

THE THEM

by

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

The Them

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My first novel is about Agnes, a 10-year-old girl who is a compulsive liar. The story is set in New Hampshire at an elite overnight summer camp. Agnes is haunted by a life at home with her autistic brother, emotionally absent father and aggressively unhappy mother, but she believes that camp will give her an opportunity to recreate herself. Unfortunately, the person she would like to become is her counselor, Ari, an unhinged sexually promiscuous 17-year-old girl on the verge of making some very large mistakes.

Inimitable, hopelessly hopeful, angry and abandoned and yearning for love, Agnes can be seen as an amalgam of characters like Carson McCuller's Frankie in The Member of the Wedding, Louis Fitzhugh's Harriet in Harriet the Spy, and Arundhati Roy's Rahel in The God of Small Things.

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Chapter 1: The New

I walked along the wooden floor and looked at the pictures that the other campers had taped to the walls near their beds. Their families seemed better than mine, taller, more sure of themselves and posed like the covers of catalogs. Their friends seemed dazzling, trios and quads of 11-year-old girls with their arms slung possessively around each other, beaming towards the camera. I traced my fingers down the face of someone I didn't know and wished it was me.

My parents had left only minutes ago and I was alone and the cabin felt large and confining. I wasn't angry at my parents for leaving me at summer camp, but I was angry at them for not preparing me for how it would feel. I had thought they could prepare me for anything. The white and blue uniforms, starched and ungainly, made me itch. The too thin mattress on the two high top-bunk, how was I supposed to call that mine?

My mother helped me put the blue sheets on my bed. I had never put sheets on a bed before. She tugged impatiently at the mattress pad while I struggled. We put the pillow cases on the pillows. I taped two pictures to the wall. And then they left.

It wasn't that I was going to cry but I thought I might need to do something when I heard the sounds of sneakers climbing the steps up to the front door. I froze in the middle of the room. I had seen their pictures, but up close, when they streamed through the door, I couldn't concentrate. The room became suddenly full as my bunkmates entered. It was as if 20 girls had come in, instead of three. The door smashed behind them, a loud clang like a shotgun.

They were dressed exactly like me, but besides that we had nothing in common because they were smiling and I felt like I wanted to go transparent.

The girl in the lead was obviously the blond one, who stood apart and forward, leering at me.

“Hello,” she said. It seemed like she was wary I might bite.

She was angular, thin almost to the point of vulnerability. Looking back on it, I realize that what kept her from looking weak was that she and all of the others had that deep healthy glow which having rich parents gives to children. She had the expressive blue eyes of a young girl who is rarely told she is wrong.

“I’m Kate,” she said, putting a hand out for me like women do over cocktails.

I put my hand in hers and she did the shaking.

“I’m below you,” said another girl with a too large nose. She had dark brown hair and big eyes, but it was her nose that was captivating. I imagined that she would have liked to have gone through her life with her hand over her face, subtly, as though she were just about to yawn. Her name was Johanna.

“How do you like the place?” Johanna asked softly.

“It’s great,” I told them too enthusiastically. “I love my top bunk.”

The thing about top bunks is that you are more likely to die from falling out of a bunk bed than from being hit by lightning. That’s a fact.

“Nina used to sleep there,” said Kate and I was instantly aware of how un-Nina I was. I saw them looking at me in the same way I saw myself. Not Nina. We all looked up at the bed where my new blankets were. They were probably the ugliest blankets ever. Blue and bland and boring. Somehow I imagined that Nina’s blankets were fuchsia.

“We’re going the whole 8 weeks,” said Kate. “It’s been simply lovely.”

I wondered what kind of girls I had been friends with before. My friends never talked like this. Simply lovely?

“Have you met Ari?” asked Johanna.

I shook my head.

“She’s our counselor. You’ll just love her,” Kate said.

“We love her,” Johanna added.

I wondered if Kate and Johanna were really my age. They didn’t look older than me, but they acted like adults. I felt myself shrinking.

The last girl introduced herself as Margarite. She was small and tan, like a warm baby mouse. “Have you seen the lake?” she asked.

My parents and I had passed the lake in our car ride to the cabin. My mother had said, “What a pretty lake!” while my father didn’t look and I had stared, putting my hand up to the window of the car to touch the glass that housed the lake.

My mother had told me to be good. But the good she intended me to be was unclear. Good was sometimes one thing and sometimes its opposite. Good was playing

with my brother and also letting him be, spinning circles in the front yard. Good was going away from my parents and letting them breathe. Good was staying close and never leaving. The lake was gray and long, unhurried, shining.

I shook my head. I hadn't really seen what the lake was yet.

"We'll take you before dinner," Kate said, Mother Hubbard style.

Johanna nodded along with Kate, having decided that being my infinitely more well-informed tour guides would be more fun than being my enemy. At least thus far. It felt nice, but also damning. It wasn't worth their time, I could see, to turn from me. I'd never been the sort to rouse jealousy.

"Do you hear her whistle?" Margarite asked, and we all froze to listen. And when I heard the sound it was like the kinds of birds that don't exist yet. Ari was coming.

Chapter 2. Ari.

The first thing you noticed about Ari was her red hair. The second thing you noticed was her dark fiercely dazzling eyes that took in rather than gave out energy. She was tall to us, but she probably wasn't that tall. She was beautiful to us, but she probably looked the way most young people look when they are the verge of becoming themselves, enamored of the deftness of their movements, enticed by their own burgeoning wherewithal.

Ari's whistle stopped when she hit the steps, and she strolled into the cabin without saying a word. Her every-hued bracelets shackling her wrists shuddered as she walked. Her legs were long and pale white. She had a smattering of freckles and lean lips and those eyes.

She took us all in collectively. I could see that she registered something like: these are my campers, and then she walked to her bed, the only one that wasn't a bunk-bed, and plopped herself Indian style.

I wasn't sure if she noticed that there was a new person in the room. Perhaps she thought I was Nina. There was a part of me that wished she would. Even if Ari wasn't interested by me, that wasn't a problem. I knew that anyone who was older wasn't very interested in anyone who was younger. And I was interested enough for the both of us.

There was silence then where I'm not sure if anyone knew what to say. Ari was looking off in a direction that wasn't exactly at us, but wasn't exactly not at us. She sat as erect as a statue or a queen.

"Our new girl is here," said Kate.

Ari nodded her head like she had known all the time and that was what her dark eyes had been brooding on.

"Well, who are you?" she asked.

She made me think of the caterpillar in Alice in Wonderland, blowing smoke rings in contemplation. To be honest, I wasn't sure if she was asking what my name was, or something much more.

"Agnes," I told her and her lips folded up. It wasn't a frown, per se. But.

I thought maybe I'd answered the wrong question.

"Agnes," she repeated with distaste. It was like I'd hurt her feelings.

"Agnes Greenblatt," I told her. I wanted to tell her that I was sorry. Though the name had only been something I hadn't liked before, now I loathed it and by consequence my parents for branding me in this way.

"Agnes Greenblatt," she said, looking me up and down. If someone could put you inside a box and slam the lid down and you were stuck in there, that was how I felt. Before I had imagined that being in a box, like I Dream of Jeannie in her bottle with all

those pillows and soft places to sleep, would be very nice. Well, the fact is that now I realized how much a bottle with pillows is like a coffin.

“Where are you from?” Ari asked.

“Philadelphia,” I said, which, though it didn’t seem to make matters worse, did not alleviate the expression on her face.

“Agnes Greenblatt from Philadelphia,” she said and looked away. I could see in a moment that I would lose her attention. I supposed I was lucky to have gotten this much. But I wanted more.

“I’m from the town where, where they have a strawberry festival every year,” I blurted, unsure of my voice and the way the cabin made it travel and seem to be asserting itself.

Ari cocked her head.

“We crown the strawberry king and the strawberry queen and the strawberry baby who we dress up like a strawberry. The most beautiful man and woman and baby get the titles and they usually go on to be in movies. But we also, we also do this thing where we grow the biggest strawberry in the United States, but maybe the world.”

Kate said, “How big’s the biggest?”

I knew it was a challenge so I sucked in air.

“The biggest strawberry I ever saw was 4 tons. And the seeds were the size of watermelons.”

“Watermelon seeds?” Kate asked.

“Watermelon watermelons,” I said.

The girls gaped, and that was when Ari smiled. It was a small smile but it was like the rain stopped pounding on tin.

I didn’t know why I said what I said. Maybe it was Ari’s hair which reminded me of strawberries. But I couldn’t stop.

“My parents sell the old pottery that we dig up in my backyard,” I continued. “We live in a house that’s so old, that we can dig up whole dinner sets. After school I help them. I run home and we get to digging and we go until night comes or we’ve found something real great. When I found a gold bracelet my parents let me sell it and an old lady bought it for 8,000 dollars.”

