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DOG ROSE

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THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS

BY

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ABSTRACT

DOG ROSE

BY JULIA MAEDING

What follows is the first six chapters of *Dog Rose*, a story told at the intersection of trauma and magic. Chapters alternate between past and present. In 2009, twelve year old Kira arrives as a newcomer to Sandy Landing, a summer camp nestled in the Sierra Nevadas. Having lived in the shadow of her gregarious brother and the isolation of chronic illness, Kira is dazzled by the attention of staff member Sean. Sean shows Kira his ambitious project which plans to renovate the local waterways with cryptobiotic fish eggs and a smattering of ecologically reckless experiments. Kira's presence reacts magically with the sites of these experiments, and their relationship plunges her into oceanic puddles, roving alligators, bioluminescent dreams, and melting habitats. Meanwhile, in 2014, seventeen year old Brittany is a lifelong camper whose first year as a counselor quickly unravels when her campers, Megan and Kenny, prove cleverer and stranger than she could have imagined. When an unexpected bond forms between the three, Brittany decides to include them in her secret mission—assigned by Kira's older brother, Brittany's former counselor. Together, they embark on a quest to recover the magic Kira preserved amidst Sean's chaos. Each must confront her own trauma, emerging from distant cocoons of numbness to conquer the ferocious, shimmering tunnels of adolescence. Each must discover her own power as a narrative alchemist—one who can reshape the meaning of memory and bend new worlds out of old stories. Those left behind by reality gain access to other places. Those left behind by the promise of girlhood must write ourselves back into existence. *Dog Rose* follows a group of girls as they brave the transition from stasis to life: the transcendent work of hatching from elsewhere.

Prologue: The Bunny Box

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Summer 2014

First step? Keenan's finger rose to his lips. *Shh.*

Being quiet seemed to Brittany more like a general requirement than a step, but this was how he operated: in order. She looked around. Everything was cold and washed in sunlight. The sand, light and sugary, soaked brightness up and radiated back. She thought of the snow in Big Bear that was so white it turned bluish, chapped, sun-poisoned. This sand was looser, though, and blushed into brown dust where it met the water.

He made a peace sign. Step Two.

She unzipped her backpack and lifted it out, the cheap and sacred object. A tiny plywood box with the easter bunny painted on. She'd won it from a church raffle as a kid, and it had survived her sun-baked orange duffle bag through six summers of camp. She loved to huff the mouth of that bag. Wash after wash, its seams held onto the smell of soil.

The bunny's face was not neatly painted. It had to have been purchased from a Micheal's and decorated by one of the church moms. Probably Kathy, thought Brittany. She could picture Kathy's plasticky nails pinching a q-tip and dabbing hazy puffs of white acrylic paint onto the box's face. Kathy's vision for bunnies as a species was, Brittany admitted, kind of fabulous. If things went her way, they'd be bitchy, couture cotton ball sculptures, blinking and wild. Her favorite part was the eyelashes. They had been crookedly stamped and gave the animal a look of crazed femininity. Brittany smiled, petting its deranged head.

She flicked open the box. It was full of socks, pressed in, for padding. She removed them

and saw the interior's shallow rectangle. Like a TV flipping channels, all its past lives flickered before her. The box had always been a repository for small things whose charge needed containment. At first, it stored the money she saved from birthdays, which wasn't much. Maybe a Limited Too gift card and a friendship bracelet dangling half an enamel heart. The twin bracelet—they came in a two pack—usually wound up collaring a stuffed animal. These tokens were easy to grab off the rotating Claire's display, but friends with wrists were another story.

There was Strawberry Lip Smacker, melting and resolidifying as the seasons spun. A single clear Lego, a rarity yellowed with time. A stuffed Neopet from McDonald's—a blue wolflike thing she had harbored a crush on. The Bunny Box was its loving prison. An extremely miniature Bible, crowded with unreadable verse. Sometimes she'd take it out and squint. A waste of time, but swallowing time was the point. An only child needed these things.

Later, tampons. Later, pills. Now, there were bottles, a row of tiny glass ones. Keenan labelled them with sharpie and then taped over the writing for protection against smudges. .01, .02, and so on, all the way to .05, plus a chunkier one called FOOD. She took the first out. It was a few inches tall, chilled in her hand. Turning in the sun, its lilac powder seemed to burn and flicker green. Heat brushed her shoulder.

Underneath the bottles was a sock, and beneath that slept Keenan's tools. It made Brittany think of fossils that baked into layers, wedding cakes, pastries with melting cores. Trying not to disturb the glass resting on the sock, she reached blindly into the cavity underneath. She found the thermometer, hydrometer, dainty metal scoop, and pocket knife, which wasn't part of this, but Keenan had insisted.

She lined up each item on the sand and took out her journal. The Gelly Roll clipped to its cover had a glittery purple cap, disfigured by her chewing. She pulled it off.

Keenan used a ruler to draw the chart for her. Its three columns read, in his block lettering, DATE, TIME, EGG, TEMP, SALINITY, EAT, SET UP, POPULATION, WEATHER, NOTES.

I have to fill all that? To stay quiet, she asked with a look.

Yep.

He used the first row to demonstrate.

8-12-13 7:02 AM.

His pen tapped the AM, insisting. She rolled her eyes.

He picked up .01 and unscrewed its cap.

Spoon? He mimed the word as he mouthed it. His imaginary utensil gathered a heaping spoonful of air. When let go, it simply evaporated.

She handed over the real thing. The tool looked like an ice cream scoop for Barbies, rusted from many melty summers. He pinched it between his thumb and pointer finger. That was the only way to really hold it, but the visual tickled her, a giant playing with a tea set. She stifled a laugh.

What's funny? Keenan smiled, knowing she couldn't explain. Brittany guessed that her stifling had failed.

She watched him guide the spoon into the vial to gather a mound of muddy green dust. The side of his pinky swept the mound flat. All extra dust fell back into the vial, for next time.

Brittany had a sudden urge to lick the stuff. It looked silken, the fog of a desert on the moon.

Keenan dumped the dust into the pond and mixed it in. At first, it seemed to disappear, dissolving utterly, forgetting itself. The water held its clarity. But he didn't move on. He was

hunched, waiting. Watching the water.

It happened in blooms. The first curled open and melted so quickly she almost didn't catch it. Brittany felt her brain latching onto time, sinking its hooks into the moment, recording.

The water tightened. It gathered up a small, shivering mountain. Before she could process or touch it, the gelatinous thing had a spasm and sneezed light in her face. Brittany jumped back.

Her eyes throbbed. She touched her cheek—dry, unburnt. She looked to Keenan.

You okay? He grinned, lit up with delight and perhaps actual electricity. She nodded.

The pond jiggled in aftershock, prickling with leftover charge. Then a wire of energy bent into focus. Its pink spine curved just over the surface, like a whale, barely breaching.

Before she could think to touch it, the line sizzled away. Sour yellow droplets pulled to its place. They mingled into glitching blobs and then, somehow, an ecstatic, watery shape. A flower. Six petals, searing and alive, bounced on Brittany's tongue. Her head thumped with orange. Her eyes closed. What was that taste?

Lava. Luminous, flowing, clear as wet diamonds. She had always imagined it. She had always wished for a mouth that wasn't made of flesh, a self that could roam bodiless, passing through the densities of everything.

Her eyes opened. The petals cracked apart. Their memory dissolved. Then, in a moment, it was gone, ground into mist by the atmospheric pressure of birth.

ONE

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Summer 2015

Brittany hated to start with a lie. But it was the underpinning of her whole itinerary, the premise of the summer. Though this would be her sixth year attending camp, it would be different than all the others. Weighted. She had known that, going in.

With the girls in front of her, though, she wished for some prompt—the bang of a gong, maybe—to mark the beginning.

“Well, welcome to Sandy Landing.” She gestured to the tent’s empty canvas insides.

The girl on the left—the twiggy one with the braids—inspected her surroundings coolly, but Brittany could see that she was fidgeting. Her ankle kept twisting in bone-grinding circles, and the scuffed toe of her high-top tapped and grazed the cement, muttering in wordless code.

The other had clearly spent the bus ride doodling on her blotchy pink limbs. Strands of curly red hair clung to her T-shirt. Like a poodle cornered into the vet’s office, she was stress-shedding.

Brittany strained to recall their ages. They were both first years, she remembered Courtney saying, excited at the catch of a fully fresh group. They seemed older than most first years—certainly older than she’d been, at twelve. But they couldn’t be older than fourteen. They had that look, that lostness. As if they were waiting for instructions.

Brittany pointed at the redhead’s elbow, a scribble of a wilted leaf.

“You draw?”

The girl’s face swept white.

“I’m sorry. I should have asked.”

“You’re allowed to draw on yourself, this isn’t prison. Are you Kendra?”

“Megan.” She exhaled. “So technically I have two first names, Megan Rebecca. It’s fine if you say Rebecca. It’s not a middle name. It’s two separate names. But, um, people call me Megan.”

“Uh, cool.” Brittany looked to the other. “You’re Kendra.”

The girl nodded.

“Kenny.”

When each person spoke, the air jiggled delicately, a Jell-O that hadn’t fully set. Brittany worried it never would, that the group would never form.

She had seen others make the recipe, though, and had no choice but to trust it. There was no noise except Kenny’s rubber toe softly chafing the ground.

“So, um, you guys can each pick a cot.”

They were identical, of course. The girls looked at each other and broke into stuttering hesitations, each too nervous to be useful. Brittany sighed.

“Okay, well, how about Kenny, you take that one, and Megan—you be over there.”

She got up and dragged each girl’s luggage from the door to her cot. As they unpacked and unfurled their sleeping bags, the tent’s canvas warmed, lifting the muggy bus smell from their clothes.

“I brought you something,” Brittany said. She pulled bundles of fabric from the mouth of her duffel. The girls came over.

They were tissue-covered objects, wrapped loosely in cerulean t-shirts. Megan set her shirt’s contents carefully aside and touched the rubber text printed across its chest.

“Camden Co-Op Board Semi-Annual Jogging Brunch,” she read. Brittany jumped in.

“Um, ignore the shirts. They’re just to protect the other thing.”

Kenny held the garment against her frail chest. On her, it was a muumuu.

“Guys, the shirts aren’t really the point—”

“No,” Kenny said, breaking into a big, gappy smile. She hugged herself, savoring the tagless embrace. “I like it.”

“Well, it can be a pool shirt. But open the other thing.”

The journals’ soft covers were embossed with botanical motifs—Megan’s a spindly, sprawling fern, Kenny’s a spray of dandelion puffs.

“You got us these?” Megan looked like she might cry. *Oh God*, Brittany thought. She smiled back. *Please don’t*.

If Sandy Landing had a mascot, it would be Courtney. The woman always wore the same boat-necked, black J. Crew sweater. She threw it over a sundress for a church barbecue, or layered a snap-on puffer vest on top—whatever the season called for. When Brittany first met her, the sweater was enormous and blankety with chunky, thickly-stitched seams. Courtney had just signed on as the co-director of youth ministries. Brittany was a Helper, a title which anointed her to pass out fruit cups. She was nine.

Now, the sweater was so shrunken, it pinched at the armpits. Courtney had not gained a pound. Sunday school simply had no mercy for fussy, trickily laundered garments. Brittany knew intimately the fury of scrubbing melted crayon wax out of a Limited Too halter.

The week before camp, Courtney would take to the Big Stage. It was always funny to see it stripped of Sunday morning majesty. That thunderous, awe-shimmering power that gripped the space was all lights and reverb. Without them, the Big Stage was just a big stage. Brittany and the others spread out on the carpet, cross-legged or slouched on their elbows, slurping cans from the vending machine. Courtney sat in a tufted pleather throne of an office chair. She spoke into the mic.

“Alright. So for those of you who have done this before, you’ll pretty much know all this. We’re gonna go over it anyways, plus policy updates, plus time for questions.” She glanced, vaguely, offstage. “Your paperwork is floating around somewhere. I’d like to get that done today, but we’ll see about time.”

She reached for a plastic Lipton bottle tucked under her chair, taking a gulp. The mic amplified a rogue throat-gurgle. Courtney screwed the cap on and grinned.

“That’s what I get for wanting a new mic? Dang. Alright.”

