"Take us to the cafeteria?" Lila bounces in front of the desk.

"What, no hello?"

"Hello." Eleanor smiles briefly and returns her gaze to Maggie's bare legs, then to the marked tile floor. Eleanor always gets nervous around Minnie, which makes Maggie think she is either in love with Minnie or wants to be her. Combined with her first-hospital-visit nerves, Eleanor looks like she is about to have a seizure. Maggie grabs her hand quickly and squeezes, hoping it calms her at least a little. Eleanor doesn't take her eyes from the floor, but she squeezes back.

Minnie stands from the desk and exits the station to lead the girls towards the elevator. "I love your hair, Ellie."

Eleanor smiles and says, "Thank you," so quietly the *you* fades away. Maggie drops Eleanor's hand and steps back to look at her new hair. That is what was different. That is what made Eleanor look like someone else. Maggie hates the new feathery, straight strands. She doesn't say anything, but runs ahead to press the elevator button.

As they wait, Lila starts playing with Eleanor's new hair. "This would be perfect for a hairwrap."

In their preoccupation, Maggie tugs at Minnie's hand. "Can I eat in the cafeteria?" Eleanor looks up as Maggie asks this but blushes quickly and turns her head, pretending she didn't hear. "You are fine. I talked to Andrea for you. You get the night off." Minnie looks up at Lila and Eleanor, who are pointing at some older man in the waiting room and whispering to one another. "But please eat enough or I'll get in trouble."

Maggie nods her head in promise as the elevator dings and they pile inside. Lila and Eleanor look to Maggie to press the button. Luckily, Minnie pushes it so fast, Maggie doesn't have to explain that she has never been to the cafeteria.

The cafeteria at the hospital smells like stale bread, disinfectant and Italian dressing, just like at school, except here, the sounds give a different ambiance. Rather than the recess-anticipatory laughter released with classroom freedom, the adults here talk in close groups with indoor voices. Maggie knows she is meant to like the air of middle school lunchrooms but something here smells safer, less expectant.

Minnie leads the girls through the food line, periodically prodding Maggie's elbow to ensure Maggie orders the correct choices from a fish-netted, white dressed server behind a glass counter. Minnie pays for their meals and sets them up at a table near the entrance, where D. and Maggie's father will be able to find them easily, then runs back to Maggie's floor to meet Nurse Sweetie. Left alone, Maggie and Eleanor smile nervously at one another and hesitantly move their food around on their plates. Lila immediately takes a bite from a piece of chicken and starts talking while chewing.

"We are going hiking at camp tomorrow. I wish you guys were coming. It's going to be great. No bees this time, Ellie, I promise. Want to come, Ellie?"



“I can't.” Eleanor sticks a plastic fork into an Italian dressing soaked piece of iceberg lettuce. Maggie wants to tell her there is more fat than vitamins in that salad but bites her tongue and brings a spoonful of soggy peas to her mouth instead.

“Sure you can. My dad will drive you up.”

“It's potluck tomorrow and Gary is coming over.”

Maggie forces the peas into her stomach just before it clenches. She puts down her spoon, dabs her mouth with a paper napkin and takes a sip of water. “You're still on that?”

“On what?” Eleanor puts down her fork and crosses her arms around her stomach. Eleanor has gained a few pounds since Maggie last saw her. Her face is still thin and she doesn't look *as* heavy as she did two months ago. She is not pudgy, but her breasts are almost as big as Minnie's.

“On Gary. I don't know. Never mind.” Maggie looks back at her plate and cuts a piece of broiled chicken breast with a plastic knife. She didn't pick the children's meal or the deceptive salad today. Her mother would be happy with her choice.

Eleanor glares at Maggie, so Maggie keeps her eyes focused on her meal, calculating the nutritional difference between this plate and what Nurse Sweetie brought her last night. Eleanor doesn't look away. “He likes me. He told me.”

Lila bounces in her seat and shoves six greasy wide cut fries in her mouth at once, spraying bits of potato as she bites down. “Really? When did he tell you?”

Eleanor takes her eyes off Maggie to focus her smile on Lila. “Last week. I wrote about it in a letter I sent you, but I can tell you again.” Why didn't Eleanor write Maggie a letter?

Lila nods, spraying more potatoes. Since she only eats healthy food at home, she has disgusting eating habits whenever she's allowed to eat grease or meat. Maggie looks away. As Eleanor describes some magical setting including roast beef and drunk parents, Maggie spots Gabby four tables away, laughing between a group of young orderlies and two of the nurses Maggie met today. Maggie stares, hoping Gabby will look up and come over to save her from romantic story hour. But as Gabby laughs and drops a piece of chicken into her purse, she doesn't once notice Maggie watching her.

Lila taps Maggie's shoulder and forces her attention back to her own table. "Are you listening?"

"Sure. Gary likes Eleanor."

Eleanor smiles and takes another bite of her salad, missing the sarcasm. Maggie is grateful Eleanor didn't hear it. She is grateful her friends are visiting her today, and she really does want to be nice to them.

Lila taps Maggie's shoulder once more to stop her from staring at Eleanor. "So do you want to come hiking tomorrow?"

"I can't. I have to stay here."

"Oh."

"Besides, isn't Leann at camp too? What do you need us there for?"

"Leann is there." Lila puts her fork down and sighs dramatically. "But it's not the same."

Maggie looks up from her food. She means to look sympathetic, but she can't help smiling. "Why not?"

“She hates climbing and even though she *says* she likes flowers, she only likes them inside. She's not going to be any fun on a hike.”

Eleanor takes a bite out of her chicken and dabs at her lips with a napkin, the way Maggie did. “Don't you have other friends?”

“Yes, but it's not the same as you.” Lila's whine is cut short by a burst of excitement as D. and Maggie's father walk into the cafeteria. They walk to the table to say *hello* before going to the counter to pick up their own dinners.

Maggie's father tussles her hair, making Maggie self conscious of her thin strands in comparison to her friends' new styles. “How is your surprise?”

“It's great, Dad.” Maggie runs her fingers through her hair, trying to flatten some loose strands. She wishes she had showered today. “Where is Dennis?”

“He's at Nic's again.”

“Oh. Who were you on the phone with?”

“Just work.” As he says this, his eyes dart around the room. Maggie knows he is lying. He pats D. on the shoulder. “Let's go get food.”

Their fathers spend six minutes at the food counter before they return, her father with a plate matching Lila's meal, D. with a plate piled high with mashed potatoes, French fries, salad and an absurd number of peas. Maggie feels sick looking at his food. He dives into it, eating as sloppily as his daughter.

Maggie's father sits next to Maggie and pats her shoulder, smiling at her half eaten plate. “You're doing a good job, baby.”

Maggie blushes and tries not to look at Eleanor, who is staring at her while finishing the last of her chicken at double speed. Maggie tries to distract them. “D., you're going on a hike?”

“Yes, indeed.” He sprays potatoes at Lila, who wipes her face and tells him not to get her too messy. “I wish you were going with us. We'll bring you back a leaf. Lila says you are collecting them.”

“No, I'm not.” Maggie squints at Lila.

“Yes, you are. That red one.”

“Oh. Yeah.”

Eleanor takes the last bite of her salad. “That was a gift to Maggie.”

“From a boy.” Lila giggles as she moves on to eat her pineapple cake.

Maggie's father looks around the table, hurt to be left out. “What boy?”

“It is no one.” Maggie pushes her plate away, hopeful that eating half was enough. Her father pushes it back towards her, silently pleading with her to finish. She reluctantly picks up her fork again. “Are you going back to camp tonight?”

“Yes, long drive. Sorry we can't stay longer. Lila and I have to be up early for the hike.”

“It's okay.” Maggie piles her peas carefully on a spoon. She's happy her friends are here, but her new daily routine wears her out and she doesn't want them to stay too long.

“How is Ariel?”

“She misses me!” Lila smiles at her father, leaning back in the chair. “Right?”

“Exactly.” D. takes a huge bite of mashed potatoes and peas. Maggie stares at his stomach. She swears she can see it growing. “But it is good for her and Minnie to be alone.

And her case is going well. She and your mom have been spending a lot of time together.”

He looks like he's about to say something else but glances at Maggie's father and stops.

Maggie's father doesn't seem to be paying attention, though. He is only looking at Maggie's plate. It's make her self conscious, so she eats faster. “Lila,” D. says, changing the topic.

“Tell them what you made.”

Lila stands, scavenges her pink cloth pockets and pulls out three brightly colored lanyards. “Key chains!” She gives one to Eleanor and one to Maggie. “Friendship key chains. They match.”

Maggie smiles down at the green and blue folded plastic. She wishes she could be as thoughtful as Lila. Dr. Greene says Maggie should make one resolution for each week, separate from eating, to make her happy. When she gets out of the hospital, her first resolution will be to make Lila and Eleanor friendship gifts.

Maggie's father pats Maggie's shoulder as she takes the last bite of chicken and whispers, “Thank you,” in Maggie's ear. Maggie twitches, but her father quickly distracts her by looking up at Eleanor. “Your hair looks nice, Eleanor. I liked your curls, but this is pretty.”

Maggie nods along, pushing her plate away for good. “Me too.”

Eleanor smiles across the table, looking directly at Maggie. “Thank you,” she says and lifts a fork to start eating her piece of cake.

4:

With Dr. Greene today, Maggie talks about Eleanor and Lila and their visit. She describes Mrs. Cook's comforting living room and Lila's exciting dining room, with no chairs and just mats for them to sit around a wicker eating bowl, *Ethiopian style* according to Lila. She describes the first day the three of them met and how she didn't have many friends, except for her cousins, in her grandparents' town. She explains how that didn't bother her then, but now she really loves Eleanor and Lila for being the first nonfamily people she has cared about. That is why it bothers her to have to lie to them and why she wishes she could show them her tree house.

"If it bothers you, Maggie, why don't you try talking to your parents about it? They might be more understanding than you think." Dr. Greene has been organizing her desk throughout Maggie's long monologue, but at this she looks up with full attention.

"I guess." Maggie hasn't told them because she hadn't realized how much it bothered her before, but talking now with Dr. Green's overeager face trained on her, Maggie suddenly grows concerned that she may have just revealed too much of her family's secrets. "You won't tell my parents if I tell you something?"

Dr. Greene's face suddenly flattens and she holds her hands still in her lap. "I don't tell them anything you say here, Maggie. We have full privacy. You know that don't you?"

"Promise?"

"Pinky promise." Dr. Greene sticks out her hand, jokingly, but serious too. Maggie ignores the gesture.

"I'm not allowed to." Maggie pauses, waiting for Dr. Greene's next piece of advice,

but she doesn't say anything, just pauses and waits for Maggie to continue. Maggie searches her mind trying to determine exactly what she means. "My mom is the one who gets to be upset, not me. She tells me her problems. I can't add to them or she'll break down." Maggie stills once more, looking at her hands. "If she wants a secret, I have to keep it. I have to."

Dr. Greene watches Maggie's eyes as they lower uncomfortably towards the ground. She waits for Maggie to continue, but Maggie feels drained. She has said all she is going to say today. "Can I tell you a story?"

Maggie nods, but doesn't lift her eyes from the strands of twined carpet.

"When I started studying psychology, all my friends were excited. They thought I would learn a magic solution to all their problems, so they began telling me everything. I mean *everything*. What they bought at the store. How their parents hurt them. What boys they liked. What boys they didn't like and how the ones they hated were the ones who always paid attention to them. What they wore to work and how they felt judged for that. What they ate for breakfast. How they were afraid of still wetting their beds. And the dreams. That was the worst, details of how they flew in their dreams, how hair wasn't real and some people had hands for feet and feet for hands in their dreams." Dr. Greene pauses to sigh and Maggie laughs in spite of herself.

"*What does it mean?* They all asked me for the fix. None of their problems were that big in and of themselves but combined, it was too much. I was swimming with other people's lives and you know what?"

Maggie shakes her head. "What?" She looks up from the ground to Dr. Greene's concentrating face.

"Psychology gave me no answers for them. Nothing did. I had all their problems

keeping me up at night. I was a wreck and I had absolutely nothing to tell them that could possibly help.” Dr. Greene pauses and three knocks ring through her door. She yells, “Hold on. Two minutes,” then turns back to Maggie. “You can’t help anyone if you are a mess. I asked them to stop talking so much. I explained how I couldn’t handle everyone’s worries. I still had my own. Two or three friends got offended and we stopped talking, but you know what?”

Maggie shakes her head again. “What?”

“The ones who loved me stopped. They asked me to tell them what was worrying me. Maggie, your mother loves you and she is a good mother. If she is telling you too much, I would guess it is because she doesn’t know it is hurting you. If you tell her you can’t handle it, if you tell her you need to show your friends the tree house, I think she’ll let you. You just have to talk to her.”

Maggie nods her head and thinks of all her mother tells her and all she doesn’t tell her mother. It was her mother who first talked about the Forest. Maggie never once tried explaining it to her. She feels a wave of exhaustion cascade through her limbs. Talking takes more from you than it should.

“Maggie. I think we made a breakthrough today. But our time is up. Think about what I said and we’ll continue tomorrow. If we keep this up, you’ll be able to start improving and you will be out of here in no time.”

Maggie doesn’t know if she can keep this up. Her stomach is contorted and despite the air conditioning, droplets of sweat are falling down her ribs. Even though Dr. Green promised not to tell, Maggie can’t help but feel like she just betrayed some family promise, but she does want to go home, if for nothing but to return to the Forest, so as she stands to



walk to the door, she thanks Dr. Greene and promises to think about what she said.

Outside the door, Minnie is holding a clipboard, leaning against the wall, a yellow sunset of scrubs before the sky blue paint. “Good session?”

Maggie nods, *Yes*, but is too worn down to recount anything more to her. Besides, Minnie is not contracted to secrecy the way Dr. Greene is. They walk in silence towards the elevator where Minnie is the one to break quiet.

“Big plans today?”

Maggie shakes her head, *No*.

Sometimes when Minnie and Gabby are together, they talk so fast Maggie feels left out and today she wants to spend time with Gabby alone, so she lies to Minnie. “No. My dad is coming early, so I think I’m going to take a nap this afternoon.”