Ari was grinning now and so we were all grinning, me the most. After school I did my homework while my mother vacuumed what the maid had missed and my father sat in his study smoking a cigar. But I realized that I could be the girl who mined treasures in her backyard, or anyone I could imagine, as long as I held my ground and Ari believed it.

“All right,” Ari said. “Agnes.”

Chapter 3 What We Know

As we headed down to the lake Ari led the way. She pointed out the buildings where different activities occurred in a languid way. She seemed more interested in watching herself point out the various buildings and baseball diamonds and tennis courts than she did in their actual existence.

“Do you like basketball?” she asked me as we walked by the gymnasium which she had lifted her white wrist to show me.

I didn’t know what the right answer was so I said that I did like basketball. I wanted to be more eager than less, because I imagined that would make me more likeable than less. Half walking half running to keep up with everyone, I felt like a terrier on a lease.

“Oh, you like basketball,” said Ari without a hint of inflection.

There was a moment of silence and then Kate said, “No one here plays basketball except the lesbians.”

“Personally,” said Ari, “I’m not very good at basketball. I haven’t got the best coordination.”

“Neither do I,” said Johanna with dedication.

We kept walking. As we headed farther from our cabin the dirt roads were dry and the dust rose up around our feet. The tangled roots of trees were everywhere and

waiting to trip us, or maybe just me. The fact is, you can measure how tall a tree is by measuring how long its roots are because trees also grow sideways.

“What about lacrosse?” Ari asked.

“What about it?”

“This is the lacrosse field. Do you like to play lacrosse?”

“No,” I told her. “I don’t.”

There was a moment of silence and then Kate said, “Everyone here is super into lacrosse.”

I kept walking but felt myself becoming more red than less.

“Do you like to read?” Ari asked me.

But I knew the right answer to that one.

“I love to read,” I told her.

Ari stopped in her tracks, and we all stopped too, suddenly, nearly bumping into each other in our clumsiness.

“Personally, and in all honesty,” Ari said, putting her finger to the tip of her lip in contemplation, “I’m simply terrible at reading. I’m probably a worse reader than you are. And you’re eleven.”

“I’m ten,” I told her.

“So I don’t read a lot,” Ari said. “It makes my head hurt.”

I hadn't imagined upon meeting her that there was a thing I could do better than Ari. But I had just finished *War and Peace*, and even without asking, I knew that she hadn't and probably never would. In my world, being an avid reader meant that your father paid attention to you. That was the only reason he had tolerated my brother—because they could spar their facts back and forth like swords over the dinner table. If you weren't good at the things that your parents liked, like reading and vacuuming, then you weren't what your parents liked, either. But, the thing about this place, I was beginning to realize, is that the rules had changed.

"They almost threw me out of school," said Ari. "But I showed them I had other skills."

Ari began walking again and so we all did. She was looking up at the sky. I thought to myself how Ari didn't look at anyone in the eye for more than a moment. She made you want her so much to look you in the eye that it hurt.

"I like to ride horses," Kate told me. "The stables are over past this field, but you have to pay extra to ride horses. Did you schedule ahead of time for your parents to pay extra so that you can ride horses?"

I said that I didn't think I had.

"I don't ride horses either," said Margarite.

"Kate is better at riding than most of the other girls," Johanna told us proudly.

"It's true," said Kate modestly.

We were going downhill at this point on our way to the bottom of the camp where the mess hall sat staring at the lake.

“The food here is disgusting,” said Ari, to me, I think, even though I was now trailing behind her, no longer really in her wake. I imagined it was to me, because I imagined that the other girls already knew what she thought about the food. I imagined that they knew a lot about what she thought about a lot of things.

Even if Ari didn’t think she was very smart, she did intrigue herself, watching herself in the mirror in the bathroom with a sort of fascination. What I liked most about her, as I came to know Ari, was that, unlike other people I had known or watched who were older than me, Ari owned up to what she considered to be her failings. Most older people I knew would never have admitted to any failings. By admitting that she wasn’t perfect, in my eyes, she became so.

Because, to me, anything she thought she was insufficient at seemed to be unimportant. Yet how intriguing that my reading level placed me miles ahead of she who was miles ahead of me. It was like we had gotten switched up somehow. Though, of course, if Ari wasn’t good at reading, then wasn’t reading sort of worthless to be good at? A bird’s leg scratching over paper. My brother would lose himself in the written world and never return. My father would hide away in his study. Reading only took you further from the people you knew. Like I knew each sticky square of my sidewalk back home, and it was a foreign and unnecessary land to her, it seemed that the things I knew which she did not suddenly didn’t matter in the slightest.

Chapter 4: The Lake.

Swim time was every day, rain or shine. If you sailed, waterskied or canoed you'd spend most of your day on the lake. The lake was a meeting place, a departing point. The flagpole which we saluted every morning and sang to every evening was situated so that we would watch the ripples of the water mirror those of the flag in the wind.

We'd stand on the platforms of corrugated steel that moved with the lazy lappings of the lake on a good day, and swayed like a breaking amusement park ride on any day where the breeze wasn't limping. And then we'd jump into the lake, deep, submerging ourselves in such coldness hidden under the warm top layer. Deeper down was dark, even with eyes open, a murky wasteland, uninhabited except by the surging murk and plant life that, when touched by accident with a bit of the foot, felt like eels, quivering.

My first night on the top of my bunk bed was like the bottom of the lake I didn't know yet. I tossed and turned, each of my movements disturbing the bed, making Johanna and I shake with my fears.

"Are you OK?" she asked me in the dark. I had imagined that everyone was asleep. The sound of the walls of the cabin were the sounds of people hidden in the walls of the cabin, trying to get out, asking if I was OK. At first I didn't know it was her and thought it was the walls speaking to me.

"Agnes," she said again, "what's wrong?"

I suddenly realized who it was.

“I’m sorry,” I said.

“It’s fine,” she said. “I just want to know if you’re OK. You’re shaking me. I can’t sleep.” She paused and added, “I’m not angry though.”

I wanted to get down from my bed and tell Johanna that I loved her for not being angry and for telling me so. I had always imagined so much anger in people not telling me.

“It’s just so new,” I whispered down to her. “I’ll stop moving now,” I said.

And then I did. I didn’t move for hours of waiting and I thought about adding up numbers and about how earthquakes kill people. I was an earthquake on the top, trying to not make a rumble.

In the morning, on the first day in front of the lake I waited too, an earthquake in my thick blue Speedo bathing suit. My stomach was rounded from my body and so were the two points on my chest. My breasts were larger than I liked, preposterously situated, emerging from me. Each time I saw them I was newly surprised. What they were doing on my body seemed like an imposition and a rude trick.

When Kate asked Ari why mine were bigger than anyone else’s in the bunk, Ari told her it was because of all the pudding I ate. Which made me attest that I would never eat pudding again, but Ari slapped her own chest and said she was going to start gorging.

That first day as I stood and waited on the metal buoys that quaked beneath me I wanted to be submerged. I wanted to be called into the water. I thought there might be

some formal roll call, some check list that I would have to pass before admission into the lake which was freezing dark cold and unbearably alien deep on down.

“You can swim, right?” asked a tall woman who was the swimming instructor or the lifeguard. She stood beside me and surveyed the campers in the water.

“Yes,” I told her.

She looked at me and then she looked down into the lake where everyone else was half under, their heads bobbing and sinking, emerging and submerging again.

“I’m embarrassed,” I told the instructor.

“Of what?” she asked.

I pointed to myself.

“Then the best thing to do is jump,” she said.

I nodded my head.

“You can swim, right?” she asked again.

“Yes,” I said and she pushed me hard so I went sprawling and belly-flopped into the lake, swallowing it whole.

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Chapter 5-- Flags

How I loved Ari, especially in the morning, when we stood as a bunk in front of the flagpole and she was ours, clucking over us like spoiled chicken seed while re-braiding my wet tangled hair into pig tails in the warming air.

I didn't mind that Ari usually re-braided my hair and sometimes I would do it messy on purpose so that she would fix me as we all waited, standing, for the girls who were lucky enough to unfold the flag and hoist it with their armpits to the sky. The way her fingers played through my hair made me imagine that she was a lost sister of mine and that we were intimately connected. I sometimes thought that maybe we were related but just never knew. If I could grow up to be her I could have everything.

The mornings were bugless. There was peace in the silence before we began to sing around the flagpole. I loved it. "Day is Done" was for the night time, but our mornings were begun more patriotically with our hands to our chests. In the morning, we pledged our allegiance to God, but also to ourselves.