In the past, camp’s first night had been crammed with presentations: how to kill or kindle the spit of a baby fire, how to salve a cracked, bloody nose, how to dress a wasp wound, how not to die on the zipline. Not once had Brittany consulted any of it. There were crucial things to know about survival at camp, and maybe if she or Courtney had any say, they could have been included. As it stood, the content was decided not by staff, but by Legal, whose choices suggested drama flourishing behind the scenes. *My Lips Are Sealed: Spreading Rumors*, *Spreading Disease* and *Mountain Men: Masculinity and Positive Leadership in The Sierras* were Brittany’s favorite parts to hate.

The new idea was for these presentations to be converted into a thick packet. Counselors would sit down with campers, run them through it, and harvest their signatures.

Brittany's hand shot up. All heads turned.

"Do we get a copy of the packet? To keep?"

"Uh, we weren't planning on it."

"So I'm supposed to memorize this thing?"

Courtney laughed.

"No. No one needs to memorize anything."

"What if we need something? And we can't remember?"

All she wanted was an admission. She wanted someone to say one true and terrible thing, even if they couldn't do anything about it. *This is a waste of time. It's Legal, not us.* That, she could respect.

"You can always ask staff. You can always ask me. But you're on what, year six? C'mon, you're a pro." Courtney shrugged and went for more Lipton. This time, her throat was obedient.

Brittany made her way down the slope, the girls following her like little ducks.

"All the girls' tents are here. The guys are further up." She pointed past the clustered domes, dumplings dotting the hill. "We're not allowed in each others' areas. You're not missing much."

It was delicious being their leader. She was used to wriggling her way into such a position, but her licensure as Counselor felt so much better. Crossing the square, they passed Jasmine with her own toddling group. She waved to Brittany and they exchanged satisfied, grown-up smiles.

She led them through the square's flattened clearing, the amphitheater of cement seats. The charred fire pit nearby. The main cabin, where staff held meetings, and staff cabins behind them. They walked a wooded trail to the stunning, sculptural cafeteria.

"It's so...*fancy*," Kenny said, reverent.

"Right? The bathroom is next door. Just be aware, it smells like frosted shit."

The girl nodded seriously. *God, her eyes are huge.*

They toured the entire camp loop, aside from the pool, which was a fifteen minute walk offsite. The brevity frustrated Brittany. Sure, camp wasn't a lot of land. To her, though, it held its own world, immense and sweeping. A walking tour couldn't capture its staggering bigness, how *much* there really was. One 45-minute swath meant nothing. Hours would have been nothing. She wished she could tell them what she knew, but had to settle for this.

The truth about camp was tucked way up high. From the perch of Brittany's imagination, she would crane to see the mountain, a veiny knuckle of earth. Pines crumbled like oreo over the peak, rolled down the side and into crevices, collecting as if between couch cushions. In the morning, when sun came pouring down, shadow drained into pits and emerged, on the sunless side, with all of its knowings intact.

Water trickled down the mountain's side and pooled into mirrors, flat pans of light, blinding in reflection. Wind stirred red dust from the banks, tossing a clouded broth. But with calm weather and the sun tilted just so, one might see a moving thing, a smear that slips between the fingers of light and escapes in a trail of shimmer. And Brittany had.

Even in perfect stillness, though, vision was never enough. Depths cannot be told from above. The only way to know the bottom is to touch it.

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The next day, Brittany got up early.

She had to move quickly through the square. At 6:45, staff would start stretching awake and migrating to the cabin. By 7:30, counselors would arrive. There would be coffee and wet english muffins. Brittany couldn't stand them.

Past the square, pine trees sprung up and thickened to woods. Their ground was a bed of rusty pine needles. Brittany loved the crunch, but couldn't enjoy it until she had sufficiently disappeared.

Downhill, she relaxed. She slowed her pace and inhaled all the glorious buzzings of morning. In third grade she'd learned about pollination and precipitation and all those other cycles nature spent its days tending. It wasn't until now, her sixth summer, that she could feel the days turn.

Brittany had never been a nature person. Or maybe she'd just hated listening to her ex blather about the planet boiling. She wasn't sure. But the freshness of this new ritual was germinating a crisp, chirping warmth in her chest.

Of course, it wasn't a ritual yet. Today would be her first attempt, to be reattempted every morning for all three weeks of camp. The plan seemed airtight, and so far, it was. She would wake to her wristwatch's tiny beeps (she had prepared a birth-control-related excuse, which would serve the dual purpose of staving off questions and adding to her older-girl glamor). She'd dress quietly and check her supplies: her old purple Nalgene. Her Kit, which was just a wrinkled old ziploc containing tampons, band-aids, disinfectant pads, Ouchless hair ties, Hilton orange blossom body lotion, Aquaphor, ankle tape, and Dial. Her notebook. Pens. Extra socks, the thick, padded kind of dads, in case hers got wet. Her Bunny Box.

As she walked, the forest thinned, and dust became sand. The sky shone white and clear. Little crystals of salt and tiny, twitching insect wings glinted in the sun. Brittany shimmied down to the water. Her windbreaker crinkled.

Fuck. The noise. She'd worn her hoodie, cotton and silent, every day so far. Why not today? She strained for the memory.

Ah. Yes. Megan had woken her in the dead of night. Trekking to the grimy cement bathrooms, she'd noticed the ceramic chatter of Megan's teeth.

"You cold?"

"Oh, no."

"You can borrow my jacket."

"No, it's fine."

She stopped, yanking her zipper.

"Are you su—"

Brittany pulled the jacket off and thrust it at Megan, who seemed to freeze, eyes wide with twinkly horror.

Smile. You're scaring her.

This happened sometimes. She had to soften the cold bar of herself into spreadable social butter. She unclenched her jaw and blinked, slowly, in the way cats liked. Megan lifted her hand toward the offering with caution. It was working.

"I run hot," she insisted.

The memory receded as her knees pushed into soft sludge. Even through jeans, she could feel the bank of the pond shudder, absorbing her impact. Registering her. She patted it, registering back.

Just me this time, she winced. *Sorry*.

If the pond was disappointed by Keenan's absence, it didn't tell her so. It waited, cupped in stillness. She scanned its floor. The sediment, a mixture of sand and finely brown clay, had been brushed by currents. Grooves fit together like zebra stripes. Brittany could picture him, squinting into the same water as her, seeing things she couldn't.

It remembers, he'd said.

She hated when he did that, spoke in code. Or poetry.

What do you mean?

He pointed to the sky.

The water remembers the wind. That's how we get those lines.

Then he shrugged and looked back. Sunlight caught his brow.

Actually, all of it. Everything remembers everything.

Keenan, Brittany thought, would have been great with Megan.

When he first brought her to the pond, he was her camp counselor, and she was a happy thorn in his side. The happiest she'd ever been. Digging in, nesting beneath his rib. But he plucked her out. Something about college. His sister, Kira, was sick. She needed him.

But I need you. She hadn't said it, of course. She wasn't the one with the sickness. And, she had to remind herself, he was not her brother, or her father, or any tether that eyes or DNA tests could see. The rope was invisible, twisted with the fraying fibers of her memory.

Who was she, Kira? Was she even that sick? Brittany tried to imagine a smaller, female version of Keenan. The figure coughed and blurred like shadow.

The Marshall family came from back east. Keenan's father had been a doctor at one of those dynastic New York hospitals until he was offered an even more prestigious position, head of hematology, at a dynastic California one. This promotion meant moving Keenan, his mother and his sister across the country, and, in Brittany's mind, delivering them to her. She owed some Connecticut doctor a thank you note.

Sandy Landing was all about emails, and each year, starting in spring, Brittany's inbox would work overtime herding them into a folder named SANDY PROPAGANDY. She would have had them routed directly into Spam if not for the crucial single message buried in all of it. Somewhere in that manic chorus of greetings and reminders and updates and heads-up and mosquito infographics and fundraising pleas and contraband lists was a whisper she had waited all year for: her counselor assignment.

Brittany spent her first two years with Susan. First year assignments were always random, but she knew for a fact the second year placement was Susan's choosing. Susan had adored Brittany since day one, probably because she was always volunteering for stuff. This had proven a polarizing trait. Her sixth grade math teacher, Mr. Morgan, was the type who prided himself on being palatable to rotating panels of adolescents. She'd raise her hand and he'd say, *Brittany! Relax*, putting his palms out as if to slow a bucking horse.

Susan took to it. She liked having a chirpy little helper. She gave Brittany her phone and made her Timekeeper, tasked with setting alarms. In return, Brittany could go first for the fun stuff. The zipline held highest priority. Its waiting line was situated in a particularly harsh blotch of sunlight, the kind counselors called a Killzone for its ruthless sunburns.

Her third year was Reggie. Reggie was a girl, of course. Nobody knew what her name abbreviated, and she seemed to enjoy holding that power over everyone. She was popular, Brittany remembered. Flirtatious and winky. Always elbowing the puppyish male counselors. Brittany, thirteen at the time, had watched her intently. That woozy, sparkling teenage girl magic—the stuff that pricked boys’ skin and stirred up their hormones—had yet to visit her. She barely filled out a stretchy training bra from the Target Junior’s section. Reggie had most certainly moved onto Women’s.

Once, during a massive camp-wide game of hide and go-seek, Brittany was sneaking around in the woodsy twilight when she saw the orange edge of Reggie’s hoodie poke out from behind the trunk of an ancient, mammoth sugar pine. She’d tiptoed, necking to see, and there it was: two brown-haired teenagers, tangled and breathing. If Brittany hadn’t known better, she may have mistaken them for animals.

It was sweet to think about, the innocence. And it hurt.

Reggie didn’t return the fourth year. Instead, Brittany was placed in the care of Annie. Annie was sweet, but that summer had been a mess. It was supposed to have been the grand opening of the second pool.

The first pool had been there since the 80’s. Brittany’s parents had swam there, back when they took the form of sunbaked teenagers. They were campers, then counselors, then senior staff, then directors, then board members. Her mother had eaten at the mosquito-netted cafeteria with fetal Brittany curled in her gelatinous cocoon. A family joke claimed the chemicals in all that camp food had seared Brittany’s scar into existence.

Of course, it wasn’t a scar, and the joke wasn’t funny. But whatever.

The pool's long cement cavity brimmed with old red tiles. The deep end hit six feet. The shallow reached three, with a gradual sloping between.

Pool time was a camp institution. The dust, the sweat, the throbbing insect bites, and the tumbling exhaustion of camp life were absolved in an instant with a deep dip in the neon blue. It was the daily reset. The daily luxury. And, for many, the daily shower.

Construction of the second pool was announced the summer before Brittany's second year. The venture, explained a braggy, letterheaded email, was *ambitious*. They were so *proud* of it, so *thrilled* to offer it. She read the message over and then again, but there was nothing. Why make such a big deal about a pool?

Her parents swore they didn't know details, and that was that.

After Annie came Keenan. With him came the end and beginning of everything.

Had she known what the mission really involved, Brittany probably would have opted out. She had no particular interest in fish, but Keenan made them seem urgent and precious.

"You have to think of them as animals," he pressed. "Not food. Not disposables. Not pets."

It was a corny thing to say, but he was earnest, his smooth brown hands wringing. A tiny, gold-wire ring lived on his pinky, the origin of which she'd never been brave enough to ask. Keenan was well groomed, sure, but adornment wasn't his thing. He was the type to pass a bottle of Coppertone around the breakfast table. Brittany had once overheard some of the female counselors speculating that his underwear came in bulky plastic Kirkland multipacks, and, had Brittany asked, she suspected he would have confirmed just that. He liked bowling. He sometimes wore a khaki, nylon fishing hat.

If he were anyone but Keenan, he would have been an utter fucking dork, thought Brittany. But nobody could resist his warmth, his wide smile. He helped with anything and everything—transporting armloads of firewood, wound-care demos, scrubbing pots. He could tie many complicated knots, but most only knew of his lanyard starter, which everyone relied upon. He didn't wear cologne because his sister was sensitive to it. Instead he smelled, faintly, of figs.

That year she met Keenan, the bus ride took four hours instead of three because of some mechanical snag. They had to wait, baking into the bench seats, as adults tinkered outside. The first-years were wiggly, but Brittany had packed a charged iPod shuffle. She was prepared—for adventure, yes, but also for boredom.

She listened to an audiobook, *Natural Satellite*, for the millionth time. The familiarity was heavy. Laid over her, it had the instant dampening effect of a weighted blanket. All her favorite stories resonated in a way she couldn't quite explain. This one's protagonist was a tired forty-something housewife who decided to get her tubes tied only to discover, to her horror (and Brittany's delight), a curled, fetal salamander taking shelter in her left fallopian tube.

The salamander, Brittany determined, provided a metaphor for existential crisis. Its body grew in increments. Chapter 1 was called *Larva*.