Minnie looks up to the ceiling and jokingly turns from Maggie. “Fine then. I guess I’ll have to find myself a new television addict to feed off of.”

5:

At weigh-ins the next day, Maggie is up another two pounds, so they check her pockets for snuck in weights, apparently something Gabby is notorious at cheating with. Maggie is not so crafty, though, and so the doctor congratulates her. “Good job. You are almost there.” She will be back in the Forest in no time. The prospect reinvigorates Maggie and almost compensates for the energy taken from her in Dr. Green’s session, so rather than napping, she goes to the waiting room to wait for Gabby. She doesn’t turn on the television, though, afraid of getting taken in or drawing attention to herself. She watches her surroundings carefully, ready to duck behind a rainbow block tower at the sight of Minnie, but fortunately, Gabby appears before she does.

“You look like a vigilant cop. Why so nervous?” Gabby doesn’t sit down or take a rest but reaches out her hand to tell Maggie to stand up. “You’re gonna have to change to come out with me. We accentuate our bodies here. We don’t hide them.”

Maggie shrugs, feeling nearly as defiant as when Eleanor criticizes her clothes, but with Gabby, she is unwilling to protest. In their room, Maggie accepts a dress from Gabby’s suitcase only because it hangs so far past her knees, it hides the bruises on her thighs, which the nutritionist told Maggie were most likely due to not eating enough red meat, a deficiency women are especially susceptible to.

The first stop is their smoking break. In the park with Gabby, Maggie stands close to the stone benches and cement outposts rather than walking into the trees as she did with her mother. At first they claim the space alone and talk of Eleanor and Lila, Dr. Greene and the newest cuts of blue jeans advertised in *Teen*, but as Gabby works through her crushed blue Camel pack, two other men approach and greet her with a wide grin and hearty pats on her fragile shoulders.

The oldest of the group, a peppered gray short haired surgeon with thick rimmed black glasses comes the closest to matching Gabby’s proclivity for nicotine but even he falls

two sticks short. “You know those are going to catch up to you, Gabriella. Everything in moderation.” The black haired man, who Gabby introduced as Rocky, beckons for her to put out the most recent light. Gabby ignores him but doesn’t look away as Maggie would have, instead smiles as she blows a ring of smoke before his face. “I’m serious. You know, my mom wouldn’t be in this place if she had stuck to my strict rule of two a day. It’s all about moderation. I swear.”

“Except with the whiskey, eh?” The peppered doctor takes the cigarette from Gabby and inhales a deep breath himself then puts it out in the tray. Gabby wavers slightly as she stands to take the next cigarette but stares a second longer at her pack and eventually puts it away, still closed. “Besides Gabriella here is young, she has time to get her act together.”

“I am not young.” Gabby laughs wickedly as she leans against the bench, letting her shirt ride up revealing inches of her stomach only one of the smoking men takes the time to glance at. “Maggie here, now she is young. Time to start, yeah? Lots of time to heal.”

“No, thanks.” Maggie shrugs away, enamored with the ease with which Gabby talks to these grown ups, but unsure if she can, or wants, to have that ease. Mostly her stomach and lungs just sting standing beneath layers of descending ash. She shoves her hands in her pockets and holds her breath. Though her parents both still smoke the occasional cigarette, Mrs. Cook taught her that the key to living long was not moderation but abstinence. She could tell them, but Maggie is certain that Gabby wouldn’t understand such logic. Besides, her thin arms fit well with a cigarette at the ends of them.

Gabby coughs once and reaches out the pack to offer one to Maggie. “You sure? It is an appetite suppressant.” Maggie looks towards her feet, willing the strangers to stop looking at her.

“Don’t be a bad role model, Gabriella.”

“I think she already is.” Rocky laughs but no one else responds and the peppered surgeon takes the conversation from his friend after a sympathetic glance at both small girls.

“So, Gabriella. It’s my old lady’s fiftieth next week. Now tell me, what am I getting her this year?”

“A big party. Lots of wine. And fresh flowers. She loves daisies.”

“I know that. You think I didn’t think of that? But I need more than a party. She was so mad last month, I think this birthday can get me out of the doghouse for good.”

“Only thing that is going to get you out is to be a better man.” While spinning advice, Rocky takes a match from the surgeon and lights his second cigarette this hour, which must be a special extra for his mother in the hospital because Maggie swears she saw him out here already this morning.

“I am not a man like you, Rocky. I treat Betty well, I just work a few too many hours for her liking.”

“So get her a stand in man. I’m free you know.”

Maggie rolls her eyes but the others all laugh, except for Gabby, whose eyes fall to the sidewalk while she listens to them jabbing each other instead of her. “Get her a puppy. Does she want a puppy?”

“Betty’s not quite a dog lady. She had one as a girl and still has the scars on her right arm. He was a terror.” The surgeon smiles, Maggie thinks it must be at the thought of his old lady as a child fighting furry dogs. She imagines her grandmother in the same way and also cannot help but grin, locking eyes with him.

“Does she like cats?” Maggie’s grandfather once told her that there is an animal that can get to everyone’s heart. For most, it is dogs or cats, for some it takes a little more searching.

“I believe she might.” The surgeon nods, locking eyes with Gabby.

“I love them crazy old cat ladies. Better watch out, Serge.” Rocky punches his friend’s shoulder and drops his ash on the doctor’s white shoes. “You a cat lady, Angel Gabrielle?”

“Nope.” Gabby reveals her stomach once more as she reaches her hands high and

stretches in a yawn. This time when Rocky stares, Maggie shoots him an evil glare, which the surgeon responds to with a short, chuckle. "I'm done with this smoke for today. Maggie, ready?"

Maggie nods and stands from her crouching seat on the bench to follow her roommate away from the men. Rocky doesn't say a thing as he lights his third cigarette, but the surgeon waves goodbye to both girls and makes Maggie promise she won't ever take a cigarette, no matter how young or old she is. "Your heart won't like it, I promise. We old dogs just get stuck in our habits and we are poor examples." Maggie thanks him for the advice, hearing her mother's cordiality in the back of her mind, though even as she mouths the words she is not quite sure what she's thanking him for. Maybe she should wish him good luck instead.

Back in the frozen air of the hospital, the sweat and scent dry over Maggie's skin causing her to shiver as they enter the elevator. Gabby's shivering too, but rather than pressing floor nine and returning them to their room where dozens of sweaters sit waiting to be worn, she takes them to floor two, Dr. Greene's floor. In the sky blue hallway, though, they don't tap at the familiar door. Instead they continue towards the end of the hallway furthest from the elevator doors where a wide black sign announces the nurse's lounge.

"Why are we going here?" Maggie crosses her fingers, praying that Nurse Sweetie isn't waiting behind the door.

"Minnie gets me coffee, and the old ladies love me. You'll love it here." Gabby swings open the door without a knock and enters the room with a flip of her hair and a twirl on her feet. Nurse Sweetie is indeed waiting behind the doors, seated in a worn green couch, which she promptly stands from as she grunts and exits behind the girls, leaving a wide round indent in her place.

"Miss you too." Gabby calls out the door as she falls into Nurse Sweetie's indent. Maggie waits uncomfortably by the edge of the door, now praying that Sweetie doesn't return.

A dark curly haired middle aged woman with thick glowing blush and wide strokes of blue eye shadow over her hazel eyes, lifts a mug and leaves her desk to walk towards Gabby.

“Why are you always tormenting her?”

“What did I do?” Gabby bats her eyelids and leans into the couch. “Where’s Minnie?”

“She has rounds now, you know that.”

“I know. I just pretended to need her so I could come see you.” Gabby smiles sweetly, which only causes this nurse to roll her eyes as she sets a bright red machine to drip coffee into a clear pot. “This is my roommate, baby Maggie.” Maggie cringes at the title.

“This is Jean. She’s the prettiest nurse here, can’t you see?”

“Your flattery is no good. But pleased to meet you Maggie. How are you getting on here?”

Maggie searches for an answer, uncertain whether to be nice or pouty, talkative or quiet. Mostly, she wants to smile and not talk, afraid to prolong this afternoon she is beginning to wish she hadn’t agreed to. Mostly she wants to leave the room before Sweetie comes back. Luckily, Gabby answers for her, saving Maggie from having to make a decision.

“She’s Andrea’s patient too.”

“Oh man, she must love you.” Jean giggles and Gabby falls into hysterics. “Don’t worry if Andrea is short with you. She just doesn’t like your roomie. It’s not your fault.”

Maggie shrugs. She doesn’t want to insult her nurse, because she is afraid Andrea will hear her doing it, and she will get bigger portions of macaroni and cheese or thicker slices of ham tomorrow. “She’s not bad.”

“Yeah, right. She doesn’t say more than two words to you when she brings your dinner.”

“I don’t mind.”

Jean smiles at Maggie while she drums her fingers waiting for the pot to boil. "How long have you been in? I'm surprised we haven't seen you in here."

"Two weeks." Maggie doesn't elaborate.

"Baby Maggie has family and TV to fill her time. She doesn't need to waste it here like me."

"If you are wasting time here, you can get out. I'll drink all this coffee myself."

"Ah no. You know I love you." Gabby shakes with laughter as Jean fills the once used mug with fresh coffee and reaches out the full cup to Gabby, now seated cross legged, rocking on the couch. "You want a cup Maggie?" Jean searches beside the pot.

"No, thanks. I don't drink coffee."

"You sure?" Gabby lifts her cup, handing it to Maggie. "It is an appetite suppressant."

"You said that about the cigarettes. Do you say that about everything?"

"Nope. Just these." Gabby laughs and Maggie reluctantly takes a sip from the burning hot mug.

"Gross." She wants to spit the bitter black taste back into its cup. Gabby starts laughing again, but Jean has her hands on her hips, staring at them.

"You tried to get her to smoke?"

Gabby shrugs and bats her eyes once more. "Me? No. Of course not."

Jean looks at Maggie with squinted eyes, but Maggie just shrugs. "No coffee, thank you."

As Gabby slowly sips, Maggie rises from the wall and walks closer to sit next to Gabby. Her legs tremor with the fatigue of too much standing. Just as she gets halfway across the room, though, the door swings open and Maggie nearly trips. In fear, she tries to press her body back against the wall. This makes Gabby start laughing again.

"What is she so scared of?" Jean giggles softly, staring wide eyed at Maggie, but unlike Gabby, Jean reaches out her hand to pat her back and make sure Maggie's okay first.

"It is just Ange and Martha, calm down. Andrea's not back."

Maggie shrugs, trying to pretend that isn't what she was afraid of. She takes a seat next to Gabby to let her limbs recover. After Maggie is introduced to the two new nurses, equally middle aged, though both the new women are slightly skinnier than Jean and Jackie, a pale faced, long braided Nurse Martha sets in on a rant about her husband. The man she describes fits so perfectly with Rocky, Maggie almost asks for his name, but decides it would be rude to interrupt.

“And I swear if he draws a winking smile on one more receipt, I'm going to refuse to go out with him.”

Gabby rolls her eyes. “If he's flirting, he is not doing anything. When he starts acting respectable, now that's when you worry. That means he's acting on the winks.”

“That's not true.” Jean jumps in. “My Roger is always sweet and he isn't running around with anyone.”

Gabby smiles too sweetly at Jean. “We know. We know. You found the one good person and made him your husband. Lucky, lucky you.” Turning back to Martha. “The trick is to be better looking than all those women, if it bothers you. You have the body, you just need to dress up. I'll lend you clothes for this Friday and I swear, he is not going to be winking at anyone but you.”

“But I don't want him winking period. And why do I need to dress up? Why am I competing? Besides, I can dress up all I want, I'm still fifty-three. That doesn't change.” The room fades to silence for a minute while each of the woman catalogs the various flaws that genetics and time won't let them alter.

“Why don't you talk to him about it?” Maggie hears the words fall from her lips before they even played through her head. She tries to suck them back in, but it is too late, they are floating in the air. Rather than pause and stare as Maggie expects, though, the women barely react to her interruption.



“You think I haven’t tried that? He doesn’t listen. He says, *You jealous baby?* and buys me some crazy bouquet of flowers, thinking that is that and the next week it’s the same thing again.”

This is the point where Maggie tunes out. She figures that if this happens every week, she can come back in two days and get the rest of the story. For now, she focuses on her own words and silently scolds her mouth for speaking without first asking. Her mouth replies that its words are better than the vanity floating from everyone else’s lips.

When Gabby finishes the last drop of her coffee and pops up from the couch, promising to return tomorrow with an outfit Martha insists will never fit her, Maggie is more than happy to escape the room. Maybe if she drank coffee and smoked cigarettes, she would understand the appeal of the day, but as it is, she really would rather be watching *The Munsters* with Minnie.

Safe in the elevator, Gabby turns to Maggie to receive an evaluation of the day. “So who you like better? The men or the ladies?”

Maggie shrugs, leaning against the wall of the elevator, unsure she ever wants to talk like any of the people she just met.

“Yeah, they are all pretty horrible, huh? Good thing is, you and I, we don’t ever have to grow up.” She smiles as she runs her hands across her stomach. “I’m no lady. I’m no man. Just me is all.”

Maggie laughs now, a genuine short cackle. She doesn’t know if she’s laughing at the men, the ladies, Gabby or herself. But standing in the elevator, looking at her friend and her feet, everyone suddenly seems ridiculous. “Where are we going now?”

“To catch up on our readings.” Maggie looks up asking for more information, but Gabby doesn’t give any. Instead, she taps her nails on the elevator door. “So, why don’t you talk, my little mute?”

“I talk.” Maggie considers bringing her fingers to her teeth, but instead tugs at her dress.

“Yeah. What do you say?”

“Lots of things.” Maggie pauses as the door dings and opens and they walk out onto a new floor Maggie's never been to. They start walking. “Can I ask you something?”

“Of course, Chatty Cathy.”

“Does it bother you when people tell you so much?”

“What?”

“The men and the nurses tell you too many secrets. Does it bother you? Or make you upset?”

“Of course not. Why would it?”

“I don't know. It's a lot of things to know.”

“I guess so. But that is their lives. What makes people friends, what makes people real, is talking about these things, helping each other with these things. Anyways, problems make people interesting.”