The older girls would flap their fingers over the bones above their breasts. I stood stock still and watched the sun rise against the rising of the American flag, that very flat piece of something that seemed strong and thin and never fully explained. I thought that the hoisting of the flag was the hoisting of ourselves, steadily up as the day progressed, then down for the ending and the sleep of night. I knew that Ari thought the flag raising and lowering was something to get through. She would look off into the tree line or out across the lake. But for me, who had grown up without any sense of patriotism or God

either, I loved pledging myself to some sort of Lord who I began to confuse with the gold embossed bald eagle at the foot of the flagpole.

I wondered why I hadn't been encouraged to kneel down at the foot of something other than my parents earlier.

On the third day of camp I had wandered down to the mess hall early, before the bugles' blast, when the colors of the sky were beginning to lose their glow in the July heat, and the pale lake lay like the shell of a boiled clam. Walking down to the lake through the empty rutted dirt tracks felt like a great alone contentment. I imagined that I was the only one left on earth and how terrifyingly wonderful it felt. The trees are taller when you're alone and they seem to have things to tell you.

But when I arrived at the flagpole there were three older girls standing there slack kneed and uncomfortable.

"Come on girls, get it together," came the booming voice of the lacrosse coach/mast of flag activities, clapping her hands. I hadn't known two hands could make such noise.

I knew who the lacrosse coach was like I knew who each of the other counselors were, mostly from the way they looked. Like the sailing coach looked wind-swept, hardy, with vaguely damp hair that came from the spray of the boat cutting through waves, and the equestrian instructor looked like a horse, the lacrosse coach looked like she had just gotten done hurling balls at the legs and torsos of young people whose only protection was a long handled butterfly net.

As far as I could tell the sport of lacrosse consisted of carrying these sticks and then hurling baseballs at each other. One of the goalies, Sandy, a year older than me and in the cabin next door to us, had rings of yellow and green bruises on her legs, stomach and arms which we could see in all their glory up against the milk white translucence of her skin as she donned her bathing suit and flip flopped down to the shore when swim time came. She would hop skip down to the lake and, walking behind her, I would watch her bruises hop skip too, clinging to the sinews in her skin. Once I did indicate to her a show of clandestine collusion with a meaningful glance at a particularly swelling black and green bruise on her shoulder. She looked at me doubtfully.

“What?” Sandy pushed her hair behind her ears and looked at me with her hard black eyes.

I didn't have the courage to explain the things about her bruises that I understood. I wanted to tell her that I knew why she stood in the middle of the goal and allowed herself to be hit with balls thwacked straight at her most vulnerable parts by the giant older girls whose malicious intent was to win inside the parentheses of pain causing. I wanted to tell her she wasn't alone.

Sandy saw where I was looking and touched, slowly and deeply the bruise on her shoulder. Her two fingers pushed into her skin at first softly and then with the kind of earnest pressure which is a child mining her fingers deep into a jar of peanut butter. She watched me as she did this and she smiled and I turned away.

But, when the lacrosse coach noticed me watching the girls in front of the flag that day, and then noticed an absent member on her flag folding crew, she turned to me and pointed her thick finger.

“You!” she said. “I bet you’re not an idiot,” and I skipped over excitedly to the group.

I was still at that point in my life where I thought that any opportunity that came my way was coming my way in order to be the time of my life. And I would hold this thought pretty much up until the exact moment where I was engaging in the opportunity, at which point, like in the moment poised above the lake or taking the first swing at the tennis ball that seemed to leer intentionally away from my racquet, I became dazed with fear and realized I was not up to the challenge.

Folding a flag is a time worn tradition I’ve come to learn, but at the time when the lacrosse coach was barking at me and flexing her muscles in what seemed to be a threat of violence in my direction, I assumed that the particularly odd and awkward rules of flag folding were created by the lacrosse coach for the sole purpose of trying to make me cry.

“Not that way!” she ejaculated with red fists in her cheeks as I tried to fold the flag into a square.

“You stupid dolt!” she trunchbulled, physically moving my feet in the opposite direction, then forcing her arms down on my shoulders to hold me still.

“If you drop even one corner,” she said, “you will be executed for treason.”

I looked to the older girls who were holding the flag with me. They looked bored and uninterested in her threats so I pretended that I, too, was not scared of being executed for treason.

But, it wasn't long before the flag folding was choreographed around me, so that when the time came and the music blared from the speakers and the campers lined up that night to sing God is Nigh, I remained still while the other girls dance-walked in order that I remain so. I was allowed to hold a bit of the edge of the flag while this was going on, and was actually proud to do so. I was the youngest one up there and I was touching the flag, after all. I looked to see if Ari saw me and I saw that she wasn't not seeing me. She was there, but I didn't seem to matter much to her. I was always being surprised that what mattered to me wasn't of equal weight to everyone else.

At the end of the folding and tessellating of the triangles, the song died out and the flag ended up in the shape of an overstuffed spanicopita. It also ended up in my shaking hands, where it sat on my palms as though I were a waitress on her first day carrying a tray she was about to drop.

I wasn't supposed to end up with the flag, which I immediately began sweating on. I could feel my sweat seeping into the cloth and I began to imagine that that in itself was treason. I felt sick to my stomach, and none of the girls moved to help.

The problem wasn't just that I was worried about dropping the flag in front of everyone and embarrassing myself, nor was it that I didn't have any idea where the flag was supposed to go (which was true), nor was it that I mostly believed the lacrosse coach's threats. The problem was that I began to have to pee. The fact is, when a person

gets nervous they are seven times more likely to need to urinate than when they are just going about their business without being frightened. And I knew one thing more. If I peed my pants in front of the entire camp on my third day of overnight camp, I would literally tie cement blocks to my ankles and wade out into the lake.

Luckily, the lacrosse coach came to my rescue, huffing and puffing, she strode into the center where I stood with the flag and she grabbed it from me and stuffed it, rather indecorously I thought, into a box at the foot of the flagpole.

“You can go now,” she said to me, and I withered under her tone, but I did not pee. And I made it back to the cabin in time. And no one even said anything about how bad a job I had done, except that Ari said I looked a bit like a drowned rat. Which, the thing was, luckily I didn’t have to be.

Chapter 6 The Clown and His Dog

Two nights later, after the flag was lowered and we had eaten dinner, it was a bunk night. Bunk nights were the best nights because the four of us had Ari all to ourselves. They were also the best nights because Ari was in charge, and she would always come up with adventures.

That night Ari lugged a backpack and we followed her out to a slope of grass way past the cabins where I had never been before. As we walked Margarite grabbed both of my hands in hers.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

“It’s swing,” she said, and bumped her stomach into mine, then pulled out again, still holding my hands. “Follow me,” she said, and I tried to follow her movements and the way she pulled and twisted me which sent me reeling back into and out of her arms.

“I’m not sure I get it,” I said.

“Watch me and Kate,” Margarite said, and chose a new partner. I watched the two of them meet and distance themselves, get close and fall away. I watched them turn and twirl, beaming and singing as they went.

“You’ve never swung danced?” Kate asked me after Margarite had swirled her out and she was gasping for air and laughing into the wind.

I shook my head.

“It’s the best,” Kate said.

“Come on, girls,” we heard Ari call, and Margarite and I who had just grasped hands to try it again, let go and headed off to follow our counselor.

“My mom taught me how to dance,” Margarite told me, as we hurried towards Ari.

“You’re good,” I said.

“Thanks,” she said. “My mother is very beautiful.”

I could tell that Margarite, who was still thin limbed and small, would be a woman like her mother one day, but I could only or maybe especially see it when she was dancing, with her eyes closed.

When Ari found us all a spot she approved of it was way out, just where the well-tended grass began to go ragged and join the forest beyond. She opened her backpack and dropped a load of sticks onto the ground.

“There you go,” she said.

The three others got to work, shaping the sticks and branches into the shape of a small teepee while Ari played with a long red lighter, clicking it on and then off and then on again. Each time she clicked it on, our heads would all turn and we would watch the flame rise.

Then she lit the kindling and presto. The blaze did not begin small. It was suddenly huge and very warm.

Ari divvied out the marshmallows and chocolate and graham crackers and when she whacked her leg with her hand and chastised herself for forgetting skewers for our marshmallows, Johanna suggested using branches.

“Sure,” said Ari. “Nature to nature.”

So we dashed across the grass to find the perfect long twig and then ran back so that we could be there, while we burned our marshmallows black in the fire, for Ari’s ghost story.

“I’m assuming that’s what you all want,” said Ari. “You’re done with dancing?”

“Yes,” we clamored. We wanted a ghost story. The night was the perfect almost dark for it.

“You’re sure?” Ari asked us, smiling.

“Yes,” we told her in unison.

“This kind of weather makes me feel like getting the chills,” said Ari. “But we’re going to have to give each other the chills, OK? Which means none of us can know how it’ll all turn out. We have to let the ghost story be true, which means it has to come to us.”