Brittany finished at 7:06. She stopped by the tent, dropped her stuff, changed back into sleeping clothes, and re-emerged as Morning Brittany: a teenager of smudgy consciousness, yawning and aloof, reporting for duty with the rest.

"Alright, I think everyone's here." Courtney slid into her chair. A big paper coffee cup turned her fingers red. She took a sip. "Whew. That is *hot*."

The long, beige table was actually two plastic folding tables pushed together. Brittany and eleven others sat up and down its edge, rubbing bleary, sleep-crusted eyes. Massive cups obscured half their faces.

“Welcome,” Courtney began. “I can see you’re all thrilled to be here.”

1

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Summer 2009

There were empty chairs here and there. The coffee machine sputtered and steamed. Stragglers lingered around the room's itchy edges. Kira wondered if she could leave.

Then, suddenly, everyone began arranging. They were finding—or inventing—places to sit. Chairs were filling, but so were tables. A few counselors had hoisted onto them, their legs dangling off. Kira wasn't sure if it was a courtesy, so the adults had enough chairs, or a smirking rebellion, a rejection of the normal way to sit. Were chairs uncool?

“Here,” a voice offered.

It came out throaty and crooked, and his appearance matched. This man was tall, tanned and handsome, yet misaligned. He kept shifting his weight around. Maybe his legs were formed unevenly. Or maybe he was just nervous. If he were a dog, she thought, he'd be a Jack Russell terrier.

He smiled and gestured grandly to a seat.

“Oh.” She felt her cheeks bloom with color. “Okay.”

As Kira hung her backpack over the chair and sat, the man hovered, his ghostly dog tail thumping the carpet.

“Was this yours?”

“Oh, no. But I saw you looking. I thought I'd point it out.”

“Oh. Thanks.” She waited for him to disperse, to slip back into the noise of the room. When he didn't, she added, “Where are you sitting?”

“Oh, I'm not.”

“You’re gonna stand?”

“Mm hm.”

Kira laughed. It bubbled out of her and popped softly, dainty and glazed in the stale air.

“What’s funny?” He was grinning, now. Not politely, but truly. With dimples.

“I just...thinking of you standing up during this whole meeting, with everyone sitting. It’s weird. I don’t know.”

The man looked right at her face for a split, riveting second. Boyish mischief spiced the ring of his iris.

“It’s your first year.”

“Is that...a question?”

“Mm...” His eyes kept narrowing somehow, even when they weren’t anymore. It was a honing and it was happening now. She squirmed, a little thrilled. “I don’t think so. I think I’m right.”

“Well, you’re not.”

“It’s not your first year as a counselor?” His raised eyebrows looked like soft, crunchy hay. A place where piglets would nestle and fall asleep. Kira tucked away the image for later.

“I’m not a counselor. It’s my first year as a camper. But not my first year at camp.”

“How does that work?”

ScreeeeeEEEEEEeeEEE. In the center of the room stood a microphone, agitated and bleeding sound. Kira saw people unconsciously touching their faces and necks, their elbows, just to make sure they were still there.

The lady standing nearby covered her lips to mime a cutesy humility.

So sorry!!! She mouthed it but didn't say it, a quiet apology for a loud sound. Kira turned to him with a comment, but he was gone.

ScreeeeEEE. WeEEeeeE.

It was horrible. Curling away, she shut her eyes and counted. *One. Two. Three.* Slowly, her brain cultivated a pleasant static, a vague crackle that dropped her shoulders.

Her eyes opened. Now, it was him at the mic. The man stood in a pool of aloneness, hands in pockets, as the tail end of the sound drooped and fell off.

He leaned in, his eyes asking the audience for permission. From the crowd, someone chimed, "I turned it down! You're set."

"Alright. Thanks Cathy."

He let a pause expire for good measure.

"Looks like I'll be able to speak without causing any hearing damage, god willing."

A light chuckle filled the room. One of Kira's least favorite types of laughter, but on his blushing face, she found a real smile.

He turned. The smile pointed, suddenly, at her. She could have fainted.

Bzzzzzzzz. Her phone, deep in her jacket pocket. Kira reached in, felt around for the silencing switch, and flicked it.

He spoke about the board and what it honor it was to serve. He went on and on about the fiscal challenges, the bureaucratic barriers, the tremendous efforts of the staff and the generosity of the sponsors. Kira understood very little, partly because it all seemed so vague, but partly because his attention made her feel stunned and tingly. When he finished, he walked over.

"I didn't catch your name."

"Kira."

“Hi, Kira. I’m Sean.”

He paused, searching in her face for something. She couldn’t wait to find out what it was. It occurred to her, a few seconds too late, that she was supposed to offer it.

Kira grabbed her backpack.

“I’m here because, um, my counselor got sick. She asked me to take notes.” She unzipped it, revealing the battered cover of a spiral notebook. “I mean, I was supposed to, but...”

He nodded.

“I see.”

A woman in capris and a cropped haircut tiptoed over to him. She tapped his shoulder like dipping a finger in whipped cream.

“Sean?” The woman’s smile glowed with urgent heat. God, how embarrassing.

“Hi, Sandra.” He turned his head but kept the rest of his body wholly pointed at Kira.

“Oh god, Sean. Did I tell you the boat got fixed? Mark is just loving it. Spends all day out there. Sunburns out of this world. His back is like one of those Russian victims, you know the burn victims from the radiation? So sad, that whole mess. So I’m at Costco—”

“Sandra, would you mind giving me and Kira a second? I swear I’ll come find you when we’re through.”

Sandra blinked, suddenly registering her presence.

“Oh, sweetie! Oh, I should have said something. So you’re a counselor? Kiara, is it?”

“Kira,” she corrected, mercifully, as if striking it from the record. “I’m a camper.”

“Well, okay. The thing is, sweetie, this is a closed meeting.”

“I know. I’m here on assignment.”

“An assignment! Ah. Okay, well, may I ask what that might be?”

Sean's eyes glistened at Kira's. He put his hands out.

"Hey, Kira is a good soldier. Her counselor got sick and she filled in last second. She's been taking down notes this whole time." He leaned in. "This girl is a consummate professional. She is a note-taking *machine*."

Kira was too proud.

That was it. There was more, but not really. From there, the scene folded up neatly. Sean had to go because everyone wanted him. Sandra said some goodbyes and set off across the carpet for another conversation, exiting their little dream. Kira stayed in her spot for several minutes, doing nothing but counting and praying in holy silence that nothing would wake her.

Kira's counselor wasn't mad about the notes. She wasn't the type, and besides, she really was sick. Her head hung over the edge of a Tupperware bowl.

The girls, watching from a cautious distance, looked to each other. With no Kailey, would they be allowed to govern themselves?

"So sorry, guys," she muttered, and they knew it wouldn't be long.

The new girl was named Carly. Carly, Rachel declared on the first day, was a "definite slut," and Kira found this difficult to refute. Carly was one of those white girls who wore big, bracelet-sized hoops, but nobody called her ghetto. Instead, she was just a tryhard, a wannabe throwing handfuls of sexy at the wall in hopes something would stick. She wriggled into ribbed tank tops. Wife-beaters, they were called. Every time Kira saw one, she heard her brother Keenan's voice. *Why do we still call them that? Why was that ever ok?*

Carly's shorts were cut like underwear, with frayed edges dangling in precarity. Keenan would have hated those, too, but not because they were immodest. *If one of those edges were to catch on something, you could get yourself really hurt.* Kira smiled.

Rachel was a supremely bitchy intellect. It pleased Kira immensely to catch and collect her little comments. Even funnier, her face managed to cook millions of micro-emotions into one majestic, horror-struck expression. Sometimes, when Kira was brushing her teeth or reading in her cot, she'd remember a Rachel moment, and it was like being hit by a truck.

Once, Kira and Rachel were sitting on folded knees combing through Rachel's suitcase. Carly wandered into the tent, her hair in a strange knot.

"What are you guys doing?"

Rachel looked up. "I thought I brought this deck of cards, but I guess I left it at home."

Carly snorted.

"One time I lost this poker game and I totally had to eat a can of beans like, not heated up or anything. You guys seen Collin?"

They shook their heads, and she left.

Rachel looked like she'd been slapped, hard, by a stranger. Kira collapsed into a seizing heap of laughter. They never found the cards.

Carly was a knitter. At breakfast, she'd eat efficiently, walk her clean dish to the big industrial sink, and fix a coffee. The girls would be halfway through their eggs when Carly's long wooden needles were heating up, twitching rhythmically, churning out the tidy rows. To Kira, it was such a quaint hobby for someone whose thong glowed clearly through her white shorts.

The first week, she started a baby-yellow scarf. She didn't tell them it was a scarf, though that quickly became apparent. When asked what she was knitting, Carly would smile down at the progress in her lap, close her eyes and sing, "You'll see—ee." Each day spawned more rows of scarf.

Camp had a funny effect on time. Keenan had tried to explain it: the way things compacted, stacked up quickly. Experiences, he said, turned into memories faster than in the real world. He said *real world* like an off-brand—not what anyone really wanted, but sometimes the only thing on the shelf.

Before they knew it, Kira and Rachel were moving in sisterly rhythm. Carly wasn't a stickler about everyone walking together, as long as no one walked alone. So they went travelled as a pair—to the bathroom, many times a day, where they would pee side by side. Unwilling to pause their conversations, they simply talked louder, projecting into the gaps in their stalls. In the mornings, they brushed their teeth at the same nasty sink. Neither brushed at night, a secret that bound them. They walked to the cafeteria, too, pointing out all the curiosities that flickered along the path, the light footed birds and cringey male counselors. And to the pool, where they grazed in the sun. When it got too hot, they entered the water, dove to the deepest blue corner and opened their stinging eyes to see each other.

If their first four days together were promising, their fifth was, itself, the promise. Evening light paled their limbs as the girls walked back from the bathrooms, tramping uphill. While the tents were staggered on flattened, circular lots, the ground outside was lumpy, a tangled labyrinth of staircases made of old stones and logs pushed deeply into soil.

"Camp is so beautiful," Kira said, before she could stop herself.

Rachel looked at her with new, sweet regard, as if Kira were a twittering lark, a creature landed on her shoulder.

“You are so weird.”

Rachel gave the warmest gifts with her eyes.

It was all Kira wanted from anyone. There were three others in the group, but they were friends before camp and, upon arriving, sealed off into a unit. Secretly, Kira was grateful. She had Rachel all to herself. Kira had always wanted a Rachel, but she hadn’t known it. All she had known was that she was unusual.

Keenan was huge when he was born, their mother liked to say, as if it were fated.

He debuted five years before her, and, in that time, accomplished a lot. In preschool, he constructed the tallest tower of blocks the staff had ever seen. A photograph of the beaming young engineer standing beside creation was, for seven months, the landing page of the school website. Its place on the family fridge proved permanent.

He skipped second grade. He read fluently, breezing through the math curriculum. It would have been annoying if he weren’t so sweet. Keenan was exceedingly joyful and cooperative. He was almost always the only Black kid in class, and seemed to thrive in the spotlight.

Kira had not had the same luck. When she was six months old, the nanny, Sarai, was fixing a bottle when she noticed that the formula was the same color as the child’s eyes. There was a distinct yellow milkiess puddling in what should have been twinkly and newborn. Kira’s father got the text on his lunch break: *the baby has jaundice. bringing her to hospital. will update*

When he saw her eyes, he went back to work, unfazed. *It usually balances out*, he said, referring to the level of bilirubin in her blood. Sarai brought her home.

Kira's eyes held their yellowness. Then, at eight months old, she caught a fever that refused to back down. Every time Sarai took her temperature, it boiled closer to the edge. Her body was cooking, and Tylenol seemed only to piss it off.

That was it, the beginning of the unending thing. At least, that was how she imagined it. Her earliest memories were of soggy cartons. She'd chew on the folds of hospital chocolate milk rations. In a sterile, beeping place, her baby teeth would gnaw the years away.

Time frayed into wet, wavy sheets. IV bags dripped dry. The Hello Kitty stickers on her homeschooling binder lifted at the corners, curling away from responsibility. They were supposed to stick and stay and make her feel better. Or feel something. While Keenan busied himself with adult-level Lego kits, Kira languished in a hospital bed watching Monk.

People always thought her disease was lucky—not that she had a disease, but that she had *this* one, the one her father had studied. Maybe they thought he waited by her bedside at home, or cocktailed custom IVs in their living room. Maybe they thought she liked living with someone who wasn't mystified.