“So what are your problems?”

Gabby laughs, but only shortly this time. “I don't have problems. That's why I listen. Otherwise, I'd be boring.”

Maggie doesn't agree, but she decides to return to being a mute while they walk through a hallway of shut doors. They walk past a quiet nurses' station into a room labeled library. Once inside, Maggie speaks again. “So what do we do in here?”

“Read of course.” Gabby smiles and directs Maggie towards a shelf in the back labeled psychiatry. She presents the second shelf from the ground to Maggie, holding her hands flat to show it off, like a game show host. Past her hands are about a dozen books all with versions of the phrase, *Eating Disorders*, printed on their spines.

“We read these?”

“Of course. What else?” Gabby pulls a thick brown book from the shelf and settles cross legged in front of the wall. For an hour, she gets completely absorbed and doesn't once lift her head from the pages. Maggie flips through four books in that time, but cannot find

anything interesting in the printed jargon. She decides to walk to the fiction shelf and search for the next Tolkien book. She finds it and begins reading, even though that means skipping ahead in the story line.

After an hour passes, Gabby suddenly snaps her book shut, stands, and returns it to the shelf. Maggie follows her, and they walk back to their room.

6:

This Saturday, Maggie's mother arrives at nine o'clock, alone again because Dennis has a baseball game. Today, Maggie's mother received approval from Nurse Sweetie to take Maggie off premises for breakfast. Maggie switches from hospital jeans when her mother begs her to wear something nice for their expedition. She puts on loose black slacks and a crocheted sweater that is admittedly too hot, but pretty. Maggie likes the way the wiry strings tickle her bare arms.

They don't travel far, just three blocks into Somerville's Main Street, far enough away from *Verve* so Maggie doesn't feel compelled to mention the betrayal dinner. Despite the short distance, Maggie's limbs ache with exhaustion when they arrive at *2 Brother's Bagels*, her mother's chosen destination. The thought of the everything bagel topping sprinkled on her tongue makes Maggie salivate as they pass through a glass door strung with bells that jingle their arrival. But standing before a glass container housing bins of thick, well coated golden dough, Maggie's stomach twists to remind her. "I can't eat a bagel, mom."

Her face drops for the hundredth time this month, and she tugs at a smooth curl of hair to hide her disappointment. "You could get eggs instead."

The turns of Maggie's stomach at this thought are neither small nor subtle. "I can't eat anymore eggs."

"Well." Her mother pauses, looking pleadingly to the gray haired, scabbed face man behind the counter who just shrugs and wipes his dark, hairy knuckles against a greased white apron, offering no solution. "Why don't you order a bagel and just eat what you want?"

"But I can't eat any of it."

"If you can't eat a bagel, we have to go back and eat hospital food." They both glance, embarrassed, at the man behind the counter.

Maggie shrugs. "Fine. I'll try." Maggie's stomach flops questioningly, but she chooses to ignore it with the taste of garlic crumbs approaching.

The man behind the counter approaches the bagel rack and leans forward. "What kind can I get you girls?"

Maggie doesn't hesitate. "Everything."

Her mother asks for plain and the man reaches a bare, hairy knuckle to search for the widest rings, then sets about cutting the bagels in half and smearing on cream cheese from an aluminum tub.

They sit towards the back corner of the white walled restaurant. Her mother's pink cotton dress sparkles too sweetly and clashes with the black scuffs and unswept grime of the bagel store. Even with four other customers and even this far away, Maggie can feel the cashier's ears tuned towards them, only feet away, so Maggie doesn't bring up the stories that have filled her mind this week, though at Dr. Greene's suggestion, Maggie does want to tell her mother what has been worrying her. It has nothing to do with the tree house.

As soon as Maggie bites into her bagel, taking only a small piece to prolong the time she can savor the flavor, her mother splits her bagel in half and nibbles at the bottom part.

"I have news." Her mother places her arms on the table and spreads a grin so wide, Maggie has to lay her own lunch back on the plate, certain she will throw up if anyone else brings a new lover into their family.

"I am going back to school."

Maggie sighs, relieved not to have to hear her mother has suddenly fallen in love with Mr. Phillips.

"My boss talked to me about it after the meeting Thursday, and I waited to tell you so I could tell you alone."

"Why?"

"I'm not ready to tell your dad."

Maggie wants to roll her eyes but locks them on the table instead, not wanting her mother to mistake what aspect of the conversation she finds ridiculous.

“On Thursday after the meeting, he said I have a knack for numbers and he wants me to work in accounting for him, not just as a secretary. But he said I’m not quite qualified yet. I could do a lot more if I had a degree. And if I promise to work with him when I’m done school, he’s going to lend me the money to go.”

“That is really nice of him.”

“I know. Isn’t it wonderful?”

“No. That is *really* nice of him, mom.”

“I know. I know. I’m making him cookies this week to thank him.” She nods to the hairy man, smiling congratulations from behind the counter. Maggie doesn’t see how this boss fits in with the bossy men Lila’s mother describes, but she can’t determine a classy way to ask her mother how on Earth she managed to get her boss to be so nice, so she returns to her bagel with only one after thought. “Dad would be happy for you, you know.”

“Maybe.”

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They spend the rest of the morning wandering through the familiar shops and streets of Somerville. There are not too many people walking, but the few people around make it inappropriate to discuss details of the Forest. The girls would sound crazy. Maggie wrestles with Dr. Greene’s advice for the first few blocks, wanting to tell her mother about Eleanor and Lila’s visit, but she is afraid of digging a new trench between her parents. She doesn’t say a thing.

When she finally gives into just listening to her mother’s work gossip and dress pattern proposals, Maggie begins to feel normal again. These are her streets, her shops, her town. Though a few facades have been renovated and alternated in her three years living here, over all, it looks the same today as when she first walked down Main Street. She inhales a breath of humid air and realizes that though a day turns to a night and seasons wane, come summer the air always fills with water and in winter it dries. Certain things don’t

change. Maggie takes her mother's hand when they cross the street, like she always did until Maggie was eight.

*August 1976*1:

Five weeks after arriving, Maggie meets the weight requirements to leave the hospital. Ninety pounds, a healthy for a five-foot-tall blossoming girl who promises to eat her mother's dinners and continue therapy with an approved psychoanalyst. Gabby shows Maggie textbooks that explain the different breeds of psychology. "He won't be anything like Dr. Greene," Gabby warns. "Much worse. If that's possible." Maggie laughs hysterically alongside Gabby even though she secretly doesn't mind Dr. Greene anymore. This is a technique she picked up following her roommate around this past week. Every time something terrifies you, laugh, approach mania, and slowly the noise fades into genuine happiness. Half the time it really works, but even when it doesn't, it always keeps you from crying and others rarely see the screams behind laughing fits.

The doctors ask Maggie's family to let her stay in residence until Friday. After Gabby's six reentries, they have learned the temporariness in highly monitored weight gain and explain that a three day extended stay is cheaper than a second full length visit. For the last three days, Maggie is allowed to eat her meals in the cafeteria while she continues therapy and weigh-ins. "If on Friday, she is still on target," Nurse Sweetie explains, "She can go home."

For the next two days, Maggie eats with Gabby in the cafeteria and meets her two attendant boyfriends, Bill and Larry, who Gabby is just devastated to be leaving. Gabby reached weight herself six days ago, though Maggie wonders if they forgot to calculate extra pounds for her height because Maggie can still see the ribs through Gabby's skin every time she changes her dress. Today, Gabby will be heading back to Avalon, her family's horse farm in Flemington.



As she fills up her red plastic suitcase, leaving behind a bright orange silk dress she swears looks better on Maggie anyways, Maggie lays laughing on her stomach, a laugh that would have ruptured her stitches if she had been admitted for surgery. Gabby swears she'll come visit Maggie's tree house when she's allowed to use the car again. Maggie laughs harder at this, trying to believe the promise.

Gabby introduces Maggie to the woman who picks her up, a sixty-something year old lady with Gabby's smooth dark cheeks and foreboding eyes but a filled out stomach and thick grayed hair. Gabby introduces her as G Lee. For the first time, it occurs to Maggie that Gabby never had anyone waiting for her at visiting hour. Not one friend or family member ever brought her cake or sent her flowers. Maggie wants to point this out and ask why, but between the flow of staff coming to wish her goodbye, she doesn't get a chance. Gabby hugs her, kisses her cheek, but never leaves a full picture to hold on to.

Maggie laughs alone in her bed until her father arrives with another bag from Somerville Bakery. For the first time, Maggie takes a rainbow sprinkled sugar cookie from the box. She eats a full half before the family walks down to the cafeteria together for a normal family dinner.

2:

On Maggie's last day, Minnie asks for her lunch break to follow Maggie's session with Dr. Greene, so they can celebrate in the cafeteria together. Maggie's hunger encourages her to pick broccoli, rice and ham without Minnie jabbing her with her elbow this time. Minnie takes the children's meal of macaroni and cheese and ham. Like Lila, Minnie must love the opportunity to eat fat and pigs. Fortunately, Minnie is less sloppy than her father and sister when she eats.

They sit near the back of the cafeteria, where Minnie says they will have more privacy. Unlike Gabby, Minnie doesn't crave the attention of the male orderlies, though it is clear to Maggie that Minnie could have their eyes if she wanted them. Minnie has been dating the same boy for six months, a fellow nursing student who is currently working with geriatric patients. The only reason Ariel has stopped bugging Minnie about getting serious so young is because, as she says, "At least one of them is breaking the gender norm."

Minnie rolls her eyes as she repeats this to Maggie today, using air quotes to partition her mother's most ridiculous statements.

Maggie can't help but laugh at this comment. It feels like betrayal to make fun of Ariel, though, so she adds, "I like Ariel."

"Me too." Minnie wipes her mouth as she finishes chewing. "I just wish she would leave me alone sometimes."

Maggie cuts a small piece of ham and slowly chews through it, not quite sure what to say next. There is a question she has wanted to ask Minnie all day, but Maggie doesn't know how to phrase it.

"Now, your mom," Minnie continues, leaning on her elbows. "She is perfect."

Maggie looks up, wide eyed, and before she can help it she's laughing so hard, she nearly chokes on the piece of ham she was in the process of swallowing. As her laughter fades, a quote from Dr. Greene passes through Maggie's mouth before she has a chance to

really consider it. “The grass is always greener on the other side.”

Minnie nods and smiles down at Maggie, then takes another bite of macaroni.

Maggie sips her water and tries to phrase her question. “Minnie?”

“Yeah?”

“Why didn’t anyone ever visit Gabby?”

Minnie looks down at her food and takes a large bite, thinking before she answers. “Some people did. But she is in here a lot. Friends get bored of hospital food.” She stares questioningly at her own meal, affirming her answer.

“But what about her family?”

“Her grandmother and grandfather are all she has. Her parents aren’t around.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t know. She never talked about it really. You know she doesn’t like to focus on the sad, just laughed anytime someone brought up her family.”

“But what about family? They’re not allowed to get bored with food and abandon you.”

Minnie laughs almost as loudly as Gabby would have at this comment, and Maggie joins in, swayed by Minnie’s smile, without knowing why. When they settle, Maggie leans forward and repeats, “But, really. Why didn’t her family come?”

“Maggie. Not everyone has parents as good to them as ours are to us.”

Maggie thinks of all the ways external appearances can be deceptive but bites her tongue and takes a final mouthful of broccoli, realizing, even as the words form, that they are not true.

3:

That afternoon, the doctor tells Maggie her weight is still up, so she is free to go. Maggie looks up at Sweetie, expecting to see a smile as wide as the one she is wearing, but her nurse's face remains stoic. She is a robot.

Maggie's head spins and her body fills with excitement, nearly to the point of hunger. She is free to go, which means tonight, she goes into the Forest. Her friends will tell her how much they missed her. Her parents will stay kind to one another, the way they were here, on those two maroon chairs. Maggie will be home again. Comfortable again.

Unfortunately, there are three hours before her mother will come to pick her up. She should nap in this time, so she can stay up later in the Forest tonight, but her heart is beating too fast to sleep. She walks to the waiting room to say goodbye to reruns instead.

Halfway through *The Munsters*, Nurse Sweetie walks into the common room holding the hand of that six-year-old girl whose father stared at Gabby's stomach three weeks ago. Maggie silently groans and keeps her eyes locked on the television, not wanting to be forced to feign pleasantries. Poor girl. A creepy father plus Sweetie for a nurse.

Maggie does a good job of not looking at them through the rest of the episode, but as Herman fades into a Jell-O commercial, she can't help but turn her attention to the girl and her nurse, whose voice seems to have raised three pitches in the company of her new patient. Nurse Sweetie has her hand on the girl's back, helping her rearrange dolls in a playhouse. The girl stutters and slurs her words, but Sweetie sits patiently through all mispronunciations and smiles encouragingly when she gets one right.

Maggie flicks off the television, but neither patient nor nurse reacts to the loss of sound. They go on playing, intent on decorating the perfect kitchen. Maggie, for the first time, realizes there's no conspiracy, at least not the one she thought. Nurse Sweetie's kindness isn't a lie, just something she knows how to flick on and off. Maggie watches them play for an eerie ten minutes before she feels a flutter in her chest and heat rushing to her

cheeks. She doesn't want to go back to her room, so she walks to the elevator, into the garden and practices Gabby's unnerving laugh, prepared to charm the doctors herself.

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Maggie returns to her room after an hour spent outside. She didn't know any of the doctors smoking, so she wandered into the woods rather than waiting by the outpost. She practiced climbing trees to make sure she remembers. Tonight, she will be in the Forest, and she doesn't want her celebration to be ruined by her inability to get up to the Nest. Clawing her short nails into the papery wood of an ash tree, Maggie felt more like herself than she has in weeks. As she walks back through the elevator and her hallway one last time, with the sun still blinking in her vision, Maggie's excitement to return to the Forest tingles her burning skin. When she sees her mother waiting with a packed suitcase at the foot of Maggie's bed, Maggie bolts inside to give her a hug. "I get to go home!"

"I know, baby. Are you excited?"

"I get to go to the Forest!" Maggie sings as her father and Dennis enter the room. Maggie stops singing, but runs to greet her father, who lifts her in the air and spins her, just like D. would have done.