Kate and Johanna and Margarite all nodded their heads like they understood, so I did too.

“It all began many years ago, but right here, at our camp. This story is about a clown who worked here after his traveling circus went broke because everyone started watching too much TV.”

Johanna shook her head like: what a shame the world is.

“The clown was hired to work here as a chef and he could make the most delicious meals that would always be such a surprise to the campers, because they’d start out as one thing and then poof, they’d be something else.”

We nodded and settled in to listen.

“The clown was never without his huge red nose, his white pancake makeup, and two large squeaky shoes. He could play the piccolo, too. And after he cooked for all the campers, he would do an awesome trick where he would light himself on fire so that you’d think he was burning alive.” As the night darkened more deeply we watched her face glow in the half light.

“And all the campers loved him, because as he burned he would shriek, and then he would disappear, and even though everyone had seen it a hundred times before, each time everyone thought he had died. But he would always come back through the side door and then what had been terrible would turn out just to be a big joke.”

Then Ari looked at Kate. “Your turn,” she said.

Kate paused and wipe her mouth which had chocolate melted on the side of it.

“I don’t want to go first,” Kate said.

“You’re not going first,” Ari said. “I did. Didn’t you hear me? You’re just the first to add on.”

“Well,” said Kate, turning her eyes to the fire and thinking deeply. “The clown had a little dog. Who always followed him around. Eveywhere. And the dog’s name was Morris.”

Kate wasn’t extremely imaginative, because all of us knew that she had a cocker spaniel at home that she named Morris. There was a picture of him taped to the wall by her bed. But we were happy to have Morris join the story, and imagined him prancing around our campgrounds, barking at the morning doves who lighted by the lake.

“Morris would do tricks with the clown who loved him and all the campers wanted to babysit Morris all the time,” Kate continued.

“OK,” said Ari. “My turn again. Morris the cocker spaniel was being babysat by a cabin of 11 year old girls who thought it would be fun to give him a haircut to surprise the Clown. So they snipped here and snipped there, and as they were going to cut off a bit of the hair on the top of his head Morris thought he heard something and moved to bark at it and the girl holding the scissors accidentally snipped off his head.”

We all gasped and I thought that Ari was expecting us to believe these campers had some very big scissors. But I was excited when she turned to me.

“Agnes,” she said. “What happened next?”

“So, the girls in the cabin,” I said, “they were all terrified because the dog was dead, and there was blood everywhere, and the clown was planning on picking up the dog in an hour, so they did the only thing they could think of.”

And I paused while my bunkmates watched me and Ari looked on.

“What was the only thing they could think of?” asked Ari.

“They decided to cook him into a Mexican Casserole,” I said. “But first they had to cut him up into little tiny pieces.” And always the pragmatist, I added, “and their counselor helped of course because she had an axe.”

Ari smiled. “Margarite.”

“So they all cut him up with the axe and it was blood, like, blood everywhere.”

“Yes,” said Ari, “and beans too, and sour cream, and what else goes into a Mexican Casserole?”

“Tortilla chips and cocker spaniel,” Margarite said, and Ari laughed so hard that we all started to laugh too even though it wasn’t funny in the way that laughing at something feels good. Kate looked pale and unhappy but she was laughing along with the rest of us.

“Johanna, what happened when the Clown arrived to pick up his dog?”

“They said he escaped.”

“And then what?”

“The Clown went looking for him.”

“And then what?”

“Well, of course no one could find him.”

“So,” said Ari, “they went back to the cabin and the Clown said that the search had made him very hungry, and he asked may I try some of that casserole.”

And even though we had all probably known that the clown was bound to eat the casserole, that there was nothing that could happen but that the clown would eat his own beloved dog, when Ari said it it felt like something had gone out of the fire and the night got colder and darker.

“So, the campers didn’t know what else to do but serve the Clown a heaping dish, and he ate it all clean. And then he asked for more, and he finished that plate, too.”

I stared down at the ground around the campfire. The grass was prickly where my legs were bare, and I felt lonely suddenly, like I wanted my parents and my brother. I wanted it not to be dark, and I wanted not to be where I was, an otherworldly sensation I felt from time to time, when the wrongedness and misplacedness would happen upon me in an overwhelming fashion.

No one said anything, so Ari continued.

“And when the Clown had finished the entire casserole, he thanked the girls and their counselor and he left. Only that night he felt very sick, and as he was getting ready for bed he vomited all over the floor and in his vomit he found Morris’ dog tags and he realized what he had been served.”

“This story isn’t funny,” said Johanna.

“We’re at a campfire,” said Ari. “So it’s not supposed to be funny.” When she said it she didn’t look as nice as she usually did.

“So the Clown realized he had eaten the one creature on earth he loved and he vowed to kill not just the girls in the cabin but every single camper at our camp, at a rate of one a week, every summer, for the rest of his life.”

Margarite shivered so we could all see her shiver but she didn't say anything so we looked back at Ari.

“So, every night, he walks around the campgrounds, whistling, whistling for his dog and wearing his squeaking shoes. But he's just waiting for the campers to go to sleep so that he can come in and cut off their heads and then chop them into little pieces and feed them to their friends.”

No one said anything but I felt sick. It was odd, because even though I had helped make this story, and even though I knew, as a story, especially a campfire one, that it was fake and based on the untruths I had grown well-versed in uttering, I still felt personally stung and that wasn't the first time I've asked myself what the thrill is in making yourself scared.

That night, as we headed back to the cabin, I could have sworn I heard the Clown walking through the trees behind us, and he was there, lurking in the kitchen with a sharp cleaver in my fantasies, somewhere behind the staff door in the mess hall, ready to strike as I lay in bed.

When, in the middle of the night, too frightened to sleep, I high-tailed it to where I saw a light on in the bathroom I came upon Johanna.

She smiled wanly when she saw me and, patting me on the shoulder, said, “Don’t worry. Ari’s stories aren’t as scary once you make it through the night.”

“So you feel better in the morning?” I asked.

“You feel as better as you can,” she said.

Chapter 7: What It's Like to Be a Guy

When audition sign ups were passed around the mess hall the next morning our cabin wasn't eating, but Margarite and I did sign our names to try out for Grease.

I operated under the illusion, having been told by my parents that I was infinitely amazing in all (unspecified) things, that I was meant to star on the stage. The play's director thought otherwise, however, and when the cast list went up, because anyone who tried out was given a part, I was relegated to the part of Back Up Chorus (male). This meant that when Danny sang his song about all the dirty things he pretended to do to Sandy, I had to act really excited and say "uh huh uh huh uh huh" like a slobbering wolf hound, but it also meant that I got to learn the choreography to "Greased Lightening."

When I dejectedly told Ari about my role she thought it was great. She actually clapped her hands together in anticipation.

"I can teach you all about being a guy," she said. "Lord knows I've known guys."

Margarite and I had come back from our sailing class and I had gotten changed out of my wet bathing suit secretly in a stall in the bathroom. Now dry but still feeling wet, I was looking for my tennis racquet.

"First of all," Ari said to me, "all guys only want one thing."

"What's that?" I asked.

"A port in a storm."

She ruffled through her trunk for a while and then shrugged her shoulders at Margarite and I.

“I had this great tape about it, but whatever. It’s a song about how men are on the sea, and they’re sailing, they’re sailors. And they are trying to find a place to land because the waves are about to tear their ships to pieces and they are afraid they might die. And then they land, and they’re safe, but they only spend the night because in the morning the water looks so beautiful. And they have to go back to the water. They just have to. And they leave all that was safe behind.”

“Oh,” I said.

“Do you get it?” Ari asked me.

“Sort of,” I said. I pictured the men being buffeted by drenching downpours and terrified that they might die.

“It’s actually pretty sad,” Ari said.

“It is sad,” I said. I pictured a man going overboard in the terrible waves, how his arms are going up for help and they throw him a life preserver but it’s too late and he sinks down and there is only the rain and his friends are trying to find him in the water but they can only see the waves and the lighthouse but it’s too far away. And no one can tell that anyone else is crying, none of them know, because of the rain.

Ari said, “I’m sorry I can’t find the song for you. It’s a beautiful sad song. It’s one of my favorites.”

“So I want a port in a storm,” I said.

Margarite was sitting on her bed listening to our conversation. I had stopped looking for my tennis racquet as soon as Ari started talking.

“If you’re a guy, yes. You want to get laid.”

“I want,” I said, but couldn’t complete the sentence. “I thought,” I said.

“It’s like a metaphor, don’t you get it smarty-pants?” Ari said not exactly nicely.

“Oh, yes, I get it,” I said.

“I’m in the chorus as a girl,” said Margarite.

Ari put her finger on her lip and tapped it a couple of times as though she were being very contemplative.