People tended to miss the problem. Kira had watched enough *House* to know why. On TV, diagnosis was a puzzle. Teams of model-ly, lab-coated physicians pored over glass tables spread with papers. They scratched their heads and slammed doors. They scoured not only their minds but their *souls* for answers.

With answers found, the episode ended. But diagnosis was just the start. What they didn't show was the fatigue. The endlessness and the lost time. When Kira was seven, she'd spent almost half her life beneath what the hospital called a blanket. It was, in actuality, a body-sized rectangle of bleached thread.

The sixth night was movie night. As an impending sunset pushed down the afternoon sky, Kira, Rachel and the rest trickled down the hill with sleeping bags under their arms. Carly had a strategy: if they arrived late enough, the hockey rink would be smushed full of kids, and staff would have no choice but to place them in the nearby treehouse. The view would be unbeatable.

“You guys aren’t the only late ones,” Courtney said, unmoved. She gestured to the others skittering down from their tents in the hills. “We’re gonna lay some towels.”

There was a flat, cleared area right around the rink. Basically, dirt.

The rink was indeed crammed with big, foamy sleeping bags and bodies squatting like frogs. Some burrowed deep into their fabric, bracing the cold. Others traversed the rink carefully. Kira watched them hold their breath and tiptoe over puddles of nylon.

With their goosebumped bodies situated, everyone looked up. A collective shiver swept the rink. All voices hushed to whispers. Hundreds of tiny spears of starlight pricked their collarbones. Wind rustled their bags, leaving its powdery kiss: red dust, the fingerprint of camp itself. Kira blinked it out of her eyelashes and thought of one word. Special. It was special.

Even Courtney seemed tickled by the ceremony.

“Alright, people,” she said, mittens wrapped around a mic. “Hopefully you all peed. If you need to get up, please get a flashlight from your counselor. Please don’t step on anyone.”

Sixteen minutes into *Flubber*, the wormy green blob leapt from an icy canister, and Rachel tapped Kira’s shoulder.

Rachel stood up. Hunching, she made her way between the sleeping bags to the edge of the rink. Kira followed.

They found Carly on a sleeping bag unlike her signature green. She slouched back on her elbows, brushing shoulders with Kyle, a semi-bearded counselor.

“What is it?” She hissed, red-faced.

Bathroom, Rachel mouthed. Carly waved them off.

Rachel led Kira into the trees. They made a stop at the bathroom, a nasty concrete fortress. Kira went in, peed, washed her hands.

She found Rachel waiting outside, the single-bulb light crossing her face. She had a strange look about her. It was quiet and glittering. A panther, about to lunge.

She grabbed Kira’s wrist.

Kira almost fell, but she didn’t have a chance. It was already happening. Rachel was pulling her through the darkest funnel of wind, a wind of their own making. She was running. Loping, actually. She had this huge, stupid smile on her face that didn’t seem to notice or care about Kira floundering behind her.

“Rachel!” Kira spit. “*Rachel!*”

Rachel launched a series of hyena-shrieks that bounced off the marrow of the trees, off the golden owl eyes, off the night.

The tree house was like a shoe box turned on its side. *A diorama*, thought Kira. She had once hot-glued plastic palm trees to the inside of an UGG box—a “beach-in-a-box,” it was called, made to bring tropical flair to her hospital room. The volunteers and their crafts were corny. Sometimes, though, she enjoyed them.

The wood slats had rotting, yellowed spots. Kira could smell splintery fiber decomposing. The place was hard to see with no lights, and Kira only hoped there wasn’t a family of black widows chilling inside. Rachel didn’t even hesitate.

“I wonder who’s had sex in here,” she said, unzipping her jacket.

Kira unzipped hers and spread it on the floor. The parka’s ample cushion had a wingspan wide enough for them both, snuggled close.

They lay on their stomachs, two pink-cheeked sea lions, chins cradled in their hands. Kira had worn two jackets—the velvety black parka, padded with goose feathers, and a lighter one lined with flannel—plus a thermal underneath. It was always better to wear too many layers than to be caught wanting. She explained this to Rachel as she draped the flannel over their backs.

Rachel hadn’t asked. She had no questions for Kira about her disease. This was preferable to pity and advice. Once, a woman had stopped Kira and her mother in the grocery store because she’d overheard them talking about the food in the hospital cafeteria.

“I just want you to know. I am praying for you,” she said, teary. Before anyone could interject, she added, “My sister in law had cancer. It is a *battle*, and you are a *warrior*, sister.”

She pushed her wobbly cart away. Kira’s mother’s jaw made a popping sound, but she didn’t say anything, just squinted hotly into the shelves of egg cartons. There wasn’t much to say. The tacked-on “sister” seemed egregious. The cancer assumption was a little extra. The rest was just as they had come to expect.

In their cozy hollow, Kira and Rachel watched Flubber jump across the screen, a tarp suspended between trees with old, twisted ropes. They watched the sky—a mess of uncountable stars. Mostly, they watched the other campers.

Some were in their sleeping bags, others on them. Kira saw a couple people reach into the depths for stashed chips and starbursts. Some sat on the ledge of a short wall wrapped around the

rink, legs splayed on the floor. And a few were paired off, nuzzling. Carly and Kyle sat so close they almost converged. The edges of their bodies touched, but barely, leaving microscopic gaps for coldness and sparks.

“Do you think they’ll actually kiss?” Kira asked.

“Oh, for sure,” Rachel said, chomping a strand of trafficked licorice. Food was forbidden outside the cafeteria for being harmful and delectable to the wildlife. Kira bit into her own piece, thinking the rule only made it taste better.

Particle by particle, Carly and Kyle leaned into one shape. Kira and Rachel made silent, choked noises and pounded their fists on the wood.

“Fucking *yes!!!!*” Rachel whisper-screamed.

Once it began, a ferocious tenderness took hold of Carly. She held Kyle’s face—the wedge of his weakish chin—like an artifact, a carving more brittle and precious than bone. Her lips melded into his again and again.

“Holy fuck,” Rachel muttered.

Up in that treehouse, the bottom of Kira’s brain turned over for the first time. A gorgeous warmth was crawling into her belly, singing and awake.

Rachel took her hand. Their fingers interlocked, and everything was freezing. Everything was new.

The pool didn’t belong to Sandy Landing the way the rest of the property did. It was an entity leased each summer. Its owners ran a drink stand across from their fenced lagoon: Coffee Shop. Kira thought this lazy.

The coffee was fine, probably. No one drank it. Everyone spent their crumpled dollar bills on frothy, frappuccino-style shakes. Kira had tried all three flavors by the end of her second week at camp. Her favorite was Vanilla, which, inexplicably, tasted like a restaurant mint. Rachel would always get Strawberry, a bland vanilla dyed pink.

They swam sometimes, but mostly they laid out on the faux-lawn spread beside the pool. Real trees hung overhead, sometimes shedding real leaves. The scratchy, gumby-colored grass was so conspicuously fake. It reminded Kira of a film set. Nothing had to happen. She felt excited just to be there, to be cast.

She and Kira would stretch out on their stomachs. Rachel loved stealing magazines. She wasn't brave enough to grab them right from the metal prongs at the grocery store checkout. Instead, she swiped them from doctor's offices, the dentist, her mother's friend's purses. The frayed pages of her hoard were tracked with inky, melting-licorice fingerprints.

Rachel's reading voice came out different from her speaking voice. She sounded like a kindergarten teacher winding down the herd before nap time, laying every word with hypnotic care.

"Twenty-nine ways to please your man's what," she said. It was written as **29 (!) Ways To Please YOUR Man's WHAT????!**, but sounded almost lyrical from Rachel's mouth. Kira just basked in the calmness.

Like most of the articles they read, this one was titled to be deliberately misleading. Yes, there was a list with information on how to please a man, and yes, that list had 25 points. But each was just a different, totally inane body part.

"Number seven," Rachel announced. "Earlobes."

Apparently men wanted you to treat their earlobes with rabid affection. *Think of them as sexual organs*, the writer urged. *Start by enticing your man with a naughty nibble or two. Then kick it up by lightly tugging his earlobes with rhythmic intensity. Before you know it, he'll be begging for full-on auditory asphyxiation!*

"What's 'rhythmic intensity'?" Kira mused.

"You know," Rachel said. "It's the way...well, you know how, when two people are doing it, they, like, sort of keep the beat?"

Kira had never thought about it.

"Why do they do that?"

"Fertility reasons," Rachel decided, and read on.

Walking back to camp, Rachel sipped the last of her milk-slush.

"I don't even know if it tastes good anymore," she admitted. "I just crave it now."

Kira closed her eyes, milk and mint simmering on her tongue.

"Kira?"

Holy shit.

Sean stood in the middle of the path, flexing, drenched in sun. His gorgeous stance conjured Spirit, a cartoon horse second-grade Kira had crushed on. Rachel's jaw smacked open.

"You *know* this guy?"

Kira nodded, her heart flinging around its cage.

"Um, kind of."

Sean slid his hands into the pockets of huge gray swim trunks. More urgently, he was shirtless. Kira avoided making eye contact with his bare chest. Men, she remembered, had a whole garden of hair there.

“You guys go for a swim?”

“Do we look wet to you?” Rachel asked, snorting. Kira felt the blood drain from her face.

“Alright, touché. So what did you guys get up to?”

“We got some reading done,” Rachel interjected.

Kira could live with that answer.

“Yeah. We got those frosty drinks.” She shook her emptied cup.

He looked around slyly and leaned into the space between them.

“Okay, if I hook you guys up, you promise not to tell anyone?”

Kira stumbled backwards. His tan arm flew out to catch her, but she caught herself. She breathed and tried to recalibrate, to balance. Her head felt starry and sloshing.

“You good?”

“Oh. Yeah.”

She knew she was fucking this up, but she refused to look at Rachel and be crucified. Instead, Kira tried to look anywhere but his naked chest. She aimed for his knees. His legs were hairy, too. She knew men were hairy creatures, but the abundance never failed to surprise her in person. There was a furry path creeping out the hem of his shorts. Kira died a swift death remembering the passage which had informed her and Rachel to lick their man’s “happy trail” until he needed a “happy ending.”

“Listen, guys,” he whispered. “Now, I know the guys at Coffee Shop. I’m buddies with them—I drink for free. And if you promise not to say anything...” He raised his eyebrows. Rachel couldn’t hold back.

“Yes! Oh my god yes. Yes, please.”

He laughed.

“Sounds good. I’ll tell ‘em I sent you. Kira and...what was it?”

“Rachel.”

“Perfect. Deal’s a deal.”

He glanced beyond them to the pool, a glistening chlorine horizon.

“I’m on my way over now. Thought I’d grab a vanilla before my meeting.”

Kira burned.

“That’s her flavor!” Rachel hooted, nudging Kira’s side. “That’s literally her favorite flavor that she always gets!”

His hand landed on Kira’s tiny shoulder. It was big enough to crush the whole pearl-swell of bone, if he wanted. Her lungs flamed in red and pink and yellow and green. She did not exhale.

“Good taste.” He said, and smiled in his cute, conspiratorial way. He lifted the hand.

“Well, I gotta go. Nice to meet you, Rachel. Kira—always a pleasure.”

That word, *pleasure*. It often appeared as a verb in the magazines. Kira wasn’t quite sure what it meant. She suspected, though, that she was wading in.

That night, Carly picked at her dinner.

“I hate garlic.” She looked into the bowl as though it were a deep, unknowable well.

“Maybe I hate soup.”

Rachel and Kira looked at each other.

“Everything...good?” Rachel asked.

Carly toyed with a strand of celery on the tip of her fork.

“You guys, can I open up about something? Can I be like, really real with you for a sec? Vulnerable?”

They nodded.

“I think I may be about to start my period. And, like, I always get really....really soulful during that time. I think...about things, and...”

Suddenly, her breathing cut off. Her face broke into jagged, tearful spasms. Then she shot up.

“Guys, I’ll be b-back.”

Stunned, Kira looked around the table. Nobody but Rachel met her eyes. Wordlessly, they slipped out of their chairs.

As the two walked 20 or so feet behind a surly, trudging Carly, the air blew nippy and sweet.

“The fuck are we going to say,” Rachel wondered aloud.

“We could give her cigarettes.”

Rachel nodded vigorously.

“Yeah. Say more ideas.”

“We could do a little Irish Dance. I saw it on PBS once. A jig.”

“Oh my god. What else.”

Kira had left her goosefeather jacket in the cafeteria, and her hands were losing heat. She rubbed them together.

“We could interrogate her. Like, act like she’s a terrorism suspect, and it’s the airport, in the little rooms they have, the underground cell things.”