"You excited?"

"Yes!"

Maggie's father pats her on the head. Dennis leans against the wall, playing with a bright red yo-yo. He is the only one who doesn't look excited, though Maggie's certain he's just hiding his emotions because he hates spending his evenings in the hospital more than anyone. Well, almost anyone.

Maggie walks over to lean beside her brother while her parents finish packing up her belongings. "You excited?" Dr. Greene suggested trying to be friends with Dennis again as one of Maggie's resolutions, so she is trying this out.

"No. I don't care."

"Why not? You won't have to visit me here anymore."

“That’s true.” Dennis coils the white string to bring the yo-yo back up to his palm. “Look what Jenny got me.”

Maggie smiles at her brother, then catches her mother staring and gaping at them from across the room. Maggie does her best not to show too much enthusiasm. “It’s nice.” Maggie wants to change the subject so her mother will stop staring. “Do you have a game tomorrow?”

“Yes.” Dennis looks at his yo-yo instead of Maggie as he spins it again. Being friends with him is not easy.

“Who are you playing against?”

“I don’t know.” The yo-yo spins out and he has to curl it up again.

“Dennis?” Maggie taps his arm trying to get his attention. “Want to hear a joke?” Dennis shrugs. Maggie tells it anyways. “What’s a pirate’s favorite type of sock?” Dennis shrugs again. Maggie knows the punch line is *Argyle*, but she also knows that Dennis wouldn’t understand that, so she tries to channel her brother’s sense of humor. “Sock monkeys.”

Dennis drops his yo-yo and stares up at Maggie. “That doesn’t make any sense.”

“No?”

“No. You should have said, *Sock parrots*.”

Maggie stares at Dennis, blankly, but when he starts giggling at himself, she does her best to join in. Fortunately, their father walks over to place a hand on each of their shoulders, and she doesn’t have to fake for too long. “You guys ready to go?”

Dennis nods. “Yes. It’s boring here.” Maggie rolls her eyes, giving up, and walks over to her mother to help her carry the suitcases. “Don’t worry, baby. I’ve got it.” Her mother lifts a canvas bag and a heavy plastic suitcase through the door, toddling as she walks even though she refuses any help. The rest of the family follows her out, empty handed.

In the elevator, Maggie's mother drops the bag and wipes sweat from her face with the back of her hand. Maggie's father reaches for the suitcase, but she bats his hand away. He leans against a cool metal bar on the wall and smiles at her. "So what's the plan for tonight?"

"What do you mean?" Maggie steps away from her father and glares at her mother. The plan for the night is for Maggie to go to the Forest. That's it.

"I thought we could all go to dinner together to celebrate your freedom."

Maggie shakes her head. Her mother steps in to lie so Maggie doesn't have to. "I don't know if that's the best idea. It has been a long day and Maggie's tired." Maggie fakes a wide yawn and Dennis catches it. "Also, I don't think going to a restaurant is the best plan." Maggie's father's face wrinkles, hurt, but her mother doesn't seem to notice. "Plus, I made us a healthy dinner from the doctor's recommendations, so I think it's best if Maggie and I go home tonight, but you and Dennis can go celebrate if you want. Right?" She smiles at Dennis who nods, yawning. "Maybe Jenny can go with you." She stares at the elevator doors as they click open, lifts her bags and walks into the lobby to sign Maggie out officially. The rest of the family stays still until the elevators threaten to close.

When they all start walking again, Maggie takes her father's hand and squeezes it tightly. "I am really tired, Dad."

Her father looks down at her, still squinting. "You don't seem tired."

"I really am, dad. Really. But what if tomorrow we all go to Dennis's game together and then celebrate?"

Her father doesn't look convinced as Maggie's mother returns to their side, and they exit through the front door. He nods his head. "Okay," and drops Maggie's hand to walk away with Dennis.

In their car, Maggie's mother brushes the last beads of sweat from her forehead. She looks, frowning, out the window as Maggie's father's car rushes past them. "I didn't mean to be mean, you know. I just wanted you to be able to go see Squirrel."

Maggie sighs, "I know," and leans against the window. She really is too tired to deal with this. She tries to think only about the Forest.

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Maggie's mother has broccoli, baked chicken and oven roasted potatoes ready on the stove top for their arrival home. She heats them up while Maggie sets the table and pours them each a glass of grape juice, which the nutritionist suggested Maggie drink with at least one meal a day. After her mother sets two plates on the table, they cheers to Maggie's return home. Maggie eats quickly. Her mother eats slowly, watching every bite Maggie takes. Between nerves and excitement, she doesn't need encouragement to finish her plate tonight. Her mother already told her she can't leave the table until she finishes.

After taking the last bite, Maggie looks up at her mother. "May I be excused?"

"Sure, baby."

"Are you coming?" Maggie waits for her mother to finish her piece of broccoli.

"No, baby. Not tonight. You need to celebrate with your friends alone. Besides, I'm actually tired. I'm going to clean up then rest. Maggie's pretty sure that means she's going to smoke, but she doesn't say anything because she doesn't have time to argue tonight. Maggie runs up the stairs to her room.



4:

In her room, Maggie pauses for a second to take in the familiar shine of her dresser, all the glittering porcelain of her collected childhood decorations. She taps across the shag, stares out the dark window towards her neighbor's well lit house, the same red paint, the same barn mailbox. Isn't it strange the way these things stay the same no matter how long she goes away? Walking back in her room feels like walking into a time capsule, every object perfectly preserved in the moment she last walked through her door. Nothing altered, nothing grew. She looks from the window to the purple wall, from her purple wall to the aluminum foil mirrors. There she stands, with a pretty pink t-shirt, baggy jeans, blond scraggly hair crisscrossing over her eyes that are black like her grandmother's, her nose that is curved like her mother's, her lips that are thin like her brother's, bruises and stick limbs, elflike ears that are uniquely hers. Nothing alters, nothing grows. Except. . .

Except that things do grow and change. Maggie closes her eyes and drops to the floor. She rolls across the warmth of the carpet and pulls herself under the bed, which now has a gap about an inch higher than before, so there's room for her to easily fit through. Maybe she is thin again, maybe one hundred pounds went to her hair and her arms, not to her waist. Even if she's fat, who cares if she can still fit under her bed, if she can still roll underneath, arch her back and press against the cold wooden frame, wait floating through the purple space and land, warm and soft, in the familiar stringy grass.

When Maggie opens her eyes and adjusts to the familiar shimmering air, she sees Squirrel waiting, smiling above her, next to Bird and Luna. The three fall down beside her, collapsing and crouching to the greatest extent their bodies will let them. Luna falls the lowest and licks Maggie's face, grooms her arms and fingers as well. Maggie sits up to meet the embraces of Squirrel and Bird.

“Who’s watching the Eggs, then? Nothing happened to them, did it?” Maggie backs away from her friends, suddenly filled with concern. She knows the towel she brought already disappeared.

Bird laughs and taps Maggie’s stomach with his right wing. “Lucy brought us a sweater, too. We told her how you do that, and she brought us one that she says its okay to let disappear, a really ugly purple one.”

Luna’s tail snakes over the ground in excitement. “Lucy says you really missed us. We missed you too, Maggie. She said we should bring you to your favorite places, and I liked that suggestion so I made a whole plan for today so we can show you everything.” That doesn’t sound like them, to stop looking for an Exit. Maggie is skeptical at first, but she doesn’t want to search today, so she lets them take her through Luna’s plan. She quietly thanks her mother for suggesting this.

They run to the different landmark trees, to the slightly cracked webbing of Sky Wall, to Bird’s favorite patch of grass, to Luna’s scratch post plant. When they finally collapse back in the Nest and Maggie asks Squirrel for a single acorn, they ask her about the hospital. She describes Gabby and the taste of hospital food Nurse Sweetie force fed her, the way her doctor’s arms looked like reptile skin, all red, scaly and hairy. Finally, she tells them the truth she hasn’t told anyone else yet, about why she ended up there. She explains that she is going to keep getting bigger if they keep making her eat so much. She’s scared of getting too big to come under the bed, but she is also scared of not eating and spending too many days in white rooms full of feeding tubes. She doesn’t know which fear is worse.

“Didn’t your mom teach you her trick?” Bird asks

Maggie shakes her head, and Squirrel starts talking. “It was my idea. Lucy said she couldn’t visit because she was too big. I told her to put bricks under the feet of her bed and then she could always fit in.” Squirrel looks up to the Sky and whispers the last sentence, “She still stopped coming.”

Maggie thinks back to her room tonight. How could she have not seen the bricks under the bed? Well, that explains why she fit under so easily. Although, maybe then that also means she did gain weight while away. She cups her right fingers around her left wrist. Yes. She puts her right fingers into her acorn flavored mouth and bites down, trying not to think about the weight. She looks up at Squirrel, then Bird, then Luna.

“Why didn’t you tell me about my mom?”

Bird flaps her wings, looks towards the sky, ready to fly away. Luna closes her eyes and rolls her tongue in a slow, low growl. Squirrel catches Maggie’s eyes and responds. “She didn’t want to see us anymore. She might have told you to stay at home.”

“You know I wouldn’t have listened to her.”

Squirrel shrugs his shoulder and begins chewing on a new nut. Maggie chews on the ends of her bleeding nails, and Bird takes Maggie’s hand in her feather, telling her to stop. Blood seeps from Maggie’s cuticle onto one of Bird’s blue feathers. The red stain lasts only a minute before it disappears.

Bird’s voice lulls. “Maggie, we do need to talk to you about Lucy. We’ve tried everything to get out. While you were gone, we retried so much: digging, hitting and tapping the Wall. Nothing works.”

Maggie bites her lip, tugs her fingers from Bird’s grip and begins gnawing on her nails again. “But why do you need to leave? Look. It’s beautiful here.”

“It’s beautiful, yes. Maggie, it is. And we love seeing you every night. But, baby, you get to wake up each morning and have a normal life, a life where things grow, people change, and you get to work and do things. We are just here, always. Nothing changes.”

Bird pauses now, as though she wants Maggie to have a minute, a moment to understand why their lives can’t be molded around hers. Squirrel doesn’t let her have the silence though and instead speaks frantically. “We took an Egg to the green leaves and Bird sat on them for a day. Do you know what happened?”

Maggie shakes her head, but Squirrel isn’t really waiting for her reply.

“It cracked. And then when Bird stood up to look, it rolled to the right and the crack closed. Just like that. This world never lets us really have anything.”

Bird lifts her wing and places it around Maggie’s shoulder. Luna wraps her tail around Maggie’s foot. Maggie tries to shrink back, but her friends refuse to move. Bird sings a short call and then speaks again. “Maggie, my babies could be more than eggs. They could be birds if we got out of here. My mate is just outside, too. We can hear him, Maggie. I want to be with him, and Luna wants her family back. They’re all waiting, just outside.”

Maggie mutters how families and husbands aren’t all that great. They all hurt each other.

“My mate *is* great, baby. You’ll see. You’ll see.” *No.* Maggie won’t see. She’s stuck here. “He’s flying there, waiting, just waiting for me, and I need to get free. I need to be with him. We all love you, but Maggie, we need our lives back.”

Maggie closes her eyes and falls into Bird’s soft chest, breathing short and deeply now, slow panting. Squirrel crouches beside them all and plays with an acorn in his paws. He takes over talking. “There’s a story. The story your grandpa wrote for you. Lucy showed it to us.”

Maggie exhales and bites back the impulse to scream. She remembers her letter. How did her mother find it? Why did she bring it here.

“We can only be free if you destroy your bed and destroy the Forest.”

“But what if he’s wrong? What if he’s wrong?” Maggie breaks free of her friends’ embraces and stands up to meet Squirrel’s eyes.

“Well. We were afraid of that. At first, but we don’t care now.”

Bird raises her wing. “Squirrel, be careful. It’s not that we don’t care. It’s just that we’re all out of options, Maggie. We can’t live here forever. You need to help us. Please help us get out.”

“No. No.” Maggie shakes her head and walks away from them, turns around and says, “It’s perfect here. Everything was perfect. Now everyone wants to tear themselves apart.

Well, I'm not helping you." She turns from them and looks out over the Forest, over the perfect autumn trees, the baby blue Sky, the swirling, glistening air.

The terrible thing about needing to sleep to escape is that it necessitates resolving an argument, finding some sort of peace before the friends step away from one another. Well, Maggie isn't going to find happy thoughts for these friends tonight. She isn't going to fall asleep, but she also isn't going to stay here. She has an idea. Nothing in the Forest ever breaks. She runs to the edge of the branch and jumps off.

She disappears before she hits the ground. When she opens her eyes, she's in the purple in-between. A moment of black and then she is on the floor of her room.

Maggie tugs herself from under the bed and picks a pair of dress shoes from her closet. She puts them on and kicks the brick under the closest leg of the bed. She kicks and kicks and kicks and says, "You're staying there. Stay there until you understand. Please just get it. Love me. Love me. Love me. Be happy." One final kick and the brick slides across her carpet. The bed falls with a single loud thump.

Maggie hears steps running from the kitchen, quick creaks, as her mother ascends the stairs. By the time her mother reaches her room, Maggie is frozen still staring at the leaf on her dress, swearing she will never again shred a leaf to bits.

5:

On the drive to Dennis's game the next afternoon, Maggie and her mother hardly talk. She was in too much shock to do anything but cry herself to sleep last night, and though part of Maggie wants to scream at her mother for bringing her personal letter into the Forest without asking, she's afraid that if she brings it up right now, her mother will take out her emotions on Maggie's father at the game and ruin his celebration. After parking the car two blocks from the field, Maggie's mother tries to take Maggie's hand when they cross the street. Maggie drops her hand as soon as their fingers touch and shoves it in her pocket.

At the field, Dennis is already in a circle, planning strategies with his team. Maggie's mother waves as they walk to the bleachers, and Maggie sprints to say hello to her father, relieved not to have to stand next to her mother now.

"Hey, baby. How was your night?"

"It was okay." She pauses, staring at her mother, then looks up to her father's still hurt face. "I slept a lot."