“Girls on the other hand,” Ari said, “all they want to do is keep from getting laid because they don’t know how great it is. Girls are blindfolded and men are monsters. Well, most of them anyway. Except for Rob.”

“I can’t find my tennis racquet,” I said, trying to stop from picturing under-water monsters, terrible creatures with thousands of searching tentacles.

Ari shrugged her shoulders as if to say that that was not part of her job description so I asked her a question that she might know the answer to.

“What does any port in a storm mean?” I asked.

“It’s warm and soft and safe, and better than nothing,” said Ari. “but don’t think women don’t go for their ports, too. My mother for example.” And Ari put her palm over her head and lay back down on her bed.

“Are you OK?” Margarite asked her, getting up to check.

“I guess I’m sick right now,” said Ari. “You need to get to your next class, anyway.”

Margarite looked at me and I looked at her and I didn’t know what she was thinking. It was a bright and beautiful day outside. So Margarite and I left the cabin where Ari lay. I went to the tennis courts without my racquet and because no one had an extra one, I watched the girls waft balls to each other across the net and held my knees, thinking about storms.

Chapter 8: Sailing Away

After a week and a half of learning about the different parts of the sailboat and different techniques of sailing, after taking written tests and then sailing with and assisting the instructor, Margarite and I were finally ready to take a Sunfish out on very own. There were six other girls in the class of varying skills, but the two of us were going to embark on our solo trip on Sunfish # 3, named in pink swirl “The LandLubber.”

Margarite was a better swimmer than me, and when we jumped in the water to swim out to the boat she made it first, skimming through the green lake like a seal. From the water I watched her push herself up onto the boat, and put the centerboard in and wait for me. She was there steadying the boat as I scrambled in, keeping the boat from turtling and giving me her warm wet hands for extra help.

As I straddled the side of the boat and heaved myself in, I thought to myself how glad I was to have Margarite. She was good at being quiet when quietness was wanted. But when I wanted to talk, like today, Margarite was good at that, too.

The sailing instructor had helped us un-anchor ourselves after we had raised the boom and let out the sail. I was in charge of holding the jib sheet, which was the easiest task, while Margarite steered and we headed out into the water.

We sat on different sides and the sun was right above us. We could see the lazy trees waving from shore, and the lake was huge and ours.

“Do you think that they cast me as a guy because I look like a man?” I asked Margarite.

She shook her head and laughed in a way that was not at me. I felt so close to her in that moment that I wanted to kiss her hand.

“You look more like a girl than me,” she said. “I’m as flat as a skateboard.”

“But maybe it’s my face,” I asked.

“Your face is fine. You look like a girl. Maybe it’s like, they thought you could act really well, you know. Like, acting a guy is harder than my job. You have to put socks in your shorts and swagger.”

We glided slowly through the lake, letting our fingers play through the top warm of the water.

“Do you think Ari has had sex?” I asked.

“Yes,” Margarite answered without hesitation.

“Should we head back the other way?” I asked, and she nodded and she turned the tiller and we began to arc and I said “Boom!” and we ducked as it swished over our heads and we were sailing again.

“I bet Ari’s even been in love,” said Margarite. “Because she told us a week before you came that there’s a big difference between love and sex and sex is better, I mean love is better.”

“Wait, which one’s better?”

“Love,” said Margarite. “Of course.”

“My brother is autistic so he’ll never be like the guys Ari was talking about,” I said, looking out at the water and purposefully not at Margarite. “He can’t do any of the stuff I do, but then, he also can’t, you know.”

“My uncle has that, I think,” she said.

“He’ll never get married or have sex or be in love,” I said.

“I don’t know,” Margarite said. “Why not?”

“Do you miss your family?” I asked.

“Boom,” she said, and we ducked.

“Well, my father only comes home once a week. And you know, my mom is really busy,” Margarite said.

“Why does your father only come home once a week?”

“He’s really busy, too,” she said.

We watched the water.

“I miss my brother,” I said. “But maybe that’s all.”

“I don’t have a brother,” Margarite said.

I began to think about seeing my father only once a week and I figured that I might not mind it. I wondered if someone would say that my mother was beautiful, and I figured that no, they probably would not. My mother was not beautiful. When I would

think about my mother my face would look different than Margarite's. Her face would look like she was about to eat a sundae. I never felt that way about my mother. She wasn't like a treat. She was careworn and she was tired. She could make doing dishes in the kitchen sink look like torture. No one would take my mother dancing, and I wondered if anyone would want to have sex with her.

"If we go much further we're going to crash into the shore," said Margarite, breaking into my thoughts. I hadn't been paying attention and we were looming closer where the trees and rocks met the lake.

"I've never broken anything," I said.

"Me neither," she said.

We both watched as the boat sailed swiftly closer and closer to the rocks.

I wanted to see what it would be like to crash into the shore line where the plants would embrace us and our boat would crumple against the rocks. I wanted to see what it would be like to be wrong.

Neither of us agreed on it, but we didn't need to say anything. We just kept going, even as we could hear the counselor calling out to us.

We heard her say, "Turn around! Look where you're going!" and we mimed surprise and then attempts to right ourselves, but as the front of our boat hit the bracken of the bushes with a loud grinding crash, we couldn't stop laughing.

Chapter 9. Sandy Tells the Future

It poured the next day and all our out-door activities were canceled. Ari led us in a rousing game of quintuple war, which she won, and then lay on her bed, lazily flipping through one of her teen magazines that, when she was out, would knot our stomachs as we'd peruse them in the bathroom like pornography.

When Ari was quiet it was hard for us to find anything that was worthwhile to say. So I began a letter to my parents on one of the 500 personalized stationary cards they had bought me, while Margarite and Johanna played go fish and Kate went down to the barns at the edge of the camp to care for the horses.

My letter began, as most of my letters did, with a list of things I felt I needed, including nail polish (in Ari's favorite colors) and Pringles which we bartered at our camp in the same way cigarettes were bartered in prison. I then went on to tell my parents about my attempts to stand up on the water skis which I detailed in as vague and satisfied a way as I could muster, given that my myriad endeavors always ended with a mouth full of water and a long embarrassed swim in order to retrieve the skis I'd lost during my face plant. In the letter I made it seem as though I was days away from doing backhanded somersaults while skiing, but I thought that this might indicate to them a child of whom they could be proud. And I still had three weeks left to become her.

A couple hours into our boring rainy day, a girl from the cabin next to us braved the weather to invite us next door to see the circus which they'd created.

Margarite, Johanna and I put on our rain jackets in a flurry, excited to be invited to the older girls' cabin. Ari said she'd stay behind.

We followed the older girl through the rain. The dirt roads that connected all the cabins were now thick with mud and slushed beneath our feet. We made a ruckus in the rain, and the mud sludged up and over our sneakers and in through our socks.

When we arrived at the older girls cabin we discovered it to be in the same shape as ours, the same porch and creaking stairs, the same lay-out of bunk beds, but the older girls had decorated it with colored lights and hanging blankets that shielded off parts of the room and what looked like tin foil stars that hung sparkling and spiraling from the ceiling. It felt like we were walking into our own cabin that had been transformed or maybe stolen from us. I instantly felt uncomfortable, even before it all began.

"Welcome!" said the girl who had invited us. As soon as we'd entered, and dragged our muddied feet on the mat outside, she had donned a riding hat, like Kate had, but here in the cabin it was no longer a riding hat, it was the hat of the ringleader of the circus.

"Welcome one and all," she said to us in a booming voice. "We are so very glad to have you here on this lovely day."

Johanna and Margarite and I nodded some sort of hello back to her.

"We have quite a show for you today, quite a show," said the ringleader. "In this corner, we have our pet rat who was raised by monkeys in the Amazon. He can do all sorts of tricks."

From the left side of the room one of her bunkmates emerged holding up a dark brown rat the size of a bottle of shampoo. She held the rat by its tail, as she advanced towards us. At first I wasn't sure if the rat was alive or dead, or if maybe it was only a stuffed rat, though it looked more real than I thought necessary. But, the girl holding the rat flicked it suddenly and it flew up into the air and then landed on her shoulder.

Johanna screamed once, a small shriek that embarrassed all of us. I wanted to tell Johanna that it was important that we not be scared. Because I was beginning to realize that that was the point.

The rat sat on the girl's shoulder staring at us with what appeared to be red and furious eyes. Then it scampered behind her neck and over to her other shoulder and then down her arm. It moved quickly, almost as though it were sliding, instead of running, and then it jumped off the girl and ran for the other side of the cabin.

"Oops," said the ringleader under her breath.

The rat girl went to chase her pet behind one of the bunk-beds.

"In this corner," continued the ringleader, turning, "through these blankets and hidden, Tanya will show you how she can braid her pubic hair."

I wanted to ask them where their counselor was, but that didn't seem to be part of the rules or the game.