“Hmm. I like the jig.”

Rachel stopped, busted out some Irish-looking kicks, then kept going.

They were nearing the bottom of the slope. Ahead, Kira saw Carly begin a stompy ascent.

Stepping into the tent, the girls found their counselor on the floor, rocking and spilling tears. She saw them and bent into a spasm.

“Oh, g-guys...oh, you didn’t...I’m *f-fine*.”

Rachel grabbed a wadded T-shirt from Carly’s cot and shuttled it over.

“Here,” she said. Carly dabbed her wet, twitching face.

“Thank y-you,” she sniffed.

They didn’t know what to do, but they couldn’t leave, and it felt weird to stand or sit on their cots. Kira folded onto her knees. Rachel followed.

“Do you wanna talk?” Rachel said. It came out rabbit-soft, her kindergarten teacher voice. Kira breathed out.

Carly nodded vigorously. *Oh god*. Kira racked her brain for a contribution, but it was full of Sean’s leg hair and the pinto beans left on her plate.

“Go ahead,” Rachel cooed.

Carly babbled for a long time. Apparently Kyle was spending too much time with the boys. He wasn't kissing her on the cheek. He'd stopped asking about her knitting.

Rachel and Kira didn't have to say it. They had read enough Women's magazines to know where this was going.

"You think...cheating?" Kira whispered.

Carly's crying stiffened, as if caught or clogged, then burst into a streaming mess. She struggled to breathe through her snot.

"I...I don't wanna...I don't be....*believe*..."

Rachel looked at Kira with disbelief. *What have you done? Now she'll never get up.*

Kira squeezed a violent jolt of laughter. She couldn't help it. Though it was real this time, it was Rachel's funniest bit: a woman exhausted by the incompetence of it all.

Rachel intervened.

"Have you tried talking to him? It could be something else. I'm *sure* it is."

This seemed to make its way into Carly's head. She stopped for a moment.

"Do you hear that?"

Kira only heard pines rustling. She looked at Rachel, whose brow drew together.

"Hear what?" She said.

Carly scratched the inside of her elbow. She scratched again, harder this time. Digging.

"Poison oak?" Rachel suggested. "I can get the ointment—"

Carly's face mashed up.

"No," she growled. "No, I just...."

Kira searched Carly's skin for poison plant rashes—oak, ivy, sumac. Keenan had lectured her on many hikes. But Carly's arms were not red or blistering. They looked, if anything, lightly purpled.

"What is that goddamn noise," she muttered, clawing her cheek.

Rachel threw a look at Kira. *What is wrong with her?*

Kira stepped back. She felt a weird energy buzzing in the room, the thrum of a crooked wing.

That was the last moment of normality Kira would remember. Carly's throat released a yelpy groan, like a puppy with a stomach ache, and then she began to really scratch. With one hand, she raked the back of her neck. The other jabbed under her left armpit, and then tore at her jaw, the front of her neck, her collarbone. If she was itching, she couldn't get to the spot, because the spot was suddenly everywhere. And it really was a *spot*, Kira thought. All over Carly's skin, bruises flared, blooming sallow and sour color. Her eyelids were sinking into pallid green. Her lower lip burned magenta. Her cheek was cut with a small gash. The fiery white line, caught by Kira's eye, shed a blinding drop of pure shine.

She swatted it, smearing it into nothing.

Seconds ago, Carly was a girl. Now, she was a frenzy of chasing limbs, and everything was possible. She tore her pink Lake Elsinore t-shirt off to the cami underneath, the fabric a heathered shade of oatmeal. Kira's mother often fixed steel-cut oats for her. Their milky spoonfuls came dusted with cinnamon. She could taste them.

She blinked.

Back on earth, Carly's ribcage throbbed neon. Her horrifying abdomen had become a blue and yellow impressionist painting. Kira looked to Rachel. She had never seen eyes so white.

In a shuffle of moments, somewhere between lunch and the memory of breakfast's past, their counselor was peeling down to a scream.

TWO

*

Brittany's dreams were getting better, which is to say they were getting worse.

Each night she went swimming. She wandered into the water, the air poky like tips of succulents. It was one of those dream-things, a dimension that couldn't be explained in life, but felt sharply when flipped underneath it. The air dripped with fat, singing mosquitos. Lily pads and goosebumps bloomed.

She dove in. She always looked at her fingernails first. She wasn't sure why. The water changed her skin from ruddy pale to a silvery, slick iridescence. It was freezing and wonderful. Brittany swooped down to the floor, finding mud, or sometimes carpet, or something else, and then back again. She didn't mind the flickering. She would press her palm down. It was play doh, and she'd light up and smile like a baby. She tasted tree bark. She knew she was pretty. And there he was.

She'd spin around, slippery in the water. He was hovering. Glowing. Pulling towards her somehow. That alpine scent, rich and fluttering, filled her chest. She had waited so long.

When the dream decided, a brick dropped on her sleeping body, and her eyes broke open and she screamed air out of her red throat and she lay trembling, breathing shallow, staring at the bright ceiling and gathering the will to push it off. Only then could she stumble into the day.

Showers did little to rinse away the residual humiliation. She had tried himalayan salt and sugar scrubs. She had tried hot, hot water. She had tried Dr. Bronner's Magic Soap in the infamously bracing peppermint scent, and the crisp suds had run down her skin and stung her unsuspecting vagina, and she wouldn't be doing that again. No, it wasn't a product she needed.

The residue was psychic, a glowy, greasy halo that would cling to her as long as it wanted. She knew that. She couldn't see it, but she could feel its humid breath on her shoulders, could sense it hanging in the periphery, dragging just behind her. It was neon and invisible, nowhere and everywhere. Hell, made portable.

"You're doing something."

Brittany whipped around. Behind her, Megan sat up straight as a rod, the sleeping bag poofed around her. Her eyes were startling and clear.

"What?" Brittany cleared her throat. "I have to pee, Megan."

"No you don't. Well, maybe you do. I don't know. But you're also doing something else." She was almost smiling.

Kenny rubbed her face with a sleepy hand.

"Are you guys..."

"Diarrhea," Megan blurted. Kenny rolled over.

Megan hopped on the ground. To Brittany's horror, the girl was fully dressed. Even her hair had been clipped back, although it wasn't quite contained. Still, the effort sent Brittany a silvery chill. This frizzy, doodling weirdo had plotted to trap her.

And succeeded, somehow. That was the weirdest part: the elegance.

"I'm going on a walk—"

"What's in there? The box? It looks like salt."

Brittany was stunned.

She waited until the trees reached a cozy, absorbent thickness. Then, without slowing her pace, she asked Megan what she knew.

“Um, so, it’s like a ritual, each morning,” Megan panted, unaccustomed to the elevation and the briskness. This was not how they usually walked together. “At 6:30. You go to the edge of the lake down there, and you get the box—”

“You followed me.”

Megan looked embarrassed and proud, a dog caught nudging the fridge open. Brittany wanted to be mad, but couldn’t help being a little impressed. She’d figured if anyone would find her out it would be Courtney or another staff member. She rolled her eyes for good measure.

Fuck you. But good job.

The trees crinkled and flexed in the wind. They were stretching awake, shimmering open. Megan had never been up early enough to see it.

“So what is it?”

Brittany didn’t respond for a beat.

“It’s...it’s this thing I do for a friend,” she said. The back of her neck was slick with sweat, her ponytail’s underlayer sticking in clumps.

They tramped to the fading end of the woods. Past them was a sandy new place. Brittany stopped.

“We can’t make noise over there. Just...sit, here.”

She swung her backpack off, digging the bunny box out. Her chapped morning hands placed it in the soil between them.

“Open it.”

Megan hesitated. She nudged the lid.

The box's mouth was packed with hot pink fleece. The socks nested tiny glass bottles, like test tubes, or perfume samples from the mall. Each was wrapped with a piece of ink-scraped tape. Megan's fingertips reached for them.

"Be gentle," Brittany told her.

The bottle Megan chose, labelled .01 in bleeding sharpie, was half full of fine green-dust. As she turned it this way and that, the sifting fineness surprised her. Its little roil looked more like smoke.

She pulled back.

"What are they?"

Brittany picked up .02.

"They're fish."

She showed Megan the rest of the tools, then brought her and the Bunny Box to the pond.

Shhhhh.

They keeled over the water's edge, staying velvety-quiet. Brittany used the tiny spoon to measure out some green powder. She crawled to a spot marked with a wooden stake, possibly a severed chopstick, only an inch or two taller than the thin, reflective water.

The powder descended in slow-motion. Megan watched intently, unsure what she was supposed to be seeing. Then, all at once, she saw it. Small, chrome-shimmering clouds sprung up around the specks of green. She couldn't pin down their color. Maybe they were every color, or no color. Was electricity a color? *Baby explosions*, she thought.

"Are those..."

Shh.

The shimmer snuffed out. Megan's face fell open, struck with horror. Brittany waved her hand. *It's fine.*

It took forever, but the tiny, nuclear formations plumed back into sight. Danced and broke apart, died and re-died. Flowered and fell.

Brittany looked over. Megan's face twinkled over the water, radiating pure enchantment. Seeing this, Brittany's heart contracted unexpectedly. She thought of Keenan. She remembered being Megan, seeing the eggs bloom for the first time. Fastened in the warmth of his eyes, she'd met a new universe.

She would deal with him, and with the problem of Megan's discovery, later. She could make a new schedule, or something. She let the worry dissipate like a watery petal. For now, they were here, watching fireworks together.

There were other sites tucked around the beach. They tiptoed around visiting each stake to repeat the miracle. Megan had so many questions, questions splitting into questions, those questions splitting and splitting, dying off. But they were bound to the twittering silence of the morning.

Kenny woke around 7.

She searched the tent for a clue, any clue. They couldn't still be in the bathroom. That had been quite a while ago. Maybe this was a second or third round. God, what had Megan done to deserve this? They all ate the same thing. Maybe she had IBS.

Her bladder ached, full of night pee. She wasn't supposed to go alone, but what choice did she have? She imagined Brittany's crinkled face. *Did someone pee in here? Kenny?*

Kenny left the tent bundled in her blanket. It was too cold in the mornings. Hobbling down to the square, she saw Courtney. The woman was dragging an underfed trash bag to the dumpsters tucked around the side of her cabin. They weren't regular dumpsters with open mouths or clattering lids. These, and all others at camp, were locked and airtight to seal out interested parties. Kenny had heard stories—roving raccoons, bears pawing through tangled spaghetti. This was the old days, before Sandy Landing had their shit figured out. Courtney hadn't even been born.

Courtney cranked the dumpster shut, wiping her hands on her jeans. She wore fluffy, rubber-soled slippers, a pajama-fied moccasin. The novelty of this sighting tickled Kenny, who'd never seen the woman in anything but Converse.

On her way back, Courtney stopped. Her walls were ridged in thick, vertical panels of browned wood, swirled like marbled milk. Not all the cabins were pretty. Some had moldy shingles. One was even made up of mismatched pieces—some strips black, some grey, some yellow, an unfortunate striping. Courtney's was by far the nicest.

Something odd happened. She didn't take the front door. She almost walked right into the side of the building, but she didn't. She dug her key into a soft spot between two of the wood planks, and it popped open: a door whose seams had blended invisibly. It was just wide enough to let someone built like Courtney through. She slipped inside, and Kenny wasn't sure, but she thought she heard the click of a lock turning.

"Where were you guys this morning?"

Kenny took a sleepy forkful of egg.

Megan looked to Brittany. Brittany looked to the ceiling.

"Do I have to say while we're eating?"

Kenny sipped her coffee, unmoved by the joke.

“Are we going to the pool today?”

Watching her, Brittany knew she hadn’t let her first question go. But she had set it aside, for now.

The walk to the pool was dusty and gorgeous. Lazy mosquitos followed their stroll, and Brittany pointed out all the histories tucked into its path. There was a gargantuan log she had once used for cover in Hide and Seek. Crouching for ages, she had managed to stay hidden, even as insects devoured her thirteen-year-old legs.

“I was really stupid that year,” she said. “I brought a razor to camp.”

Megan and Kenny giggled. Brittany wondered: did they shave? She felt perverted trying to peek at their legs, but she guessed not. The girls seemed pre-sexual to her, possibly afraid of tampons.

“I couldn’t put bug spray on my legs because I was always shaving them, and literally always cutting them, and it stung because they were all raw,” she went on. “So I suffered. And, like, for what? Camp is not a beauty pageant, guys.”