"That's good," he says, scooting to the right so she and her mother can sit beside him. Maggie's mother and father smile at one another, but don't say much else. It seems their temporary friendship was just a symptom of being in the hospital. As the whistle blows from the sand diamond below and Dennis steps forward to bat first, the family settles in to watch the game in silence.

When Dennis runs into second base, sliding, Maggie hears a familiar voice cheering loudly from the bottom of the stands. Maggie's father stands and smiles down to Jenny, who is dressed in tight jean shorts and a loose mustard blouse, holding a bag of oranges, which she hands to the coach seated on Dennis's teams' bench. She turns and waves up to Maggie and her father, then climbs the aluminum bleacher steps to sit beside them. Maggie's mother refuses to scootch in, so Jenny has to climb over all of their knees and sit beside Maggie's father on the other side from Maggie. Maggie's father kisses Jenny on the cheek and

Maggie's mother clenches her hands together, refusing to look at anyone. Maggie stares at her brother, not sure who to make eye contact with.

The next boy steps up to bat, and Maggie's parents all clap their hands. Maggie thinks it's rude to talk during a game. That's why she doesn't talk, or at least that's what she'd say if they asked. She doesn't really watch the game, though. She mostly thinks about how sore her stomach is and how she wishes her mother hadn't made eggs for breakfast and how nice it would be to have a smarter father. She knows Jenny comes to every one of Dennis's baseball games, but couldn't she have missed just one? Maggie thinks about this and how hot the sun is over top of her. She feels sweat falling down her sides. She worries she's going to faint.

When Dennis's coach calls them all to the bench, Jenny leans over Maggie's lap and introduces herself to Maggie's mother with her hand outstretched. "You must be Lucy, I'm Jenny. It's so nice to finally meet you."

Maggie's mother forces a smile then looks nervously around the field. She doesn't say anything, even as she stands up to move four rows down and take a seat beside Nic's parents. She stays there for the rest of the game, until they all meet up at the base of the bleachers at the end of the game. Maggie sees her glancing up at them every few minutes, quickly so no one else notices.

Jenny forces a hurt smile towards Maggie. "I'm sorry. Maybe I shouldn't have come." Of course she shouldn't have come. Maggie's twelve and she knows that, but Maggie doesn't blame Jenny for the mistake. She blames her father. She focuses her eyes on his cheeks, trying to silently tell him.

He doesn't seem to notice. He takes Jenny's hand and smiles at her. "Don't worry. She'll be fine. She has to get used to this." She has to get used to what? Maggie doesn't ask. She doesn't want to know. She stares at Dennis on the field and wishes she were out there with him, running in circles, separate from the adults of this family.

Dennis runs up to Maggie's mother after the game finishes. "Mom, can I go to Nic's?"

“Well,” Maggie’s mother looks over to her father, avoiding Jenny’s gaze. “It depends. Your dad maybe wanted us to go to dinner?”

“I have to go to the office because I left early yesterday.”

“And I have a shift this afternoon,” Jenny adds. Maggie glares at her. No one was inviting her.

Maggie’s mother looks down at Dennis. “Okay, I guess you can go. But call me when you need to be picked up. You shouldn’t walk.” She looks up as rain starts to drip from the sky then back at Maggie. “I guess we’ll just go home?”

Maggie shrugs and Jenny jumps in. “What if we all went to dinner tomorrow? Lucy, I think it’d be good if we got to know each other better.” Jenny smiles at them. Maggie grimaces. Her mother reluctantly agrees.



6:

Back in the car, Maggie's mother sits behind the wheel, stiff backed with greasy strands falling from the bun tied tightly behind her scalp. She lifts her hand to pull them back behind her ear. They fall. She pushes them back once more, but when they let go again, she leaves them dangling, hanging in twists before her eyes that rest intently on the road, even as she speaks to Maggie. "Baby?"

Maggie pulls her nails from her teeth and lifts her head off the felt headrest, switching her gaze from her mother towards the gray paved stores lining the highway. "Yes?"

Her mother lets the question linger in the stale warmth of the car air while she adjusts the windshield wipers preemptively to protect the windshield from the growing rainstorm. "Baby?"

Maggie shifts her head to look at her mother, responding with a shorter breath. "What?"

Her mother inhales and lets out her response with a single gulp of air. "I don't want to go to that dinner with Jenny."

"Me neither." The rain collects in wide streams against the glass. Her mother doesn't adjust the wipers. She lets it accumulate in amorphous faces before them.

"Oh." She spins the wheels while screeching the breaks and slides into their neighborhood. Maggie accelerates into the arm her mother reaches before her when she stops short.

"But you don't have to go and I do." Maggie leans back into the seat, flipping through projected images of future dinners and afternoon psychiatry sessions, bright days that fall into rain, nights spent without friends because they don't want her around, breakfast and dinners and meals where others count her calories, the ache in her stomach indecipherable as hunger or fear and fullness or seatbelt bruises. Maggie watches the future and folds her legs close into her stomach, into the pain.

Her mother maneuvers the car over wet roads without saying anything. Her once heavy breath quiets. She misses the entrance to the driveway and pulls a tight curve over the curb, which bounces Maggie from her curled stance. Maggie opens her eyes and turns to look at her mother's face, stained with the rain leaking through the windows, smeared with bright colors of her once pristine makeup. She alternates to look at their house, still tall and perfect, unchanging regardless of the rain or any words shared inside of it.

Maggie unbuckles her belt and rests her hand on the cool metal handle to exit the safety of the car. She's ready to run through the torrents falling outside and reenter a new shelter soaking wet, but her mother leans against the wheel, letting her breasts fall onto the pressure button, releasing a sharp honk of the horn. They both fall back into their seats and Maggie gives into unsettling laughter. Maggie's mother watches her daughter with a face half worn with frustration, half rising in amusement. She lays her own hand on her metal handle and, before entering the rain, leans towards her daughter to whisper, "Don't worry, baby. I'll figure it out."

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Maggie reads *The Fellowship of the Rings* to the rhythm of water clacking throughout the afternoon, unwilling to step foot in a room that holds a bed that houses friends who want to leave her. She tries to read through a story she has begun to love but finds the words blurred to incomprehensibility between her own thoughts. If Eleanor hadn't already spoiled half the plot, she might have to reread the pages she flipped through today, but as it is she marks the page with a library bookmark and rests it on the table, then pauses to stare at the trees behind her house.

From the kitchen, Maggie hears her mother banging pots and flapping scissors in alternation. After Maggie finished the first dress, she picked a pattern that was too difficult for her to do on her own. She's too mad at her mother right now, though, and doesn't want to talk to her long enough to ask for help. So Maggie doesn't walk to the kitchen or help her

mother sew. She rises from the carpeted floor and walks past her mother over the stairs and into her room without a word.

Maggie keeps her back towards her bed as she searches through a cluster of notebooks and knickknacks filling her dresser top. As she slides the wooden animals and shimmering red leaf towards safe keeping without really looking at them, she feels bird calls penetrate her feet. The trills shake her skin. She finds the notebook she took into the Forest months ago, pulls it from the piles and holds it tight to her flat chest.

Walking towards the door, the lyrics of the song grow into harsh, short phrases. These aren't bird calls. It is her mother on a call. The voice's anger doesn't resemble tones Maggie wants to walk close to, so she walks towards the closet, the corner furthest from the wood of her bed. She crawls over piles of sneakers and slippers to huddle safe in dim lights and page through the notebook.

Maggie digs around in her jean pockets. A month ago, these pants hung off her, but now there's no gap between her waist and the fabric. Maggie removes a pen. In half dried out, spotty ink, she marks up theories and tests, highlighting the processes that came close to solutions in the Forest and tearing out pages recollecting hopeless failures. She constructs a new solution. Two pages later, she reads proof of its impossibility. She twists an old method, but in the margins, finds her own notes on why it too would fail. There has to be something, some way to cut a hole so her friends can return to their old lives and come back to their Forest at night. But nothing comes to her. Nothing has changed.

Her mother's chirpings fade to silence below and Maggie stands up to walk to the kitchen to ask her for help. Maggie's mother never cared this much, so how could she help? Maggie discards the notebook to return to her book instead. Before she reaches the door, the voice begins again, softer now, but even such softness threatens to rise to anger. Maggie resigns herself beside the bed in the carpet. The threads twist through holes in her crocheted vest, scratching her back the way porcelain would, the way Luna's tail would. Maggie spreads her arms wide enough to touch the frame beneath her bed. She promised she

wouldn't crawl underneath, but just a hand wouldn't break that promise. Her palm clings to splintering posts. Maggie closes her eyes.

Purple swirls flap across the dark lids, bringing into focus red and green leaves, Bird's feathered embrace, the sound of friends' voices asking about home and Maggie's life, the freedom of her own voice rising through glittered air. That is truth. That is what friendship is, what family is. Warm air, porcelain, perfectly misplaced hairs. Voices who hear, a world without secrets. Intentionally shattered? Purple swirls spiral into unending eddies. They darken to stagnating voids of black.

Gasping, Maggie opens her eyes. Her stomach screams. She chews her nails. Not enough. She sucks her whole thumb and bites down. Maggie curls her legs into her chest and rolls onto her side. A huge hairball, Luna's coloring, lays still in the carpet beneath her bed. Maggie looks all around the carpet. Six more line the floor. How many are down there that she never noticed before? Maggie reaches out her hand further to hold a clump of fur and laughs. She laughs at the sparkling dirt, at how gross it is to cling to rejected hairs. She laughs at the thought of a bald spot growing on Luna's perfectly groomed hind legs. Manic, Maggie laughs at the absurdity of her world ever disappearing.

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Maggie's mother presents Maggie with wheat biscuits, roast beef with gravy and honey glazed carrots for dinner. There's no dessert on the counter beside them. Maggie sighs in relief. "It's small portions, and *Better Homes* says it's healthy, so you can eat it all, baby."

"Okay. I will." Maggie settles into the food slowly, knowing she'll be watched for months now. It makes her shake seeing her mother's steady eyes nervously begging Maggie for something. For a moment, Maggie forgets to be angry with her mother. Maggie lifts the fork with a piece of triangular cut soggy beef to her lips then pauses and places her palms back on the table. "Mom?"

Her mother finishes chewing a small mouthful and dabs her lips with a white paper napkin. "Yes?"

“Can we say grace?” They haven’t ever said it at dinners for just the two of them.

“Sure.” Her mother reaches her hands, face up, across the table. “I didn’t know it was important to you, baby.”

“It isn’t.” Maggie reaches her own arms straight ahead, joining her hands to her mother.

“Oh.” She stares at Maggie. “The boys always say it. Do you want to now?”

“No. I don’t know what to say.”

“Oh.” Her mother looks towards the food, then back up to Maggie. “Could we say it silently? To ourselves?”

“No.” Maggie refuses to look away or lift her hands, but bites her lip. “I can try.”

“Okay.”

Maggie waits for her mother to close her eyes or signal for her to do so. Neither girl even blinks, but Maggie begins anyways. “Dear God. Thank you for this food.” She pauses, still staring, searching for words.

“Thank you for our health, this house.”

“Thank you for our family.”

“Our friends.”

“Our lives.”

“Our bed!” Maggie feels laughter fill her chest. Her mother smiles through a perfectly painted, tired face. She nods and they unify their ending. “Amen.”

Maggie staves off laughter to lift her hands and return them to a cold knife and fork.

“Who called?”

Her mother tilts her head, questioningly. “No one.”

“Who’d *you* call, then?” While waiting for her mother’s response, Maggie chews through half a carrot.

She finishes her bite and dabs her chin. “Your father says I don’t need to go to dinner. He understands. You don’t have to go to dinner, either.”

“I don’t?”

“No. If you’re not ready to eat out, it’s okay. I can cook for you.”

“Good.” Maggie lifts the biscuit and takes a bite.

“But. . .” Her mother pauses, leaning against the table. Maggie places the biscuit back on her plate. “You’re going mini-golfing after dinner to celebrate with your dad and Dennis. And Jenny.”

“Oh.” They pause, unmoving. Her mother lifts her fork before she continues.

“He said you can invite Eleanor and Lila too, if you want.”

“I can?”

“If you want.”

Maggie stares out the window and tries to imagine dealing with both Eleanor and Jenny at once. “I don’t want to.” Her mother does a poor job hiding her relief as she lifts her fork. “Well, not yet.” Maggie looks down at her plate to avoid having to see her mother’s reaction. They eat together in mostly silence for only a few minutes before Maggie’s stomach threatens rejection. “Mom, I’m not hungry anymore.”

“Me neither.” She continues staring with a creased forehead at the seemingly unending plate. “But we both have to finish. I don’t want either of us in the hospital and it’s only the first day and. . .”

Maggie cuts her mother off, not wanting her to break into tears. “Okay. I get it.” Maggie picks up her biscuit and they finish eating in silence. Her mother watches her plate the whole time.

After they clear the table, Maggie takes a rag from the quickly filling sink and soap basin to clean crumbs from the table, then trades it for a dry one and stands beside her mother to shine the pots and plates. “Mom?”

“Yes?” She doesn’t look up from the ceramic, the sponge or the suds quickly consuming her forearm.

“Who else did you call?”

Maggie bites her lip waiting for her mother's response, certain she couldn't handle another new parent. Not now. Not yet. "It's a secret, okay?"

Maggie hesitates, but reluctantly agrees not to repeat anything to her dad.

"I'm having a Woman's Warriors meeting here tomorrow."

"Oh." Maggie dries the black burnt stained cookie tray and returns it to its drawer beneath the stove. "That's. . ." Her voice trails away.

"Weird?"

"No."

"Bad?"

"No." She takes a yellow plate from her mom, the one with a jagged knife mark that certainly Dennis made while cutting steak too harshly. Did she or her mother eat off of it tonight? And how clean did the sink water really make it anyways? Maybe Dennis's saliva still stains the surface. In that case, surely there must be traces of her mother and her in there. Her father too. Maggie runs her thumb through the knife mark's ridge as she lifts to the tips of her toes to place the plate on the shelf. Plate in place, she lifts her feet further and stretches her arms as far as she can. For the first time, Maggie realizes she can reach the cupboard's second shelf. She places her feet back flat and smiles as she walks to the sink. "It's good, Mom."