Margarite and Johanna headed for the blankets to look, but I noticed Sandy sitting on the other side of the room and when she saw me looking she motioned me over. I was

glad to avoid seeing anyone braid their pubic hair. I was thinking about Rapunzel and feeling nauseous.

Sandy, the lacrosse goalie, was sitting at a fold-out card table wearing a veil over her long black hair. She had on a long lace dress, dangling earrings and many rings. She was wearing such bright red lipstick that she looked older than herself and also younger, like a girl playing with her grandmother's make up. She was plying her long fingers over a bright white orb that looked like it had once been a snow globe.

"Sit," she commanded, and so I sat down across from her.

"Welcome to my fortune telling booth," she said in stage whisper.

"Thanks," I said, because I couldn't think of anything else to say.

"Did you like the rat?" she asked.

"Yeah," I said.

"I am going to tell your fortune," she said.

"OK."

I heard laughing from the other side of the room, but I stayed focused on Sandy and the way she was spinning her hands over the snow globe. She was making the noises of old women who tell fortunes.

"You come from an unhappy home," she said. "Look, in the living room, I can see your mother crying."

I looked into the globe she was pointing at but I couldn't see anything. I was actually surprised that I couldn't see anything, the way Sandy was peering into it, but then I realized that of course she couldn't see anything, there wasn't anything there.

Sandy made a sad noise with her mouth.

"And now, I am looking at another day in your home," she said peering eerily at the globe, "and your mother is inviting a man in because he is selling insurance and she is asking him to sit down and tell her about it because she is lonely, and she pours him iced tea."

"What does my mother look like?" I asked, to try to trick Sandy into revealing that she was seeing the wrong house, the wrong pictures, or no pictures at all.

"She looks like your mother," said Sandy. "And now she is taking off her shirt and her pants and she is naked and fucking this stranger."

I shook my head and Sandy laughed.

"Your mother is a whore, didn't you know?" she said, and then she tapped her nose. "And those kinds of things run in the family."

Johanna and Margarite had exited the blankets with blank eyes and were staring at my fortune being read from over my shoulder. Johanna looked like she wanted to cry.

"We've got to get back," said Margarite.

"You don't want yours?" asked Sandy.

The rat ran back across the floor, its little claws making sharp noises against the wood. I thought I would like to cry with Johanna but none of us did, we just put our raincoats back on and headed out the door.

“Thanks,” I even managed to say, as we left.

We didn’t talk as we headed back to our cabin and when we entered Ari asked us how the circus was and when we told her what happened Ari couldn’t stop laughing.

“Those little grossies,” she said. “You can’t braid pubic hair. It’s much too short.”

“She did it a little,” said Margarite in a small voice.

“I’m 17,” said Ari. “It simply can’t be done.” She allowed us to feel, with her, a superiority that was soothing like a cool hand on our foreheads. No one said anything about my fortune or Sandy’s prophecies, but I decided to allow myself to feel like it had all happened and was over and was just another lie.

I picked up the letter to my parents that I hadn’t finished writing but I couldn’t think of anything else to say.

Chapter 10. The Boys Join In

When the weather cleared the next day, Dennis and Donna, the owners of the camp, had some great news. Dennis and Donna were middle aged couple with the same last name. It wasn't clear if they were married or brother and sister. They had a way of finishing each other's sentences. Donna, flushed and energetic, would waddle around the camp all day with a megaphone, shouting out ecstatic exclamations of congratulation on a good dive or a beautifully made pinch pot, while Dennis, wearing one of six different Hawaiian shirts, would follow in her wake, taking his glasses down off his face to wipe them from time to time, as they had a habit of steaming up in the hot weather.

Their great news was that our brother camp would be spending the whole day with us, joining in on activities and then following up the evening with a social dance.

The older girls looked visibly pleased, but I wasn't sure how I felt about it.

So, like with most things, when Donna and Dennis shared any change of plans with us, we looked to Ari to see how we should take it. She looked elated and so we were, too. Kate even jumped up and down on the tips of her toes like some of the older campers were doing. I wished at times that I could be like Kate, to feel something and have it instantly course through my body. It seemed that my feelings, the good ones at least, took such a long time to work themselves through me.

After breakfast I headed off to tennis where I was the worst of the best players. I liked being able to play with the older girls, especially when they would careen in to get

one of my low balls and missing it shout out “Good shot!” Not being very good at very many things, I was proud of being the worst of the best at tennis.

When I arrived, there were several boys hitting balls across the net to each other on our courts while the girls stood outside, chattering and pretending not to watch through the chain link fence. It was clear, however, that the older girls were visibly agitated, excited. Some of them looked like there was very little keeping them from jumping the fence. Some of them looked like they wanted to dig a hole and not come out for the rest of the day.

The tennis counselor called us all together, clapping her hands excitedly.

“Today is a special day,” she told us. “We are going to hold a tournament.”

She went on to explain that each of the more advanced players would be paired with an advanced playing boy, and that the two would be a doubles team.

Without much further ado, our tennis counselor and a male tennis counselor from our brother camp began to pick out names from a ball cap.

“Jennifer,” sang out our counselor.

“Drake,” intoned the baritone of the male counselor.

Each pair were forced to come together and miserably shake hands. Some of the campers were smiling, but the fact was, most campers looked like they were being forced to sing a song for their parents’ drunk friends at a dinner party.

When my name was called, the person who would become my doubles partner's name was Josh. He was one of the tallest and looked like one of the oldest.

I made my way out from the flock of teens and stood before him, just short ugly stupid me, and I had never felt more the way I didn't want to be than then.

He put his hand out to shake mine and grinned like he was bracing against the cold.

"Hi," he said.

He was taller than my brother was, and better looking in the way that I imagined maybe boy band members would be up close if you could ever get the chance to shake their hands.

Most of Josh's friends were being paired with the 14 year old girls from my camp who had big boobs and long legs and pretty hair, and he got me.

"I'm sorry," I said.

"What?" he asked.

Other names were now being called, so he hadn't heard me.

"It's just," I said. "I'm not very good."

"Well I am," he said, and he smiled. "I think we'll do OK," he said.

The truth is, you can tell a lot about someone from how they smile but you can tell a lot more about someone from when they smile. And the fact that Josh was smiling

when he had to deal with me made me feel like I would literally kill a kitten to please him.

Luckily, that wasn't necessary.

For the first hour of playtime I was so afraid of Josh that I couldn't even look at him. All I knew was that I had to play the best tennis I had ever played before. My feet were on fire, I dove and rocketed to each ball. When I served I prayed to the ball I tossed into the air.

My prayer went something like: "I pray this ball the lord will keep from going into the net." Having never prayed before I didn't find this particularly sacrilegious.

Each time he or I hit a ball that swerved past the other players or made them mad-scramble and miss, Josh would cluck with a laughter that wasn't aggressive, and if it was because of a shot I made, he would hit his hand against the string of his racquet as though he were giving me a round of applause.

We had won two mini matches before I was able to actually look at his face. And we were getting a water break, and about to embark on our Championship match before I could talk to him.

"You're really good for your age," he told me.

"You're really good for your age," I croaked back.

He laughed then, I thought good-naturedly.

“I mean,” I said, “there’s something about being a team that makes me work harder. Do you feel that way, too?”

He cocked his head at me.

“Yeah, I guess,” he said.

In the Championship Match, Josh and I had to play one of the prettiest girls at camp, Zoe, and her partner, whoever he was. I played with abandon, running to the net, and pummeling the ball. I wanted to win for Josh and show him that he should probably fall in love with me. When he made a good shot I would crow with delight, and he would smile. I pictured us walking down the aisle together in a tennis themed wedding.

During a water break in the middle of the Championship Match the four of us gulped from our bottles.

“How do you like our courts?” Zoe asked. Zoe was the kind of girl who seemed to dance across the stage of the court like a ballerina. Her strokes looked like advertisements for schools where you send your child to end up like her.

“I like them a lot,” Josh said.

Zoe smiled her dazzling smile at him.

“It’s too bad you’re going to lose,” she told him.

I noticed that I was very much not a part of the conversation.

“It’s Zoe, right?” said Josh. “We’ll see about that, Zoe.” I didn’t like the way he said her name because the way he said her name was as though her name was weighted with diamonds.

When we headed back to the court he fumbled several shots and then missed one of Zoe’s lobs.

“Nice shot,” he yelled across the court to her.

“Thanks!” she yelled back to him.

But, we still won the match and when we won Josh gave me a hug. It was a sweaty hug, I could feel his perspiration through his shirt, and he didn’t smell perfectly, but it was my first coed hug.

“You did great,” he told me.

I felt like I was made to be hugged by people like Josh for the rest of my life. Then he reached across the court and high fived the guy and shook Zoe’s hand.