Megan seemed alarmed by her wording. She opened her mouth and Brittany interjected.

“I have never competed in a beauty pageant, to be clear.”

“Oh, I know. I was just—”

“You know?” Brittany’s hand flew to her chest, faux-aghast. “You *know*? Wow, Megan. Hurtful assumptions...”

Megan’s lips bunched. She was fighting a crackup and about to lose gloriously. Kenny’s eyes bounced between them, entertained.

Holy shit, thought Brittany. *They think I'm funny.*

Electrified, she pushed some more.

“You don’t think I’d place? What, you don’t think I can walk?”

She did a twirl. The girls died in giggles.

“Okay, I didn’t mean—”

“Yeah, alright.”

Brittany walked ahead so they wouldn’t see her smile.

At the pool, she presented their sunscreen options. She had an aerosol formula in a clanky aluminum bottle (“bad for the environment, but hey”), a big white squeezey tube, a slimmer, metallic tube, and what appeared to Kenny as comically oversized chapstick.

Kenny recognized the metallic tube. Her mother often rubbed it into her shoulders before summery gatherings.

I'm not gonna burn. She’d roll her eyes.

Cancer doesn’t care whether you burn, her mother would say, smoothing it in.

They spread their towels over the deck.

“It didn’t used to be a deck,” Brittany chimed. “It used to be fake grass.”

“Ugh, I love fake grass.”

She couldn’t yet tell if Kenny had the capacity for sarcasm.

“Do you really?”

“It’s so cute. Like a toy.”

No, she was serious. Blushing, even.

Megan stretched out on her tummy and wriggled under the sun. Kenny copied the position. Brittany preferred to stay upright.

Their towels warmed, first wonderfully, then uncomfortably. The pool would be closed until Courtney arrived, Brittany explained.

“She should be here any minute.”

“Wait, why’d they get rid of it?” Kenny squinted.

“What?”

“The grass.”

Brittany always appreciated the look of the pool before its breaching. Like them, it loved the light. It would be rolling on its back, if it had one. She had known this pool longer than she’d known most people. It wasn’t like a family member, but more like a family member’s dog. Brittany had only one cousin, an accountant in Wyoming. If she had been close with him—and she hadn’t—and he’d had a golden retriever, and Brittany had known it since she were small enough to mount its golden back, and then maybe, as she got older, it had seen her doing some things she wished nobody had, but accepted her in all her sin, always greeting her with lapping and with licks, well, maybe it would be something like that.

“No idea,” she said.

2

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The inside of Courtney's office was cramped and whirring. Many desks had been pushed together to make one wraparound structure. Courtney's chair almost couldn't fit in the cavity. Kira counted at least three computers.

"She caught a bug. It happens, unfortunately, with all the wildlife we have out here."

Rachel laughed involuntarily, then covered her mouth. Kira leaned forward.

"Wildlife?"

Courtney shrugged.

"Something could have bitten her."

Kira remembered a documentary her brother had shown her about mosquito-borne disease. She heard the narrator's gravelly voice: *a single winged carrier can bring unfathomable devastation.*

"Well, you know, I can't share details. And it's still playing out. But she is stable. She'll be alright. She's a tough girl, you know."

The word *stable* pricked Kira. That was a term used in the ER and the ICU, where patients teetering on the edge were fried with electric paddles and yanked back to life.

"Was...was she going to *die*?"

Courtney's mouth puckered as if the question were too sour, too soon.

"It's early, Kira."

It was nearly 4 PM, almost a full day since the incident. Courtney must have meant early in the story, the one of Rachel's illness. Kira hoped it would be brief and obvious and eject its protagonist before any tendrils of complication could ensnare her. Kira's own story, on the other

hand, would be like an encyclopedia series whose arranged bindings spelled out their title. Though often noticed, it would almost never be picked up and read.

Roslyn would be the girls' interim counselor because of her group's smallish size. She wore a blue hoodie with an embroidered whale and some tiny, lettered logo stitched below. Kira watched her trot up the slope to their tent. Tiny muscles in her legs flexed with each weightless step. Her skin was tanned, lightly and evenly. Her body was a machine that worked very well.

Surveying the inside of her tent, she shrugged.

"Kinda crowded, but we can move stuff around."

Rachel made her *come again?* face.

Most tents housed five or six campers and a counselor. This one had been crammed with eleven cots, and it was already smaller than Carly's. It would have made more sense to move Roslyn's group into hers. Instead, they were here, their former residence covered with tangerine-colored tarp.

"Why'd they put a condom on it?" Rachel said, bemused.

Kira felt wrong for moving along to the next moment. She wanted to stay behind with Carly. But there was no option for that, no denying the nowness of whipped sugar crystals simmering under her tongue. Shakes tasted so much better on Sean's dime. Placing her lips on the straw, Kira was a hummingbird stealing sugarsap from his palm.

"He likes you." Rachel stirred her drink thoughtfully. "How old do you think he is?"

It was hard to tell with white people. He could have been 18 or 28. She didn't want to offend Rachel, whose light brown skin left Kira wondering.

“Really? Wait, why do you think so?”

“Come onnnn. You’ve seen movies before.”

“Yeah, but—”

“What’s your favorite.” She tapped her fingers against the cold cup.

Kira sucked in.

“Okay, so it’s not a movie.”

“Okay.”

“It’s a show. I mean, an episode of a show. Have you....do you know this show called Cinched?”

Rachel had to grab her throat to keep from lurching a mouthful of slush.

“Kira. Are you serious.”

“Just listen to me!”

“Isn’t that the one where they like...where they—”

“Listen! My hospital doesn’t get good channels. I was in bed for a really long time, Rach.”

“Yeah, apparently.” Rachel’s face was turning magenta. “Jesus Christ, Kira. How long were you there?”

“Six years.”

This stopped her laughing.

“Wait, seriously?”

“Yeah.”

“What happened?”

“Nothing. I’ve always been sick. Sometimes it’s worse and I have to go to the hospital for a while.”

“Oh.”

This was the silence Kira had been hoping to outsmart. Rachel now had pictures in her head of tubes and sterile hallways and beeping machines. The pictures weren’t wrong, at least not visually. Tonally, though, they were too grim. Kira didn’t enjoy being sick, but misery wasn’t her intrinsic orientation. The her that did homework, went ice skating, and watched documentaries about radioactive fish with Keenan had no place in this wasteland.

Kira had seen almost every episode of the show’s five seasons. Each was a self-contained reality competition. Three women fought for the ultimate prize: “A chance,” the host said wistfully, “at a *hole* new start.”

The technical term was vaginoplasty, but that was only part of the makeover. Labiaplasty, vulvoplasty, bleaching, restorative tattooing, chemical peels, and laser hair removal were often in the mix. It all depended on the particular devastation of a winning vagina.

There were soccer moms, often exhausted by a recent divorce.

“I just want to get back out there because....because I deserve to be loved again,” they’d sob, wiping tears on a cardigan sleeve. Then there were former sex workers, presented as professional rape victims.

“Night shift. Afternoon shift. I never had a day off. And my body...my body tells that story,” whimpered the woman who had briefly worked as a stripper in Flagstaff. The implication, Kira gathered, was that her vagina had been permanently mutilated by sheer objectification.

The host sympathized.

“Life can stretch us to the limits,” she’d explain. “But it’s never too late to pull ourselves

back together.”

The third category contained women born with some abnormality. It was never anything life-threatening or painful, just aesthetically unacceptable. These women entered the world with lopsided, disorganized pussies. They often required more surgery than the others, and only ever won if a wedding was on the horizon. Kira wondered how their husbands felt about marrying a renovated pussy—was it exciting, or humiliating? Who in God’s name would volunteer for this show? The circus sent her imagination spinning.

She had to do this. She had to find tunnels into new places within the stale world of the hospital. Horrifying as it was, Cinched made for a competent portal, and Kira’s boredom was second only to her pain. Sometimes boredom and pain switch places without her noticing. The nurse would come in and see her withering and ask the number. Kira would say whatever number she’d last said. She’d get some new bag clipped to her IV and feel the resounding wave: a tight, wiry shudder and its many sequels. A million rubber bouncy balls poured into her veins’ narrow hallways. She grabbed her stomach. The nurse said to breathe. Kira did not tolerate opioids well, but her pain stopped the world.

In her endless portal-seeking, Kira had read everything in the pediatric wing’s waiting room. They were mostly picture books. She was too old for them, said the nurses, but she enjoyed their loopy wanderings. Her favorite was a massive cardboard pop-up book. When cracked open in her lap, its gaping pages swallowed her right up.

The story followed a group of guests through one eventful night. It drew readers into a winding mystery. Who was the great jewel thief? To find out, Kira poked through paper windows and deep chimneys of elaborate multi-story pop-up buildings. Whoever had designed them, she thought, deserved to be called an engineer.

So many details were torn away, little folded clues, signs behind signs. She wondered what it might have been like to uncover the thief herself, but, with so many pieces missing, Kira could only speculate on the reader's intended experience. She could only hover.

That night, the group huddled around the fire pit, where Kira learned that her new counselor liked her marshmallow blackened. When it slid off the stick, crumbs of char rained everywhere. A few fell to the rolled cuff of her puffer sleeve. Kira winced as Roslyn dusted them off. Wiping anything burnt always left dreadful smears. The dry cleaning bill for such a swollen garment had to be atrocious.

Roslyn grinned, mashing ashes between two graham crackers and half a Hershey's. Kira could taste the chocolate liquifying in real time. She checked her own marshmallow's progress. Its tan was developing, albeit slowly.

Rachel used a popular technique. She plunged her stick into flames and let her marshmallow attract a sizable orange plume. Then she plucked it out, quieting all that color and heat with steady puffs of air. She was so swift, so focused as she performed these steps that they could have been confused for ceremony.

As Kira's marshmallow neared ripeness, Rachel leaned back.

"I ate three," she said. "I am going to be farting tonight."

Kira thought of Carly's rule.

"I wonder how she's doing."

They looked at the fire Roslyn had built. Little sparks twirled out and landed in the dust. Everyone used the same bricked pits, but Kira liked to imagine fire-setting as a divination, a superior astrology. She'd watched Keenan build fire after fire. Each was robust and vigorously

springing. The result of his methodical tending, each looked, somehow, just like him.

“What do you think her fire would have been like?” Kira asked. Rachel’s eyes settled on a dot of dwindling light. They stayed there for a long time before producing an answer.

“Burn unit.”

Kira’s laughter was violent. She bent over, hacking, and dropped her stick. The fire promptly devoured her marshmallow. She wheezed weakly, blinked, and wiped her leaking eyes.

Rachel normally would have acted all exasperated, a bit that never failed to start the laughing over. But she couldn’t keep her smile down.

“C’mere.” She wrangled Kira’s shoulder with a warm arm. “I’ll make you another.”

That night, Kira dreamt of running. Or maybe swimming. She was paddling, but not through water. She was flying, but not through air. *ARF! AURF!!*

Layla’s barks blew hazy rings that met her skin and dissolved into dense, arctic slush. She was soaking it in, the infamous hospital soft-serve. Somewhere, Keenan was running after. His calls, a string of burped-up noises, seemed to have snagged between English and Dog. His sweat fell in handfuls of tumbling gems. Then again, maybe it wasn’t hospital soft-serve. Maybe it was a camp milkshake. Maybe it was the memory of one contaminated with another’s. Maybe it was a hybrid. Kira liked both on their own, but, for some unpinnable reason, the thought of their combination nauseated her. The red flesh of her tongue coiled like a slug. Everyone wanted a poke.

Kira’s cot rustled, tossing her awake.

Daylight disguised the bathroom as a normal, if disgusting place. Its peppery piss smell

touched everything. Campers showered only as a necessary evil, a place for crotch washes and hot chlorine rinses. Raw concrete flooring meant those who forgot or forwent shower shoes would find flecks of blood in their socks.

Square windows floated high over each sink. The moon could reach through them, it just chose not to. The moon respected the bathrooms and their eerie power. If the moon was being honest with itself, the moon was a little afraid.

The row of crusted lightbulbs had a motion-activated sensor. Their light, though, shone far too pale to see until it was the only light left. That's when the building's personality emerged. Like nocturnal orchids, the bathroom spent all day accumulating energy to unfurl its nightly spell.

The sensor delayed a few seconds. In these seconds, Rachel's flashlight lit up the floor. It crawled over the spiky, swirling grain of the cement. That texture looked to Kira like someone had scrubbed a frayed brush into it. Keenan had many times approached Courtney and offered to sand the floors. *I can bring my own tools. I can do it in a day.* She didn't want the hassle, or liability, or whatever.