"Really?" Her mother takes the rag from Maggie to dry the final plate.

"Yeah. Is Mrs. Cook coming?"

Her mother smiles and rolls her hazel eyes, shakes her skirt as she walks to the cupboard. "No."

Maggie laughs a little, but is momentarily consumed with pity for Eleanor. Is this what Lila feels when she thinks of Maggie's family? "Mom? Wear your hair down tomorrow, okay?"

Maggie's mother pulls the ribbon from her ponytail and swirls her head to let the curly locks fall draped over her shoulders. Her hair glows even without the sunlight, bathed in the fluorescent shine of kitchen lights. "Okay, I will."

"Mom?"

"Yes, baby?"

"Can I sleep in your bed tonight. I can't explain why."

"Okay." Her mother pauses and twists her hair between her fingers. "Will you tell me why when you feel better?"

"Sure."

"Promise?"

"Yes." Well, maybe. When she figures out how to make the Forest stay, Maggie will explain.



7.

Maggie spends this Saturday with her mother, reluctantly agreeing to her help with Maggie's newest dress. They eat a dinner of leftovers without saying grace, and then Maggie's father and Dennis arrive back from his baseball game with a new suggestion. After mini-golf, they're going to have a sleep over in the tree house. For the first time, Maggie accepts the offer, without any explanation for not saying, *Maybe*.

They drive twenty minutes to the *Circus Circuit* mini-golf course where Jenny is already waiting, passes purchased, by the clubs and putters for them each to pick their size and colors. Maggie picks a green ball, Dennis yellow, her father blue, and Jenny red. Jenny says green is her favorite color, so in the future they're going to have to take turns, but for today, she lets Maggie take it.

Maggie has played on this court at least fifteen times before, but this time doesn't feel the same. She stares at the purple and yellow tiles lining all the green felt mats and thinks of birthday parties and summer evenings spent here with Eleanor, Lila and D. They would talk easily and argue over who putted first at each hole, but only for fun not because any of them truly cared. They would fudge the scores when they messed up too badly. D. said it didn't matter who won or lost, it's about playing the game.

Or sometimes, Maggie would come here without Lila and Eleanor. Sometimes, she would just come with her family, on nights when dinner didn't end in a fight, and they would go into town to eat ice cream and then come here together. Maggie's mother would sit on the wooden plank benches, insisting games weren't her thing, but she would cheer them on and Maggie would sit behind her while her brother took his turns. She would tell her jokes, and they would watch the other families together, commenting on passersby. It's never been hard to talk at mini-golf. The bright colors and fake plastic circus tents always made her happy. Tonight they don't. Tonight, talking is difficult.

Instead of cheering them on from the bench, Jenny matches their competitiveness with thought out putts and pauses before every shot to map out her trajectory. Maggie doesn't want to compete with an adult. Competitiveness is not an adult trait. Maggie doesn't know what to do.

After Jenny screams, *Damn*, on hole nine, the grandparents two holes behind them direct dirty looks and begin talking loudly about the lack of respect in children today for family values. Maggie's father laughs and puts down his putter to take the pencil from Jenny and make sure she totaled the shots correctly. "It's just a game. Calm down, baby."

Maggie looks at the ground. Her father can't call Jenny her mother's word. Maggie's stomach pulsates. Healthy dinner of more gravy and glaze stings her throat. Her father doesn't notice she's upset.

"Easy for you to say. You're winning."

"No he's not. Maggie is." Dennis pouts, lifting his ball off the green. Six shot limit.

Maggie's father stares at the score card, and Jenny wraps her arm around his waist, checking the score. She smiles. "Dennis is right. At least the ladies are ahead." She beams at Maggie. Maggie looks away, towards a fake river where heavily dyed blue water floats past them. Maybe on the next hole, she can hit her ball fast at Jenny's and throw them both into the water.

"And I'm losing."

"Yes you are, champ." Her father chuckles. The old couple approaches behind, judging in loud chatter. "Let's stop adding and keep moving."

They approach the next hole, which has a large wooden elephant in between two green platforms. Hitting the ball through the tail sends it through a loop and spits it out through the elephant's nose at the other side. Dennis groans looking at the animal. "Just give me a six. I'm going to the next hole."

"Okay, buddy. Stay one ahead, that's what I always say." He lines up his shot.

Maggie and her father both miss twice, but Jenny sends her ball through the elephant's stomach into the hole on her first try. She doesn't gloat as she takes the flag out, though, just smiles as she twists in black shorts and a purple button up. "I only succeed by watching you fail."

"I only failed for you, baby." Maggie gags secretly watching him kiss her cheek, but is distracted when Dennis runs screaming towards them.

"Hole in one!"

Jenny cheers and her father says, "It's in the blood." Maggie watches them smiling and the old people coming closer towards their green.

Maggie breaks. "No you didn't."

"Yes I did."

"No you didn't."

"Yes I . . ."

"No. You took too long."

"It's in the hole. Look."

Maggie rolls her eyes. "I'm sure it's *in* the hole. That doesn't mean it's a hole in one."

"Yes it does."

"No it doesn't."

Dennis glares at his sister, gripping his red club. "You're not always the important one."

"Yes I am." Maggie pauses. "No." She looks back at the old couple who are rolling their eyes at Maggie and her brother. Maggie assumes they're also thinking about how ridiculous her brother is. "You don't get holes in one when no one's watching and sixes every other time. You just don't."

"Yes. *I* do. I don't like you watching."

Maggie looks up, exasperated, to her father who's holding back laughter and marking up the score sheet. Jenny looks sincerely concerned. "Drew, why don't you go with Dennis

one hole ahead. I'll stay back with Maggie. We'll be faster and we can check each other's scores."

Dennis sticks his tongue out at Maggie but finally shrugs. "Okay. Let's go." Maggie feels her throat constrict at the thought of being left alone with Jenny.

Maggie's dad picks up his ball to leave with Dennis and Jenny calls behind his back, "Just give yourself a six for hole ten."

"A two you mean."

"Nope." Jenny turns from Maggie's father to smile too sweetly at the couple behind them, then looks back at Maggie. "Go first. And take your time."

Maggie hits the ball, hard, at Jenny's, but misses, causing her own ball to scatter back and forth between stone edges, accomplishing nothing. Jenny smiles, "Nice try," before sinking a Birdie.

On the next hole, where a thin arched bridge meant to mimic a tightrope provides a glittering short cut for the braver players, it is Maggie's turn to hit first, Jenny watches Maggie's hands carefully while she putts, causing Maggie to forget how to grip the handle properly. The ball swoops halfway up the bridge then falls back past her feet. She hits two more failed shots then sighs and says, "You just go."

"No. We'll call it a mulligan. I won't look." Jenny pretends to shield her eyes, and Maggie throws the ball up over the bridge. It slows a foot from the hole. "Your turn."

Jenny's ball glides over the hill after a single try. As they walk across diamond cut red tiles leading them around the course, Jenny laughs awkwardly and Maggie says nothing. "What's your mom like?"

Maggie stares at the grass. That's not an appropriate question. She's not going to answer.

"I mean." Jenny pauses, looking at the two colored balls. Maggie looks up at her in the silence and they lock eyes for only a second before Maggie turns away again. "I guess that's a strange question. I'm sorry."

Maggie shrugs. At least she recognizes her faults. "It's okay."

"My parents divorced when I was sixteen."

"I'm sorry." Maggie doesn't really want to hear about her history. She taps her putter on the ground, hoping Jenny will just take her turn. They stand in awkward silence for several more minutes before Jenny finally taps her ball.

"Well, I'm glad you're out of the hospital and okay. What was it like in there?"

"It was fine." Jenny really doesn't understand how to have a conversation. Maggie almost feels sorry for her obliviousness. Nothing she's said is appropriate to ask. She stares at Jenny's arms, shaking as they take the striped purple flag out of the hole. Maggie can't help but assist her. "Can you tell me about your job?"

"Sure." Jenny smiles and her arms settle slightly. "What do you want to know?"

"Well," Maggie doesn't know. She didn't mean to ask that question. "Did you have to go to school?"

"Yes. I went to Rutgers for Animal Science. Have you been to Rutgers before?"

Maggie shakes her head and taps the ball lightly. It barely moves an inch. She should just hit Jenny's foot with her putter.

"Well, it's okay. I liked it there, mostly." She smiles at Maggie and Maggie knows she's probably supposed to ask what the maybe implies, but she really can't talk too much more. "Do you want to see my work sometime?" *No. Maybe, yes.* Maggie doesn't say anything. She just shrugs. Jenny starts twitching again in her wrists. "I have something I want to show you there. Ask your dad to bring you, okay?"

Maggie nods and they walk to the next hole, in which a large red haired plastic clown is positioned in the center of the green with gaps in his teeth for the ball to flow through. Maggie thinks about telling Jenny she looks like this clown, not because it's true, but just to see what she would say. Instead, she drops her ball and hits it as hard as she can at one of the clown's wide white teeth. The green ball ricochets back to her feet, and Maggie hits it softer this time. She looks up to Jenny. "Do you play mini-golf a lot?"

"I grew up golfing with my dad. He taught professionals."

Maggie nods. That explains why she's competitive. "Why do you like birds?"

"My mother liked birds." Maggie nods again, not wanting to ask about the past tense.

"Why do you like birds?"

Maggie shrugs. She can't explain that. She searches her brain for a small explanation, but is relieved from trying when Dennis and her father run back, interrupting and cheering, smiling once more. "Hole in ones. Both of us." Dennis adds, "Verified."

Jenny high fives Dennis, kisses Maggie's father's cheek. Maggie tells Dennis, "Good job," with feigned emotion then looks up at Jenny and asks if they can keep playing in teams. Though she doesn't exactly want to play with her, she also doesn't want to watch her brother cheat and gloat through nine more holes.

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Jenny leaves mini-golf in a separate car, and Maggie's glad her father at least has the sense to keep their sleepover celebration separate. At his house, Maggie's father points out that Dennis missed shower time between baseball and dinner and golf. He begs him to at least rinse off his sweat before they spend the night so close together. Still half pouting and not really looking at Maggie, Dennis agrees but says the shower counts for the wager in his first backgammon loss.

Her father tells them all to brush their teeth and floss well before they change into pajamas and step outside. They'll meet up in the bunkhouse. Maggie rushes through the motions and skips the floss, certain her attention to regular dental hygiene can compensate for carelessness on one night. She wants to get outside before her father and brother to inspect the structure alone, in detail, before they all cram together for the night.

Maggie's father borrowed three sleeping bags from Jenny's parents house. Maggie wonders what it would be like to be the kind of family that has all weather sleeping bags stored in the basement, the kind of family used to driving up mountains on dirty roads with trunk full of food and bug spray, to crawl into a tent and huddle together to stay warm at

cooled elevated heights. Does camping bring a magic, a happiness she has missed out on by sleeping inside? Though, if that were true, why are Jenny's parents divorced too?

Their grandparent's house was something like this. The heat never went too high and they'd spend idyllic nights wrapped in crocheted blankets with steaming cups of tea around a fire her grandfather chopped the wood for. Maggie worried animals might be burned up who had once lived in that wood. Her grandfather assured her then that the creatures took new shape in the steam. They rose up to a free life, leaving a gift of burning warmth for the still living. His words comforted Maggie then, but in recollection she worries about the Forests they left behind in search of freedom, about the girls who lost their sanctuary in the ash. How many lonely souls wandered empty hearted through these towns never speaking of the Birds they lost?

Maggie promised herself not to think of the Forest tonight, though. They can't leave now, not without her help. And they won't be burned anyhow, even if she chopped them to pieces. The nights of fireplaces disappeared long ago. Her grandparents left. Her father chose a green lawn life and the freedom of money. They gave up on their lives without asking Maggie's permission. Well, at least he's trying now. He found these bags and a new wooden structure. Maggie wants to find fireproof paint to coat this house.

As she crawls up the ladder, she searches full blossomed tree limbs for that fleeting friend she spotted so many months ago, to distract herself from the haunting of friends preoccupied with leaving her. The mass of fur is no where to be found, but Maggie continues climbing anyways, certain if she keeps watch, he will appear before she falls asleep.

Inside, the tree house smells of wood and glue. The maple has mixed with the musky bug spray aroma of Jenny's sleeping bags and the fresh laundry odor of the half dozen covered pillows her father laid between the bags. It is a careful mix of the woods and her father. A perfect mix. Maggie settles, leaning back on a pile of pillows, to read the wood lines in the house's ceiling. Though her father promised the glass will be coming soon, for

now the windows are still just holes. A musty heat seeps through them, making the sleeping bags unnecessary except as cushions.

Maggie has barely made sense of the first ceiling boards' pattern of rings when her father's footsteps on the ladder compel her to sit up. She leans forward and inhales a breath of every scent before he lands inside, carrying three plastic water bottles and flashlights, just in time for the sun's final escape into daily hiding.

He sets his possessions on the table before taking a seat on the ground beside Maggie and inhaling his own deep breath, which ripples the pudge of his stomach and blank gray t-shirt. He rubs his thumb against the growing pepper stubble on his subtly dimpled chin. "I'm proud of you, baby, I haven't said that yet."

Maggie forgets to worry that he's stealing her mother's words because they are directed at her and because she is not sure why he is apologizing. "Why?" She looks into his black-brown eyes, glistening with either humidity or the pools of his insides.

"For getting better. For talking. For being you." His voice trails off, fading into a crinkle of leaves just past the window and the trail of cricket songs, nature that finds a way to permeate suburban uprisings. "I know we're not always easy. I know that and I'm sorry."

"It's not your fault." It is what she is supposed to say, and though she feels the sting of the phrase's lies, she says it in a delicate voice, wanting the shimmer of his damp eyes to disappear.

"That's not true." He reaches out his arm to grab Maggie's hand. "But thank you. I love you."

Dennis lands heavily on the tree house behind them. "Talking about Maggie again?"

Maggie rolls her eyes and leans away from her father onto the pillow bed. "Nope. Not at all."

Her father scolds Dennis, telling him to get a better mood, then begins to chuckle to prevent ruining the mood of the night himself. "Hey guys. Let's play a game, and whoever wins gets to tell us jokes for ten minutes."