Josh and I were given small bronze trophies that had a tennis player on top, and when we were given the trophies everyone clapped and Josh was smiling and I was, too. I was glad that I didn’t have to hate Zoe. She could have her beauty. I had never had a trophy before, or a crush.

Chapter 11: Becoming

That night, after dinner, but before the dance, Ari did our make-up. I had only had on make-up twice before. Once for my uncle's wedding to a woman my family did not approve of and once for a costume I wore for Halloween the year before when I went as a flapper so that I could wear lipstick to school. I thought that a flapper, being a loose woman, was someone who was a genteel version of a prostitute, and was surprised that my mother had allowed me to dress up as one. I had known, without being explicitly told, that of course choosing to dress up as a prostitute for Halloween was *not* OK. But I thought that choosing to go as a flapper was close enough without giving too much away. The fact is that parents think that they can see into their children's souls based on silly decisions they make like Halloween costumes. That year my brother went to Halloween as his favorite scientist, the German physicist Max Planck. So what did that say about his soul? The fact is, as soon as you have a child, at the very instant they are born, they become a stranger to you. And the sooner a parent knows that I think the better, so they can just get back to whatever it is they like to do, like read the almanac.

Without a Halloween costume on, or a formal dress, wearing make-up seemed odd. We were all still dressed in white and blue, but now our faces looked different.

Ari gave us each as much time as our faces demanded. Kate was obviously the easiest. She needed a bit of rouge and a touch of lip-gloss and she was lovely. Johanna and I took longer. When it was my turn Ari sat me down in front of her in a chair she had pulled into the bathroom.

“Let us see,” she said as she stared without any hesitation straight at my face, candidly assessing and quantifying my imperfections. I looked back into her face as she looked at mine, but she did not meet my eyes. It was interesting to be looked at so closely without really feeling like she was seeing me.

Ari hummed as she traced a kohl pencil on my eyelids.

“Keep them closed,” she said.

The blush brush tickled me.

“Now for the hard part,” said Ari. “I want you to keep your eyes open no matter how much you think I’m going to poke you in the eye. Do you trust me?”

“Yes.”

“Then keep your eyes focused on that wall over there. On that piece of wood in that wall over there, like your life depended on it.”

I never minded that Ari was dramatic about everything. Because when Ari made a situation dramatic, it was that much more interesting. I focused with every ounce of my strength and dedication on the exact piece of wood in the wall that Ari had pointed to as I watched and saw the mascara wand come devastatingly close to blinding me. But I trusted Ari and I watched the wall and the wand and her freckled lovely face so close to me that I could feel the way her breath felt as it fell against my cheek.

“All done,” she exclaimed and I stood up from the chair to see who I had become. Staring at the mirror I realized that it was still me but just with longer eyelashes and redder cheeks. I guess I should have known that Ari wasn’t magic.

Ari watched me look at myself in the mirror.

“What?” she asked.

“Oh, nothing,” I said.

“You look lovely, Agnes,” she told me and we smiled at each other into the mirror. “You know who will like those rosy cheeks of yours?”

My cheeks got rosier.

“You little minx,” she said.

“What?” I said.

“Oh, nothing,” she said. “Go get Margarite, it’s her turn.”

After she made Margarite look like Margarite with some make up on, Ari shooed us away so she could do herself. I watched her apply the make-up to her own face. She changed into a light blue dress instead of her usual counselor clothing, because after the dance she was to have her night off. Ari had freckles on her chest which she tried to cover up with some concealer but I told her not to.

“Your freckles are great,” I said, secretly wishing I had some.

“Ugly, ugly,” she said.

“Oh, Ari,” I said.

“What?”

I wanted to say something that would make her see how I saw her but I didn't think I could. I didn't know what to say and so I watched her frown at me. When she had said I was lovely it had made me feel lovely.

"You're lovely," I said.

"That's stupid," she responded and then turned to my bunkmates.

"So girls," said Ari, "who are you going to dance with?"

Chapter 12. The Way They Dance

“The thing about a dance is that you’ve got to hone in on your guy,” Ari explained to us all as we stood around her in the cabin before it began. “Do you know what that means?”

We weren’t sure.

“You have to be like a bomber pilot with a bomb but it’s only for one specific place. Do you get it now?”

“But,” said Kate, “aren’t the boys supposed to ask us to dance?”

“They will,” said Ari. “But if they’re too shy, you have to take the lead. Do you know how to slow dance?” she asked us.

“I do,” said Kate.

“OK. Show us,” said Ari.

Kate paused. “You don’t know how to?”

“Of course I do,” said Ari as though Kate was the stupidest girl in the world. Even with her make-up, the face Kate made then was one of the ugliest I’d ever seen.

“Margarite knows, don’t you?” asked Ari. “Come here. You be the girl and I’ll be the guy.”

Margarite walked slowly up to Ari.

I heard Johanna snicker but then Ari shot her a glance and the room was deadly quiet.

“It’s like this,” said Ari, and she put her hands on Margarite’s waist and moved Margarite’s hands up around her own neck.

“I know it’s a stretch,” said Ari. “Most of the boys won’t be as tall as me.”

Margarite didn’t say anything.

“And then you get in close, like this,” said Ari and the two of them stood very close, hugging like that. “And you sort of just sway, you know, to the music.”

We watched the two of them for several moments. There wasn’t any music, but they were swaying to something.

Then Ari let Margarite go.

“OK girls. That’s all there is to it,” she said.

The dance was held in the gymnasium where the indoor basketball court was. I had chosen not to play basketball as one of my activities because I was afraid of what Kate had said that first day I had come to camp. I still wasn’t sure how she or anyone else knew who was a lesbian and who was not, but I didn’t want to be cast by accident into a pool that made me any more of an other than I already felt.

The lights were on dim now and there was soda, a rare treat, and pretzels. Most of the boys stood on one side of the room staring at the staring girls on the other, but

there were some brave souls, usually older, who were already dancing with each other in that strange way that seemed like the music didn't matter. They were dancing close into each others bodies and touching in a way that I was not used to seeing people in my world touch.

The music was fast paced and the gymnasium was stuffy. I could only vaguely recognize some of the songs, but most of the girls and none of the boys were singing along.

I had told Margarite about Josh and she had told me that there was a boy who she went canoeing with earlier in the day who she thought was great, and so we walked around the periphery of the dance floor looking for our men. I sort of felt like a hunter, and powerful, because I was not the prey. I had bombs, after all.

Margarite saw the guy she liked over by the corner talking with some other boys and so the two of us stood nearby to wait, like Ari said, for the approach.

"How long does the approach take?" asked Margarite. "He can see me, right?"

I nodded, because I was pretty sure he could. But after at least ten minutes when a slow song came on and girls and boys began to get even closer in their dancing which was becoming a pawing sort of meshing, I had an idea.

"You stay here," I said, and I headed over to the boy she had pointed out to me.

He looked surprised to be addressed, but I tried my most formal and lady-like voice.

“Hello. My friend Margarite would like to dance with you. Would you like to dance with her?”

His friends laughed out loud, but the guy, small with brown hair and big eyes said that he would, and he followed me back to Margarite and he took her hand and led her to the floor.

I watched them, the way she put her hands around his shoulders and he put his hands on her waist. I felt like I was on the dance floor too, in the watching. And I felt joyous to have been the one that had made such a thing be.

On my several more laps around the gym, I tried a sticky sweet soda, and I saw Johanna and Kate dancing with boys, like Margarite, a bit stiffly, but doing it, doing it, being old enough to dance like this. I tried to find Josh in the faces of every guy I passed, and sometimes I saw him because I was forgetting what he looked like in all the faces, until I did see him, and he was on the dance floor, wrapped tightly around Zoe. They were leaning into each other like they had known each other for years, and had loved each other for just as long.

The betrayal of that moment was highlighted because Zoe was the girl who we had come together to beat. She was our competition and hadn't we squashed her? I imagined for the fleetingest moment that he had condescended to quell her disappointment in her loss by giving her a consolation dance, but then I saw them kiss, wrapping themselves even more tightly together.

Outside the gym, where I went to escape, the air was less warm than inside, and I breathed in hug fistfuls of it. I thought about running away from camp and living in a

hovel somewhere where I would eat bugs and moles. I felt meaningless and worthless in a new way, a way that was personal and not just with my family. And when I heard Ari laughing a high pitched warble and saw her being led by the hand away and off into the woods by a man, I hated her too, for her happiness, and for having someone want to lead her somewhere.

“Aren’t you funny?” she said to the man who was holding her hand. Her voice was slurred and different than I was used to.

I was behind the open door so I didn’t think they could see me but I clung closer to the wall to listen.

“Where are you taking me?” she asked in a high pitched way that made me want to wrap my arms around her and keep her safe.