The lights came on, a soft crackle. Their twitching, yellow touch descended on Kira.

"I don't have to go," she said, sinking into the wall. Rachel didn't move.

Kira saw the mirror to her right. There was her silhouette. A tracing of the small, puffed ponytail slicked atop her skull, its outline made of wet wire. Night pooled in her eyes.

The tarp was hardly secured. It had been draped—thrown over—by one of Courtney's

lackeys, definitely not Courtney herself. This was the work of a Kyle, thought Kira. Fuck that guy. If she ever saw him again, she'd be sure to light him on fire with a glare, an idiot ant under her circle of glass.

Rachel went first. She cranked the flashlight down to its weakest setting. She flicked the tarp away. Her fingertips groped for a seam in the canvas underneath. When she found it, she slithered between its opening. Kira could see very little, but she could hear sounds of adjustment, coated canvas shuffling Rachel in.

Rachel had reached the tent's dark, waterproof stomach. Kira smiled to herself and thought of Jonah. She'd once been horrified by the story. The fear of being swallowed by a big blue whale had followed her until, at 8, Keenan snuffed it with a scientific debunking. How adorable that she'd ever believed, now. It may as well have been the creature stitched into Roslyn's hoodie.

The tent had consumed Rachel and buried her heartbeat. Behind all those skins, though, Kira could hear her waiting.

THREE

*

“This is literally my favorite camp thing,” Brittany said, zipping up her backpack. “You guys aren’t ready.”

Kenny slipped a hand into her hoodie pocket. Her chapstick was missing. She scanned the tent and its dingy light.

“What are you looking for?” Megan sat on her cot, twitching with excitement.

“My...oh, there.”

It had fallen into her sleeping bag, somehow. Kenny plucked it from the folds of her blanket. Fluffy faux-shearling tickled her fingertips.

“I have a good feeling about tonight,” Brittany shouted, already outside.

Kenny heard it in her voice: the feeling, the restlessness. She saw it again when Megan pushed up her jeans to pull on her hiking boots. Though the pool had washed yesterday’s doodles clean, in the hairy gap of shin between her sock and scrunched up pant leg, an inky new sprig was crawling in.

Everyone poured into a clearing at the bottom of the hill. Kenny hadn’t seen the entire camp population together since boarding the bus. Looking around, she felt like one in a freezing swarm. Her toes scrunched rhythmically, but she couldn’t tell if it was anxiety, or the feeling Megan and Brittany were sharing. She searched the crowd and found Courtney, a tiny figure standing on a chair.

“Alright guys. You know the game,” she said, her breath pluming into smoke. “Rules are the same as always. You get caught, you come back here. Teams are red and blue. Your counselor will do your face.”

Do your face? Before Kenny could ask, Brittany lifted a crusty tube of red paint.

“Close your eyes.” She squirted two cold gloops onto Kenny’s cheeks and used the flesh of her thumb to spread the paint into what felt, maybe, like hearts.

“Cute,” Brittany stepped back, pleased. “Megan. Your turn.”

Megan couldn’t suppress her giggles as Brittany painted.

“Dude, you gotta be still.”

“Sorry.”

Brittany grinned and put a hand on Megan’s shoulder to steady her. Watching them interact, Kenny didn’t know if she was being racist, or if the two really looked alike.

As Megan and Kenny tiptoed up the nightsogged hill, they knew Brittany followed somewhere behind, but not exactly where. She wanted them to feel some level of danger, of ruggedness.

“But I’ll be watching,” she had promised, handing them each a rectangular sac. “Shake it up.”

The girls obeyed. For a second, nothing happened. They stood beneath the arms of towering pines, rattling their bags in silence. Then the doughy thing in Kenny’s palm blushed with warmth. Megan looked up, eyes alight.

“How have I never had this? I’ve been camping so many times.”

Brittany patted her sac and slipped it into a pocket.

“Cool, right?”

They nodded. It was amazing how an object could wake to life.

As the sky swooned into early darkness, the girls departed. Kenny took deep breaths climbing the slope. She felt a velvety feeling in all of it: branches fluttering, pine needles falling lightly. Even Megan’s hunched panting contributed, somehow, to a symphony playing only for her.

They didn’t talk, though it wasn’t clear where they were going. She and Megan had started walking and some vague telepathic agreement had herded them uphill, and she wasn’t going to pinch out the magic by asking about it. Instead, she let the rhythm of the climb carry her. She felt her lungs flare and burn, watched the dark soil reeling underneath. She decided it looked like the sky back home: a matted carpet of densities and math.

Her hair swinging vigorously, she cursed herself for bringing no scrunchie. Megan’s was already in use, though not super effectively, thought Kenny. Her hair was wiry in an interesting way for a white girl. What was she, Irish? She could hear Tia’s snickering from a world away. *It’s called a flat iron....*

What a catty creature, her sister. It boggled Kenny’s mind that they had come from one womb. She stuffed her braids into the humid neck of her hoodie. Looking over the trees, the branches cracking in dry wind, she missed Tia.

“Hey, what’s that?”

Megan pointed. Beyond the next thicket of sugar pines, a shallow oval of white waited for them.

The girls found the hockey rink, it seemed, before anyone else. Kenny shook her head and tiptoed around its border.

“We are so lucky.”

“Right?”

Megan turned back and grinned, her fangs bouncing moonlight. Kenny had forgotten there was a moon. She realized, now, that it probably hung somewhere behind them.

They crept to the back of the rink. The area was cleared of all foliage except two twin trees stationed on the far end, one of them tangled in what looked like a giant sheet and many feet of waxy black rope.

“The screen,” Megan said, picking up a corner of sheet. “I’m pretty sure. For movie night.”

This made sense. Brittany had mentioned *Flubber*, her droll tone gesturing to a lame but classic rite of passage, and Kenny had wondered how it would work without a television. Now, she pictured the sheet spread out, a flag waving against the backdrop of shivering pines. It had to have been a vast piece of fabric to reach the other tree.

“I feel like...we could hide in this, right?”

Megan’s fangs glinted in delight.

They got to work untangling the mass of fabric and rope. As they toiled, scales of bark flaked off the trunk, falling on the sheet and Kenny’s jeans. She saw one resting in Megan’s frizzy crown.

“Hey—” She patted her own scalp. “You’ve got a piece—”

Megan swatted vaguely around herself, capturing nothing. Kenny giggled.

“Sorry. It’s...hold on.”

She stepped closer, and, with soil-dusted knuckles, flicked the bark away.

“Thanks.”

Megan shook her hair out. Her smell threw into the air between them: a tang of sweat, a sharp whiff of shampoo. Dust, maybe. The thin red stuff that camp pressed beneath fingernails and into the pores of young lungs.

Kenny stepped back. For a second, her stomach fizzed with green acid. Had she eaten any dairy recently? No, of course not. Had she remembered to pack any Lactaid? Also no.

When this sensation passed, she turned to the rope and put her hands on the biggest knot, which was actually a megaknot, a nest of smaller ones. Her fingers ran over its fibers. They were still, but appeared to be moving, seething, a pile of slimy intestines digesting itself. Kenny remembered carvings of self-devouring snakes from World History class. There was a word for them, but she couldn’t remember it.

While Kenny wrestled with the knots, Megan dealt with the fabric. She had just managed to pull a swath free from its own twisted bunches when, suddenly, she froze.

“Wait, listen.”

Kenny stilled. Over her shoulder, past leaves and wind and prowling nocturnal animals, she picked up the frayed noise of teenagers: their bodies crawling up the dirt, their weight and whispers gathering closer.

Megan blinked wildly and looked down. The freed portion of fabric would barely be enough to cover one person. Before she could say anything, a boyish voice broke behind them.

“The rink, bro—”

At this, Kenny’s body yanked her into the woods.

She had no chance to argue the instinct. Without her own permission, she bolted, and a frantic blur of texture flew around her. Bark, pine needles. Particles of heat that hit her skin and smeared into char. She was running. She had no idea where. She scampered through the dark like hopscotch, darting between shadows, chasing herself.

But an unknown destination is not the absence of one. What found Kenny that night was a tree wider than all the others. She collapsed against its trunk, her chest heaving, her eyes dizzy with light.

The tree was merciful. Weakly, she hugged it. Her spine ached, finding a softness tucked under many layers of fibrous toughness. Her breathing slowed. The feverhaze of panic and exhaustion began to slide down, a thick wall of heat sinking into soil, reabsorbing.

It really was a massive specimen, the tree. Camp was full of them, sure, but somehow this one struck Kenny as a discovery. She stumbled back and looked up.

There was a box-shaped gap in the branches. An empty square of dark. Kenny's neck tingled.

She hadn't heard anything about a treehouse, but then again, she was new.

The other side of the trunk was carved with deep notches for climbing, but these weren't really necessary. The tree's natural formation was so knobby, so gnarled with swollen old wood that Kenny found it easy to hold. It helped that she herself was knobby, totally abandoned by the family's famous curves. There wasn't much of her to lift.

She pulled herself up to the lip of the house and squinted in. The night was still early. Instead of total darkness, a heavy shadow fell over the space. Inside were bare boards scattered with leaves and powered, thickly, with red dust. Which made sense. With no door, the treehouse lived as a permanently open mouth, ready to catch whatever the wind carried.

It wasn't much to see. Still, Kenny clung to the edge, her large eyes sweeping a surface that felt more like a face.

Déjà vu. A song Tia played incessantly, prompting Kenny to Google the phrase. What had the online dictionary foretold? She fastened her grip and remembered.

A recognition. A fleeting sense one has been somewhere, or met someone, something, before. A *false* recognition. A lie. Even in the song, Kenny recalled, it was just Beyoncé's brain letting her know she'd gone crazy. The whole song was a cry for help, albeit very danceable, Kenny supposed. Kenny didn't really know how to dance. Secretly, she suspected she didn't really get music in general. But she loved the way other people loved it: the way a song attached, like a jangling keychain, to her memory of a person. For people like Tia, whose iPod and portable pink speaker followed everywhere, it was a given. Kenny often forgot to listen to music the way she forgot to drink water. Tia was always bugging her about hydration.

Ken, you have to drink, otherwise your skin will be gross. Everyone will know.

She thought of her sister, the graceful eldest, lounging in her natural habitat. On the couch, homework in her lap. Tapping a mechanical pencil. Mumbling an anthem of insanity and scribbling a geometry proof.

At this, the spell flickered.

Kenny's body woke in a fright. Fuck. *Fuck.* What was she doing? Unable to stop herself, she looked down. She saw fingers gripping splintery boards, toes wobbling on a shallow step. Knees, trembling. A whole forest waiting to catch her bones.

Her head spun. This was it: the dumbest thing she had ever done. Her mother had made it abundantly clear that camp was expensive. She'd said this not to guilt her, but to excite her.

You'll be the first Moore in those mountains. You're our debut.

The sincerity pierced Kenny's throat and stung with saltiness. The cost could have paid for gas, groceries, Tia's tuition, literally anything other than her weirder daughter's freezing corpse. How was she going to get back to Megan, or Courtney, or anyone? Where even was she? She could maybe figure it out, with an aerial view. But she couldn't turn around while hugging the tree like this. With a grunt, Kenny lifted herself up.

She wriggled in. The treehouse felt more stable than it looked. As she shifted, the frame flexed noisily. Old planks creaked underfoot. She exhaled. The movement seemed willing, like the place was built to accommodate her, or, maybe, to hold her. She tipped her head against dusty wood and looked out over the forest.

Kenny wheezed with relief. She hadn't gone far at all. The hockey rink pooled right in front of her, a small, pale pond of cement. She figured she could have watched *Flubber* from here, had she timed her visit differently. Downhill, beyond a bumpy blanket of trees, she found the top of a glimmering dome—the cafeteria. The path winding up to the square, the amphitheater. The girls' tents, staggered in the moonlight. The staff cabins. The water gathered in a skim, fluttering layer around the bottom of the hill that hosted camp—or, really, *was* camp. It all seemed adorably miniature from here.

This change in scale thrilled her. She had wandered beyond the world. Seeing it now, she knew she'd return and feel different there, like she had encountered each place in a parallel universe. Their earthversions wouldn't know, but then, they wouldn't need to. She yawned. Perched in the stars, crouched in the elbow of such a generous tree, Kenny found herself relaxing into a warmth that quieted any need she had ever known.

What happened next took a few seconds. To Kenny, though, the moment unfolded as a process. Time slowed and hardened, breaking off into chunks. Her mind ambled from one to the next.