Neither kid laughs with their father, but they do agree to play. Dennis reminds them that if he loses, Maggie doesn't get to talk. His shower was his losing bet. Maggie doesn't intend to win, anyhow. Remembering Dr. Greene's suggestion, Maggie lets Dennis win as an apology, but this time, she chooses subtle mistakes so he won't see she's doing it on purpose.

Unlike her last loss, this one doesn't make her anxious because she realizes something new about backgammon. After all the pieces lose hope of winning, the board is wiped clean and repositioned. A new game begins with new players, new bets, and the last game is hidden away, left to memory's keeping.

They play for an hour and then their father begins yawning and asks if they can flick off the flashlights and try to get some sleep. They crawl on top of, rather than into, warm sleeping bags. Maggie leans towards Dennis to whisper goodnight, but before she does, she asks if he has learned any new jokes recently.

"Well." He pauses, looking questioningly at his sister. "Yes. Okay, I can tell you *one*. What did the rocket ship say when she crossed the park?"

"Hmm..." Maggie looks up towards the ceiling, trying to think like Dennis. "Brake for space?" Maggie doesn't even know what that means.

"Nope." Dennis begins laughing as he tries to relay the punch line. "1. 2. 3. Grass off." Maggie falls into laughter beside him, forced at first, but then it settles. The furry creature never appears, but Maggie falls asleep between the warmth of her brother and her father, still lonely for the Forest far away, but starting to believe there might be comfort here that she missed in all her fears.

8:

Maggie's father drops Maggie and Dennis back home on his way to work in the morning. Dennis calls Nic to spend the day at his house and decides to sleepover because it is boring at home with Maggie. Maggie turns on the television and shortly falls asleep to the familiar sounds of sitcom chatter. She hardly slept in the tree house, so she doesn't feel bad doing this. Tomorrow, she has to start spending the days with the Cooks again, but for today, her parents said it is okay if she lounges around at home if she promises to eat the sandwich and carrots her mother leaves on a plate in the fridge.

Maggie wakes up late in the afternoon when a loud scream in a children's clothing commercial startles her out of her dreams. Drowsily, she clicks off the television and walks into the kitchen where she sits and stares at the sewing machine her mother set out for her on the edge of the table. She walks to her room to get the fabric for her work in progress.

Her stomach twists as she looks at her bed, so she runs quickly back to the kitchen. As her upset subsides, she remembers her lunch waiting in the fridge. Her mother warned her she would check the trash to see that Maggie isn't lying. Maggie knows she could walk outside and dispose of the food without getting caught, but her stomach does feel a little empty, so she takes out the sandwich and slowly eats it. When she finishes, she washes her plate and pours a glass of grape juice then returns to the table to start sewing.

She's halfway done the collar's hem when the machine bunches and the needle stops moving. Maggie tries cutting the threads and adjusting the bobbin like her mother taught her but nothing helps. The machine is broken. Maggie's stomach tightens.

She is tired of television, but not tired in a way to go back to sleep. Besides, if her mother comes home and Maggie is on the couch, she will think Maggie is lazy and probably won't let her stay home alone again. She doesn't have the energy to read or do anything else, though, so Maggie sips her juice and stares out the window.

Without work to do, thoughts of the Forest flood Maggie. She tries to think of a solution, something her grandfather missed. Maybe she could find a way to bring her friends into the tree house instead of back to their old world. It is as real here as it is there. But the people they love are there and not here. Maybe she could at least convince Squirrel to stay with her. But he's more stubborn than any of them.

Maggie tries to fix the sewing machine again. She needs a distraction. It's not working. She walks to the sink and cleans her empty glass. She scrubs the basin and the stovetop. She walks to the cupboard for a broom and dusts the floor. She considers emptying the trash, but she knows if she does that, her mother will think she's hiding something about lunch. Then she won't let her go to the Forest tonight. But Maggie doesn't want to go to the Forest.

Squirrel will tell her to smash the wood. Bird will talk about her mate. Luna will complain about missing her family. They will just make Maggie feel bad for not letting them go. They will just make her feel selfish. Is she being selfish?

Maggie walks back to the sewing machine. She tugs at the fabric caught in the foot. She shreds the hem, ruining six hours of work. Maggie tries to adjust the needle. She pricks her finger. A sharp pain rushes in jitters through her arm. "Damn it!" She screams just as her mother walks through the front door.

"Maggie?" Her mother calls, dropping her purple canvas purse at the door and running into the kitchen. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing." Maggie pants, holding her pricked index finger against her soft lips. "The stupid machine is broken again."

Maggie's mother exhales then looks between Maggie and the machine. "Do you want help?"

"Not from you." Maggie stares at her finger, willing it to stop throbbing.

"What did I do?" Her mother sits down. She tugs at her hair and rubs at the dark lines under her eyes.

“Why did you tell them?” Maggie drops her hand and sits on a wooden chair, suddenly overcome with exhaustion.

“Who?”

“Squirrel and Luna and Bird. How could you tell them about my letter?” Maggie’s mother starts to answer, but Maggie cuts her off. “How’d you even find it? What did you do? Did you go through my things? I’m not going to break my bed. I’m not. Grandpa made it and he gave it to me and it’s mine and how could I? I’m not going to send them away. I’m not going to. I’m not.” Maggie can hardly breathe between the words. She’s gasping and pauses to inhale.

Maggie’s mother reaches across the table to clasp Maggie’s hand. Maggie’s mother’s skin is soft, warm, familiar. Maggie wants to be comforted by this. She wants to feel safe here, but she can’t. She still holds on, trying, while her mother speaks. “Maggie sometimes you have to look at other people and. . .” Maggie tries to cut her off, but her mother won’t let her. “Let me finish, baby. You have to see what’s better for other people, not just yourself. I don’t always do that, I know, but I’m trying.”

How could leaving the Forest be what’s best for them? Maggie drops her mother’s hand. She doesn’t want to be here. She needs to talk to Squirrel. She’ll let Bird and Luna go to their families. Squirrel will find a way to stay here with her. They just need a little time and they can find a way. She just needs to talk to him. “I need to go to the Forest now.”

Her mother looks at the stove, then at her empty palm. “Okay.” She looks at Maggie concerned. “But I’m going with you, baby. And you have to come back home when I say it is time.”

Maggie looks at her pricked finger. She doesn’t want her mother to come along, but she is too tired to argue. “Fine. But I need to talk to Squirrel alone.” Her mother agrees and they leave the broken sewing machine to climb the stairs.

In Maggie’s room, they replace the bricks beneath the bed’s legs then Maggie and her mother crawl on the floor. “Do you think two of us can travel together?” Maggie’s mother’s

back lies flat on the ground, holding her breath so they can press their breasts to the boards together, at the same time. Maggie says, "I don't know," then takes her mother's stretched out fingers. Her mother counts to three in whispered words, slowly. They arch their backs.

Maggie feels the purple air, warm and gusty, in her open mouth. She is alone in the swirl. Her heart beats quickly, her stomach responds to the heat with anger. Sweating, she reaches for her mother's grip. Her mother is nowhere to be found. Fear prevents her from taking in the glitter, the vibrancy of her last entrance. It lasts a minute before the purple fades. Her mother's suspended body appears, skirt fluttering in the gasping air, like a faded ghost.

When Maggie sees again, there is grass prickling her legs, the familiar disorienting blur of colors she will never see again. Maggie wants to hold onto all of this, wants the glow to stay unfocused, but in a minute the trees, the sky, and each red ceramic leaf snaps into focus and the halos of sparkles, the shine of organics, bring preemptive nostalgia twice as heavy as the blurs of the purple swirl. Maggie looks up and sees Squirrel's crooked fur, Bird's bulbous torso and Luna's netting feet. She can't stand, can't speak, can't take her eyes from them.

A cold felted hand runs over Maggie's shoulders. Maggie screams and turns expecting to find a new animal, or a walking tree. Her mother smiles softly from above, the dark circles of her eyes and pursed lips eased into a face no older than Gabby or Minnie. It is her mother, but she is more delicate, sweeter, with no hairspray in her hair, just soft tresses, no lipstick on her face, just natural beige. Her mother's skin glows like porcelain, like the trees, like Bird's feathers. Lucy crouches and absorbs Maggie in a hug cooled with her cotton fabrics. "It worked." Maggie's clouded eyes break. They all stand up and Squirrel runs up to Lucy.

He whispers something Maggie can't hear and the other animals look skeptically at Lucy, who shrugs her shoulders and looks like she's about to speak. Maggie won't let her.

She grabs Squirrel's paw and tugs it. "I need to talk to you about something." Luna, Bird and her mother stare at her, waiting. "In private."

Squirrel looks at Lucy, who shrugs once more. Squirrel nods. "Okay. Where?"

"Follow me." Maggie starts running to the green leaves. Squirrel is panting to keep up with her this time. She doesn't stop until her hands are on the ceramic blue wall. She hits it, kicks it, screams, and throws her body against it. Squirrel waits until Maggie collapses over the hole Luna dug. He sits beside her and places his paw on her hand.

When he speaks, his voice is softer than Maggie has ever heard it. "It won't work."

"But. . ." Maggie pauses, trying hard to come up with a solution. "What if we. . ." She pauses again and stares at him, pleading.

Squirrel just shakes his head and stares at the Sky. "There's only one way."

Maggie inhales and licks her thumb to smooth Squirrel's eyebrow. It pops back into messy place. Maggie's arms tremble. "But couldn't you just stay here with me?"

Squirrel looks up at Maggie and his eyes glisten. A drop of water wets his fur then quickly disappears. "No." He wraps his arm around Maggie and they sit still until her breathing calms and he lifts her head. "We have to go to the Nest. Luna and Bird want to see you." Maggie nods and, resigned, holds his furry paw tightly as they walk. She tries to remember every tree they pass, but they are all too similar. At the Tree, she climbs slowly. The whole landscape is something she can remember.

When they land beside the Nest, Lucy, Bird and Luna look tentatively between Squirrel and Maggie, waiting for an answer to the question they don't have to ask. Maggie waits for Squirrel to answer, but Squirrel waits for her to speak. Maggie gives in first. "I'll do it." They all sigh and Bird comes over to wrap her wing around Maggie. Luna wraps her tail around Lucy, but they all are careful not to show full smiles. Maggie still sees them breaking through. She hides her face in Bird's chest.

When she comes out of the embrace, Maggie crawls into the tangled sticks of the Nest, stretching her legs against prickling twigs and resting her hand on the smooth hardness of three bare Eggs. She gives them each a name, Little Luna, Squirrel Jr., and Lucy.

“How long do birds live? Will you live in my backyard when you grow up? I’ll wait for you with seeds.” Maggie starts to laugh at herself, but pauses and looks around at her friends watching her. Bird walks carefully across the Nest to sit beside her. She lifts her wings and Maggie crawls beneath once more. While Maggie burrows into the feathers and the blackness, Bird grooms her feathers. Maggie feels the pecking and twisting of her head in the act. While the others begin talking slowly, careful to hide their enthusiasm, Bird secretly places something in Maggie’s hand. Maggie feels the secret gift between her fingers as she places it into her pocket, keeping the secret hidden, and smiles at the fibrous outside, the straw like plastic center of her feather gift. They fall into conversation that causes the night to fade too quickly.

Lucy falls asleep in the middle of conversation, before Maggie does. Maggie finally sees what it means to be on this side of stuck. One moment, her mother is there, young and glistening in the sun, the next she is a faint glow of glitter dust, and then she is gone for good. There is nothing Maggie can do to pull her back but lean into Bird’s chest and continue telling them about Gabby and Minnie and the friendship lanyard Lila brought her.

When she finally feels the weight of sleep collapsing against her eyes, Maggie grabs two red leaves from the Tree. She doesn’t crumble them but folds them carefully and hides them in her pocket. Squirrel lifts his eyebrows questioningly. “For Lila and Eleanor,” Maggie whispers and Squirrel smiles at her. Maggie reaches out to grab his paw. She strokes the fur. She holds tightly, trying to pull him through with her, but when her eyes finally shut, she finds herself in the purple in-between one last time, alone.

Maggie awakes on the carpet and forces herself from under the bed, out of habit not for secrecy. In her bed, she finds her mother curled and asleep. Maggie crawls in next to her, shivering in the heat of her bedroom and puts her head in the indent of her mother’s shoulder.

9:

When Maggie wakes up, her mother's eyes are still shut. She is snoring softly. Maggie turns onto her back to cure her aching torso and stares at the ceiling, white illuminated by a bright outside sun. She wades through places now defined as memories and familiar touches waiting to be forgotten or remembered, until her mother stirs and leans in close, breathing salted morning breath and asks, "Are you okay, baby?" Maggie nods but doesn't speak as she rolls off the bed to stand on her feet. She looks down at the wood and leans against the wall.

"Can we just. . ." Maggie's mother shakes her head as Maggie's voice trails away. She stands up as well and pulls a ribbon from Maggie's bed to tie her hair into a ponytail. Maggie stares at her mother's face. She is still wearing the same dress she wore last night. It was the dress she wears to work every Monday. Now it's the dress she wore their last night in the Forest. Last night it glistened. Today it is wrinkled and matte. Her face is still covered in powder and blush, but the mascara is smeared beneath her eyes and blends into the dark circles and creases of age and stress that the Forest took away for a moment. Maggie rubs her eyes and looks away. She shoves her hands into her pockets to signal some small protest.

In them, she feels the red leaves she took before she fell asleep and chills tremor through her skin. She pulls them out and places them on the dresser beside the leaf Squirrel gave her so long ago. Tomorrow, she will press Lila and Eleanor's leaves into bookmarks. Her best friends will like them better that way. *Her best friends*. She whispers the words to herself and turns back to her mother, who is tugging pillows and sheets off the bed, unburying her mattress.

Maggie crawls across the floor, to look underneath one last time, then stands and waits for her mother to look at her. When she does, Maggie reaches out her hands. "Ready?" Her voice is barely more than a whisper.



Her mother nods. "Are you?" Maggie shakes her head but squats beside the bed. She places her hands under the mattress and her mother speaks. "On the count of three." *One. Two.* They lift. Maggie expected it to be heavier. It isn't light, but she can move the mattress. Her mother pushes forward. Maggie steps backwards. They lean the cushion against the wall.