First, she heard the lightest of sounds. It rose above a sea of chanting crickets, leaves shimmering against each other, dust sifting in the lush fringes of pines. It was quieter but, as she would realize, closer. It was small.

And light. It was wispy, an air-sound. Not a thing, but air reacting to it. Particles rearranging, space molding around a new shape. Kenny didn't know it yet, but in nature, this is the sound of arrival.

Fog slithered over her vision. Kenny blinked, thinking dust had blown between her eyelashes.

No. The fog wasn't dust-colored. It was a rush of breath, heavy with sparkle, and didn't move like dust, either. It gathered into slippery currents and tumbled, like ribbon, over her lap.

So I'm dreaming, Kenny thought. *Ah*.

As fog swam around her, Kenny's body softened, melting into the wood. She let her eyes close. Maybe she'd fall asleep and wake up for real, snuffing out the dream. This happened sometimes. Though she rarely meant to, she was often falling out of her own dreams, slipping through the gaps in knitted realities.

This time, she merely fell into another.

She saw a glassy blueness. The surface of water, perhaps. Pink flecks drifted by, unhurried.

Kenny was stunned when a dark hand plunged in, dragging delicate fingertips. She was *in* the water, she realized. She had no body to gasp with. And yet, she *felt*, somehow. The quiet warmth of the hand, its knuckles and tiny gold ring. The touch resonated in every letter of every word that crowded Kenny's mind. She was a pit of voices, utterly hushed. She was, she realized, the water.

Her surface tossed with color from the plunge. She saw the blue, which must have been sky, and spasms of black and pink and brown. When it all began to settle, Kenny pinned the jiggling frame of a girl. She wore a large black coat—a parka, puffing comically beyond its wearer—and a pale pink turtleneck, maybe another pink thing over that. Her hair was a blurry bundle on her skull. A ponytail, not a formidable one. She was young. Younger. Or maybe just smaller. Her eyes weren't large, but seemed remarkably absorbent, blinking down at Kenny.

Kenny felt a heat rising. She watched simmering red droplets trickle into the corners of her view, then dissolve, tinting her water violet, clouding the girl's hand with a silt of shimmer that thickened until it smothered Kenny's vision.

She wanted to cry out. She was drowning, though she knew that wasn't possible. The shimmer burned off and went blue, then sour teal, then red like a tongue of hibiscus petal. Kenny's mind flashed to the tide of stomach acid that rolled in when she stood close to Megan. She had become that very sea.

It felt like terror, and also like peace. As her own colors changed, all she could do was watch.

Nobody knows what happens in between realities. Somehow, Kenny made her way back. She opened her eyes to the treehouse.

The treehouse. Yes. She was here. She looked at her hands, veins popping, goosebumps sprung from her forearms. Though she was shivering mildly, she wasn't seizing. Her heartbeat marched on, apparently oblivious to the nightmare. Which was odd.

Kenny's next thought had hardly begun to assemble when, ever so lightly, she felt a twitching on her shoulder.

She turned. A glowing, minty ghost hovered inches from her face, with a furry abdomen and beady black eyes. An insect. A massive fucking insect.

Kenny shrieked. Thrashing, she slapped, and the thing flapped off in a luminous green stroke.

With wobbly limbs, Kenny brought herself to a stand. The boards looked almost wet, sprayed everywhere with iridescent coating. She reached for the wall by her side, but it was a little far. She took a step closer. Or tried to.

The fall was so inelegant that she would later struggle to relay its choreography. Her foot met the wood and slid, landing her on her butt, which also slid, and then she flailed wildly for far too long, grasping for air and slippery walls until, finally, her squirming body fell out of the treehouse's mouth.

Kenny landed in the spindly fingers of nearby branches. Her heart hammered. She groped the bark, pushed softly to test its integrity, and felt the sudden uprising of tears.

She was safe. Between the branches and their leaves, this tree's fibrous web supported her to the point of cradling.

“What the fu—what *happened* to you?”

Brittany rushed Kenny into a hug.

While she squeezed, Megan stood by, her facial expression a mixture of horror and intrigue.

Kenny surprised herself by laughing.

“I’m okay.”

Brittany pulled away and began a frantic examination. Her eyes scanned Kenny’s face, neck, wrists and shins, darting from scrape to scrape.

“You are *covered* in wounds, actually.”

Kenny inspected the back of her right hand. A skinny, jagged cut leaked fluid to her fingernail. She didn’t feel much pain, though she suspected the adrenaline was merely staving it off.

“Do you guys have any, um, ibuprofen?”

Brittany paused and then grabbed her in another hug.

Sitting in her spinny desk chair, Kenny felt like a visitor to the museum of Courtney. She clocked the woman’s signature black cardigan crumpled by a computer. The sunbleached wallpaper, a vague dotted pattern, was adorned with frames, some more crooked than others. Kenny surveyed the pictures inside. She saw Courtney with a group of others who looked like her, petite, freckled—her family?—and a sandy golden dog. A little white girl whose face was painted in an explosion of flowers, blowing out her candles. A pool full of people, their faces greasy with sunscreen, bobbing.

Brittany kneeled before her like some sort of royal attendant.

“Okay, can you take off your jacket?” She braced herself as if Kenny’s hoodie held a loose bundle of organs.

Kenny unzipped it. Nothing happened, of course. Really, she had only been wounded where her clothes were twisted aside. Her jeans—the pair Tia taught her to wash in cold water and hang-dry so they wouldn’t shrink up—had done a great job protecting her knees and upper legs. And her hoodie, the hefty purple companion, had cushioned the worst blows. She’d watched Brittany unpack the office’s first aid kit, then the impressive one Kenny hadn’t known existed in her backpack, and arrange each chosen tool in a line. First, she picked up a white spray bottle and spritzed every wound. Kenny set her jaw, expecting to be seared, but felt nothing.

“What is that?”

“It doesn’t hurt, does it?”

She shook her head.

“Hypochlorous acid.” Brittany peeled the wrapper of a transparent bandaid. She took Kenny’s hand, the one with a scary looking cut, and placed the bandaid, rubbing in the stickiness with her thumb. “It’s way better than Neosporin. Trust me. And don’t get me started on alcohol. We’re trying to heal you, not dehydrate you for jerky.”

Kenny cracked up. She loved when Brittany was gruff.

“You’re a really good nurse.”

Brittany smiled. Peeled another wrapper.

“One of my counselors here, he taught me about this stuff.”

“He?”

“Yeah,” she said, setting a long, rectangular bandaid over the many little cuts on Kenny’s left ankle. “That was a weird time. Some crazy shit happened, and they didn’t have enough counselors, so we all had to shuffle around, and they, well, I guess they desegregated the genders. Very progressive, that summer.”

Brittany gasped. A hand flew to her mouth.

“Oh my god. I just swore. I did, didn’t I? I’m so sorry.”

Kenny laughed, a convulsion in her sore belly. It wasn’t the swearing, but Brittany’s loss of composure.

“It’s okay. I, um, I have an older sister. She uses...all kinds of words.”

This was partly true. Tia’s vocabulary included many swears, but excluded those deemed uncouth. For example, *fuck* was more feminine than *shit*, which conjured in Tia’s mind a vivid, steaming pile of feces. Tia preferred *crap* because, in her words, she was “from Boston.”

Brittany looked up.

“Did she go to SL? I might know her.”

“No, just me.”

As Brittany dressed the scrapes clawed over Kenny’s right ankle, silence pooled between them. She settled her eyes on the wallpaper, its peeling edges. She didn’t have it in her to explain the truth and all its tangles—the real reason she was here.

After this extended moment, Brittany paused.

“So like, what happened, actually.”

Kenny held still. Did she have to?

Sensing her discomfort, Brittany added, “When you fell. The treehouse.”

Oh. Kenny blushed stupidly. *Duh.*

She ran a finger over her cheek and winced. The tenderness was emerging, now, which meant she'd be in pain soon.

Brittany pointed to her high top.

"Do you mind? We should probably take a look."

"Sure."

With care, Brittany unlaced a shoe, loosening the canvas, and Kenny lifted her foot out. Spots of rusty blood seeped through her sock.

"Woah," Kenny said, not meaning to. "I didn't know..."

"Yeah, you were in survival mode. You'll be feeling it all soon. Oh, that reminds me."

Brittany fetched the travel bottle of ibuprofen from her lineup. She dosed out 3 pills and handed them, with her giant sloshing Nalgene, to Kenny.

"I know it's gross, but—"

"No, it's cool."

Kenny washed the pills down. She held out the bottle, but Brittany took it and set it on the desk.

"You can drink more, if you want."

It struck her as incredibly giving, the gesture, but Kenny reminded herself that the only older girl she spent time alone with was Tia, and older sisters were stingy in a way Brittany had no reason to be. They had nothing to fight over. They ate from different troughs.

Brittany rolled her sock down. Kenny's foot was mottled with markings, pre-bruises bound to darken and sour. She groaned.

“I just...I don’t understand how this *happened*. Like, I climbed into the treehouse, and then I was sitting up there, and there was this beautiful view and I was soaking it in...and everything just got...weird.”

Her mouth closed, giving up. She’d hit the limit of articulation. Past it, she did not know how to describe her experience to herself, let alone to someone else.

Brittany leaned in.

“Weird?”

“I don’t know.”

Kenny shut her eyes. She saw a girl’s curious hand, waving, stirring up her consciousness. The insect and its furry little antennae.

When she opened them, she saw Brittany, kneeling, waiting. Suddenly, Kenny remembered something else she could offer.

“You know, there’s another door to this place.”

She pointed to a wall covered in wonky frames. Brittany cocked her head, confused.

“There?”

“Yeah. I saw Courtney using it the other day. It’s like, hidden in the design of the wood, I think.”

“You’re kidding.”

Brittany got up and walked over, searching the wallpaper. “Where...”

“I don’t know. I can show you outside, but it’s all camouflaged. The way the wood is...”

“Huh.” Brittany scratched her neck. “That’s, like, really weird.”

Kenny shrugged.

“I mean, is it?”

Brittany studied her, giving Kenny the chance to do the same. Brittany, she realized, was pretty. Though her thin ponytail and forehead sweat had thrown Kenny off the trail, she actually had striking grey eyes. Tia would have hated her for being hot with a birthmark like that. It was something few could pull off, but Brittany had the cheekbones, or maybe just the confidence, Kenny figured. She didn't know if Brittany was truly confident, or if the confidence was an act, or if everyone was confident, or everyone was acting. Was she the only one obsessing over the details of their performances? Probably.

She looked away, reaching for water. Brittany waited for her to finish and tipped her chin to the wall.

"See that girl with the birthday cake?"

Kenny looked at the photo, the fat pink flowers illustrating the little girl's cheeks. She had clear eyebrows, white-blond hair, and grey irises.

"Wait, is that you?"

Brittany nodded, smiling in an embarrassed way. She leaned against the desk.

"This is my *favorite* place." Her eyes stayed on the photograph, holding it fiercely.

Kenny was impressed. All the other pictures in Courtney's office were big groups.

"So you're, like, the princess of SL."

Brittany snorted, wiped her eyes, and grinned.

"You could say that. I mean, my parents work for the company and stuff. But it's...I don't know." Whatever had just come over Brittany left behind a glinting warmth. In the glow of Brittany's gaze, Kenny felt her chest loosen. "This place...it really knows me. You know?"

She did, now. She had been to the treehouse.

She knew this moment wouldn't come again. She wouldn't be alone in this place with Brittany again. She wouldn't be chosen for another conversation like this. Brittany and Megan had some sort of sisterly chemistry and, more than that, Kenny was used to being passed over. She knew how these things went. These things—these currents, the flow of her own life, a motion that swept her into a place she hated.

Fuck it. Kenny bit her tongue and made a decision.

“There was this thing,” she said, “up there.”

She described wings the size of dinner plates, its shivering body and unbelievable glow. She did not describe her visions or the girl in them, but what she did share was enough to grip Brittany's eyes and keep her from blinking. In fact, from the moment she started, Brittany hadn't moved at all. Actually, she seemed terrified, Kenny thought. Had she gone too far?

“Sorry, was I...are you good?”

Brittany laughed and shook her head, incredulous. The testimony seemed to have unlocked something in her.

“Yeah. Sorry. No, I'm good. I just realized. I gotta show you something. How would you feel about getting up kind of early?”

This question cracked Kenny like a glowstick. She hadn't known she was waiting for it.

“Sure.” She lit up. All her bones awoke, and all of them hurt.