The mattress and bed haven't been separated in three years. Every summer, the family flips everyone else's bed. Three summers ago, when they went to do Maggie's, Maggie cried and screamed, afraid detaching top and bottom might cause some irrevocable damage. Her parents said they didn't want to fight with her. It was her bed. If she didn't mind the dents, it didn't matter to them. Looking at the flat underside now, Maggie thinks of how soft it must be. She thinks of what it will feel like to sleep on new springs. She thinks and she wants to crawl on the floor. She looks to her mother. They lock eyes and with a single nod, keep moving.

They tilt the frame onto its side to slide it through the doorway, taking two breaks before they reach the stairs. Walking downstairs, Maggie almost loses her grip twice, but they make it silently. Through the kitchen, the living room and out the sliding glass doors into the backyard where the grass is bright and long and soft. Like at the hospital park, trampled pieces do not spring back up.

Maggie's limbs tremble under the weight of the bed. Sharp stabs jolt through her wrists. Her fingers lose feeling and still, moving is the easy part. As she drops the bed in the backyard, she drops on her knees to the soft grass. The neighbor's black cat darts through the green bushes separating the yards. Maggie repeats the reasons in her head. She repeats, *They want this. They want this.* The cat's bell collar jingles. The feeling in her hand returns in tingling waves. She strokes Bird's feather with her thumb in the pocket. She removes her hand and grips the wooden frame, wanting to pull herself back underneath. She starts to, but her mother grabs her shoulder and holds her in the yard.

“Ready, baby?” Maggie shakes her head, *No*, but stands up anyways. Her hair sticks with sweat to her aching neck. She brushes stray strands with her fingers, wipes her under eyes with her knuckles and asks, “What are we using?”

“Grandpa’s stuff.” Maggie’s mother brushes her own matted locks, tangled and dirty, away from her glistening porcelain face. She walks towards the steps below the sliding glass door and returns carrying two axes, one small with a red handle, one larger with an oak handle. She hands the red one to Maggie. Without a word, they take separate ends of the bed, lock eyes, then lift their arms.

Maggie’s mother counts to two then drops her axe. Maggie swings. As the small axe collides with the dark wood and releases a sharp crack, Maggie searches the air for her mother’s matching split. She hears only her own. She looks up to her mother, frozen still. Her eyes glisten with rain. “Mom?”

Maggie’s mother stares straight at the wood, ghostly silent. Maggie repeats, “Mom,” Louder and louder, faster and faster. “Mom. Mom. Mom. Mom. Mom.” Her mother’s face snaps into a frown. She drops the axe at her feet. “I can’t do it.” She shakes her head. “I can’t do it, baby.”

Maggie stares at the bed frame. This is her chance. They could wait until their arms stop shaking then carry it upstairs, place it back on her shag floor, return the flipped mattress to its base. And tonight, they could crawl underneath, pretend like nothing has changed.

But what would Maggie tell Luna and Bird and Squirrel. Squirrel would run away. He wouldn’t return for weeks. Bird would say she understands, but Maggie knows her eyes would drop and she would stop singing. Maybe Luna would stop babysitting. Why protect the Eggs if they would never hatch? Something has changed and Maggie can’t stop it from happening. If her mother hadn’t shown them the letter, they wouldn’t have to do this. Her friends would still have hope and they could keep living like they had been. She could have kept them here forever.

But she can’t change what has happened now.

Maggie looks up at her mother, glowing in the morning sun and feels a strange pang in the center of her chest. Maybe Maggie doesn't want to change what has happened. Lucy is as beautiful standing here as she was in the Forest. She is going back to school and she is becoming a warrior. What's more, she is a mother. She is Maggie's mother. She did that without the Forest. And if Maggie convinces her to lift her axe, Bird gets to be mother too. She gets three Indigo babies who she can love and feed and teach to fly and sing. Luna gets her family back. Squirrel gets to plan new adventures. They get to live their lives. And Maggie can stay at the tree house and sleepover with Minnie and Lila and Eleanor. Lila and Eleanor. Maggie has best friends here, too, and she doesn't have to hide from them now. She lowers her axe and lifts her eyes. "Mom?" Her mother stares at her. "You know we have to. For them." *For us.*

Her mother nods and wipes her eyes. She stares at the bed for a few minutes more and Maggie waits patiently until her mother crouches and lifts her head. "I know," she whispers. Maggie counts to three. They raise their axes and swing.

Once. The right edge splits in two. Maggie hears an eggshell cracking, baby birds singing. Twice. Lucy grunts before the swing leverages the back frame, indenting but not cracking the frame. Maggie hears Squirrel's impatience breaking in her voice. The splintered wood. The mess of his fur. Hit again. Maggie starts laughing, staring at her mother, focused, with the axe and a flowing skirt, auburn matted hair, grunting and swinging. Maggie starts laughing, manic, insane. Fourth hit. The neighbor's cat bells and Luna's soft tail. Five. Six. Seven.

Twelve. The frame is destructed, the baseboard is splintered.

Fifteen. A shimmering sparkle surrounds the mess, rises and swirls in the heat and embeds in the tears on their faces. For a second they become purple. Then the color swirls higher, away. The glow dissolves. The shimmer fades. Maggie takes her mother's hand and they close their eyes to say a final grace, sending their prayers and thanks to their friends and their lives.

**10:**

Maggie runs her fingers through tangled blond hair in the backseat of her father's fabric seated car. Her nails get stuck in three knots and the tubing of Bird's feather, which Lila's mother tied in with colored floss a week ago. Maggie told them Jenny had given it to her, choosing to rely on the already betrayed secret rather than the one still hidden. Ariel had replied, "As long as no bird was killed for it," then locked the feather in between Maggie's tangles. Maggie is trying to wean herself from bleeding nails by twisting it instead.

Today, Maggie let Dennis take the front seat for the half hour ride from her father's house to the Raptor Trust, the bird sanctuary Jenny works at. It is a special trip for the last Saturday before school starts, Saturday not Sunday because on Sunday, Lila's mom is having a last day of summer lunch for the three girls and their moms.

Maggie lets Dennis take the front seat as a small continuing thanks for the hours he spent watching her in a hospital gown this summer and a continued attempt to be his friend. He is telling their father a joke relating the skin of melons to a dragon's scales. They both laugh giddily, but fortunately they don't look in the rearview mirror or beckon Maggie to respond. She twists her feather and taps her foot, anxious to be seeing birds up close again. Jenny said there are owls and several hawks, and that she has a special surprise for Maggie.

The radio is turned on and a deep voice talks in an incomprehensible background buzz. Periodically, there is a jingle that breaks through the static, but otherwise Maggie can't make sense of the host's words. She stares out the window at the quickly moving cars passing on the highway cut into rocks. As they pull off the 287, into Morristown and scenery of trees rather than sandstone and steel, Maggie leans forward between her father and brother's seats. "Dad, how did you meet Jenny?"

"Here." He smiles into the window, looking out at the swampland's thick, mossy trees and muddy grounds taking shape around them. "I was wandering around the cages and I asked her if she was raising the flock of pigeons to feed to the raptors. She got upset for a

second, then took off to explaining why pigeons were incredible creatures. She sounds like you when she's angry, Maggie. I knew she was special."

"Why were you looking at birds without me. You don't like birds." Maggie does. Lucy does. Dennis doesn't. Her father doesn't.

"Well." Her father pauses, glancing over his shoulder to make a left turn onto a dirt row lined with pastel painted farmhouses and bare wood fences. "I don't know much about them and I had a lot of afternoons free when you were with your mom. I thought I would try learning something new." It never occurred to Maggie her father could get bored, or that he'd be lonely without them around.

Maggie strokes Bird's feather and watches a flock of mallards outside her window ascend. Her nights have developed a gap she hasn't felt since her grandparents moved away. Maggie strokes the perfectly spread blue fibers and waits for new feathered friends, hoping they will fill this empty space. "And you liked it there?"

Her father smiles and sweet dimples grow in his pudgy shaved cheeks. "I loved it there. It's special, Maggie. I can't wait to show you." He glances over his left shoulder once more, and they pull into a wide dirt covered rectangular lot. When he parks, Maggie looks through the front window and finds a wide landscape of tall, tan grass, vast and empty, covered by a clear cerulean sky. They step outside into flurries of dust that fleck the air red and a wave of humid heat that gives the scene a transparent mirage glow.

To the left, there is a white and green small farmhouse with a copper covered storm shelter stranded in patchy, dry grass. Maggie slips across the pebbles on the ground towards the house, but her father shouts, "Wrong way." Maggie begins to turn around, but when she does that, the door of the storm shelter lifts and Jenny ascends, glowing under sweat and the density of the air. Her arms straddle a large blue laundry bin filled with freshly folded mismatched towels. Maggie runs towards her new friend, who is wearing dirt encrusted jean cut offs and a tight gray t-shirt decorated with the black silhouette of a hawk. "Hello!"

Jenny laughs, "Hello," awkwardly adjusting the bin to respond to the tight, clumsy grip of Maggie's waist hug. Maggie doesn't even know why she did that. She enters mild hysterics to curb her embarrassment. Jenny joins her laughter, easily, sincerely, and a maroon hand towel falls from the top of the pile, landing in a patch of gray dirt.

"I'm sorry." Maggie's face flushes as she bends low to retrieve the towel and wipes it clean on her thigh.

Jenny finishes laughing, gasping as she readjusts the bin on her hip. "Don't worry. They're for sick birds and shit. They're never that clean anyways."

Maggie's face almost startles at Jenny's words, but she bites at her lip to keep it still, not wanting to appear immature by reacting to a curse word. Jenny doesn't notice. She leads Maggie towards her father and brother, gives them both a quick embrace as well. Then they continue walking, towards the birds.

They pass over a wooden bridge and a forest of hanging branches and tangled fragrant bushes before they enter a clearing dotted with tall metal and white cages. Jenny takes the towels into a two story tan house, through a creaking wooden hinged screen door. While Jenny is inside, Maggie finds the cage of pigeons and watches a dozen frazzled white and grey birds peck at one another, a mass of wings and chirps, but none are as beautiful as Bird.

Maggie's father's smile brightens at the sight, though, and he begins listing facts about pigeons to make Maggie more excited. Dennis finds an American kestrel flapping one wing and limping up a wooden pole to try and reach new heights. Maggie feels only sadness for the bird, but soon Jenny approaches and explains how lucky this bird actually is. He was shot by a hunter, and a young family found him fallen in their yard. They brought him in, and though he lost function of one wing, he keeps trying to fly, and he eats normally. For an injured bird, this is a good life.

Jenny leads them through a maze of cages now, and Maggie watches the eagles flying timidly above painted American flags and bowls filled with rats and dried food. Jenny

explains each bird's history. She shows them the ones that will be released and explains the process, how they nurse them back to health inside, let them gain strength out here, and then they take them to a field and track them until the vets are sure they will survive. In Jenny's view, the Snowy Owl becomes hopeful. Maggie watches him flap white and grey wings and twist his head to keep track of her watching him, watching her. She tries to sing to the Screech Owl, though he offers no real reply. She loves this place. She loves the look on her father's face when Jenny talks. She even loves Dennis's new bird jokes, which make less sense than the one about the dragon. But watching all the feathers, and twisting her own for good luck, she misses Bird and Squirrel and Luna more than she has all week. She wants to crawl into the Snowy Owl's cage and make him hold her, but he doesn't look big enough or sweet enough.

While Maggie pokes her fingers through the diamond wire cage trapping the Snow Owl, Jenny comes behind and taps her on the shoulder. "I have a surprise. Come with me. It's a secret place." Maggie reluctantly turns her back and takes Jenny's hand. Dennis and her father are positioned by the Vulture cage, watching the bird's craned neck leaning through the mesh to gawk at a poor seagull on the other side, and Jenny doesn't beckon for them to follow. This is just for Maggie.

Jenny leads Maggie over a rope hung before several cages, with a sign reading, "Staff Only," into a small rectangle of six wooden and wire cages. "These are our song birds," Jenny says. Maggie spins around. Small colorful birds surround her on all sides, singing and flapping quickly back and forth in the cages. "I want to show you a special one."

They walk to the furthest cage and Jenny opens a door. Maggie can't see anything through the mesh except for a broom and a bin labeled *Seeds*. Jenny latches the outside door and unhooks a second one. "In here," she whispers. "But be quiet. They startle easily." Hand in hand, Maggie and Jenny enter a rectangle of tangled plastic leaves and sand covered ground with only two black plastic dog bowls, one with fruit, one with water, on the ground. Dried pee and rotting bananas fills the humid air with what should be a putrid scent, but to

Maggie it feels only tropical, somehow terribly hopeful. She looks up towards the blue sky sunlight breaking through the ceiling mesh.

A dark mass flutters past her head with a quick song, a familiar song. The mass lands in a plastic tree, in a tangled nest of dark twine and white netting where three other birds are seated, patiently waiting and singing. The landing bird plucks the other's deep indigo feathers. Maggie kneels, her stomach gripped with longing and happiness.

"These are our resident Buntings. We found the two in May and I didn't realize that was what they were, until I was feeding them last week. They reminded me so much of that picture you showed me. The female had an injured wing and her mate refused to leave her side, so the man who brought them in brought them both together. They had a clutch in June and two made it safely out. They are starting to fly, look."

One of the babies hops to the edge of the nest. She flaps her arms and falls.

"They are healthy, too. So we're going to release them at the end of the heat wave. But I wanted to show you while they were still here." Jenny's voice fades into the wind of the mate flapping over top of them. He pauses on the ledge just by the door. Maggie and Jenny step back, pressing against the wire mesh to stay out of the bird's way. The mate sings to his wife, who calls back, peacefully, nearly the exact melody coded in Maggie's memory. He flies over to her and the babies seated in the nest. That same hopping bird bounces on the edge. She flaps her wings again, and the mother and father chirp a melody together. The bird flaps once more and, this time, ascends. She wavers as he floats unsteadily, but lands three feet away on a wooden post. She turns, hops in a circle. Secure on across the tangle of vines, the bird calls out a melody of her own.

*-The End-*



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