“Come on,” said the guy who had her hand, or maybe it was her wrist. He was very tall and big. The tone of his voice was not the way I would have wanted someone with my hand to talk to me. He pulled at her and she laughed, and laughed again, and then they disappeared into the trees.

Chapter 13. Nadine.

On the third week of camp my bunk was assigned to a new table in the mess hall where Ari sat at the foot and the arts and crafts instructor, Nadine, loomed at the head, dwarfing the wooden table with her sizable girth. Nadine had thin yellow hair which she usually wore on top of her head in a small bun, and she was so fat that the rolls of her body seemed like layers added to her skin, as though she was bundled up against a winter none of us could see. I wondered what the real her looked like, hidden deep down inside her under all of that swaddling. Her treble chin waddled as she talked in a husky voice, loudly, and looked at us coyly from the edge of the table through her small glittering eyes.

I didn't like Nadine because I worried about becoming her. As a newly self-defined unwanted, I saw my fate intertwined with hers and felt that this new table assignment was a subtle indication of my designated path.

I knew that she was what we should not become, though she didn't seem particularly unhappy. No one had publicly announced her as wrong, but it didn't seem as though someone needed to say it out loud. It was in all of minds, I imagined, as we watched her move slowly up the hills, like she was wading through sludge. When we would look through Ari's magazines, or when I saw what I was supposed to be on television or in movies, it wasn't anything like the Nadine unapologetically on view at the far end of the table.

Everyone else seemed to silently acknowledge her difference, but without anything besides what seemed like a casual sigh. But I hated Nadine deeply and throughout my body. I was scared that my hatred of her made her matter to me more than she should. I was bewildered that I could not move past her, but kept my eyes fastened on her daily slow process through life. What seemed the most tragic was that my hating her seemed to tie me to her that much more closely.

I would watch her fearfully out of the corner of my eyes as she sawed into her chicken, and boldly, so indelicately, chewed her food with the large enjoyment of the obese. I wondered why she wasn't embarrassed to be the way that she was. I wondered how she could live with herself. I barely could live with myself, and I wasn't her, and she was worse, well, wasn't she? The sound of her teeth gnawing and chomping felt like the sound of my future and I would watch her and my thoughts would not be clear. I could only think: no, not that, please.

It wasn't that Nadine wasn't nice. She actually seemed to have a kind and gentle personality and spoke with an Eastern European accent that clipped her syllables into a throaty smudge that was almost entrancing. The people around her seemed to like her, to listen to her patiently, to want her to listen to them. But when no one was looking her face would settle and her lips would down-turn and there would be a sadness there, there would be wanting, an unfulfilledness which I very much understood.

Chapter 14. Glug Glug Glug

Every day after lunch, packages would arrive and I was usually one of the lucky ones. Dennis would get up with a yellow notepad and list into a microphone the people who should convene outside the mess hall and wait to be handed their brown box. The number of boxes you received meant how much the world outside loved you.

The problem, however, which seemed to be arising, was that while getting a lot of packages was a good thing, getting too many packages was not a good thing. Getting too many packages was a slap in the face to the other campers. And even though I knew that I had not asked for the amount I received, there was a guilt that came tempered with the boxes which unhinged to brim with chocolates and nail polish and stationary and gummy bears and comic books and games. I felt cared about when I heard my name called, a thick rush of pleasure, and then the pleasure would sink further, quickly and furtively, to an angry embarrassment, as Kate and Joanna would eye me, and Margarite would say, “Oh really, another?”

It was obnoxious to be too cared about. In the world of camp we were supposed to make our own way, on our own merits, supposedly, but the influx of gifts which would arrive for certain girls and not for others threw the balance off-kilter and I could see that this was not only unfair, but somehow undignified.

My sixth package arrived sometime around the beginning of the third week when Dennis called my name loudly into the microphone.

“I haven’t gotten anything,” Johanna said pointedly in my direction.

Kate shrugged her shoulders. “Aren’t your parents in Spain?” she asked.

Johanna shook her head. “I don’t remember,” she said.

“That’s what the postcard said,” Kate told her. “Remember?”

Johanna nodded her head as though it didn’t matter.

“My parents are too busy, I guess,” Margarite said.

“My parents have nothing else to do with their time,” I told the table. I had meant to explain their excessive outward signs of affection but grew flushed, imagining that instead I was saying that I was the only thing on their minds. How selfish that seemed in the raw air of the mess hall. And how untrue.

I coughed into my fist and tried to stick the tines of my fork into something on my plate, but grew disheartened and gave up.

“The thing is,” I tried to explain, “they lead very boring lives. My mother doesn’t work and they hardly ever go anywhere.”

No one said anything.

“The last time they went on a vacation my father drove a motorcycle into the side of a building,” I told the table.

At this Kate smiled.

“What happened? Were they hurt?” she asked.

Because it hadn't really happened, I had to think fast.

"He was drunk, again, you know," I said, rolling my eyes, and from the edge of the table I saw that I had caught Ari's attention. "He was trying to do tricks on the motorcycle. But he was stupid and crashed. Anytime he's not working, glug glug glug," I said, and put a fisted hand to my lips in the shape of a bottle, mimicking someone I'd seen somewhere.

This kind of talk and mimicry always came naturally, but I felt like I would be punished soon if I kept it up. Telling my bunkmates that my father was an alcoholic felt like a low blow, particularly as I knew he never drank for fear of becoming one. I had only come to know one drunk in my life and that was my grandmother, his mother, and probably the woman who had inspired him to abstain. She could set the silverware shaking at family gatherings as she'd slap her fists into the table and slur accusations at her relatives. We would all look aside when she got that way, like you would when an animal is defecating. But my grandmother's drunk was a sedentary and relatively harmless one which could exclusively be seen in her prowling glances and quivering hands. Outside the reach of her voice, you were safe. It was nothing like the drunk I imagined my father might be, cruising top speed down some foreign street, danger in his eyes.

"Did he break anything?" asked Kate, and I knew the answer.

"He broke both his arms," I told the table. "He was so upset, particularly because the only thing he really loves is to play guitar. And he used to be so good, too. But he

couldn't anymore. And he couldn't feed himself either," I added. "So I would have to put the sandwich in his mouth. And sometimes he would make me, you know."

"What?" Margarite asked.

I could watch Ari watching me.

"He'd make me bring him beers," I said. "And bottles of wine. And I'd have to hold them while he drank and then, you know. It wasn't fun. It was kind of like he'd disappear."

"My dad drinks bourbon," Margarite said.

Ari smiled then. "Harsh," she said, letting the word tumble out into the air. The way Ari said whatever she chose to say had such implications. I'm sure we all paused for at least half a moment to imagine Ari drinking some drought in a crystal glass and the harshness of it on her lips and the smugness of it in her smile.

"My dad doesn't disappear when he's drinking. He's more there than ever," said Margarite.

"My dad drinks wine bottles as fast as Nadine sucks down dessert," I said before I knew I was saying it. There was a sniggering laughter that came from somewhere but when I looked up to find where it had come from I couldn't catch anyone laughing. Margarite was looking at her plate and Ari was looking through me as though I wasn't there. "I mean that my dad drinks faster than her, not that she," I said, "not that she..."

Nadine hadn't heard, though. At the other end of the table she was talking with others, genuflecting with her thick hands. I noticed, with displeasure, that her plate

looked like she had literally licked it clean. I was glad she hadn't heard me though because, besides not wanting to hurt her feelings, I didn't want her to know what I was thinking about her. And I was surprised to hear myself revealing more than I had intended about how much she was on my mind.

"You have a mouth," Ari said licking languidly at a bit of sauce on her wrist.

"Was your dad all right?" Kate asked.

"Yeah," I said. "He always had his books so even when no one was there he wasn't alone."

"The first time I got drunk," Ari said, "God."

But maybe Nadine heard something then because she called down from her end of the table quickly.

"Not now, Ari," she said. The way she said it was like she was speaking to a child, condescending but also sympathetic, as though what Ari was prone to say couldn't be helped. I suddenly realized that Ari was not as old as I had thought she was. She was still her age, of course, but in the scheme of things maybe her age was younger than I had imagined.

Ari smiled sheepishly, and Nadine called for us to pass our plates down to the head of the table where she scraped them begrudgingly and stacked them to be taken away.

Chapter 15. Danny

Margarite waited with me for my package by the grove of elm trees behind the mess hall. When Dennis handed me the box it wasn't heavy but it was much too large, about the size of a suitcase that would barely fit in an overhead compartment.

"That's for you," he told me with a large grin as he plopped the box into my arms.

"Bigger than last time," Margarite said.

I sighed and hauled it with me to the theater while Margarite jabbered and did a hop-two-skip beside me. Her energy was often contagious, but I felt weighted down.

At the theater the girl who played Danny was chewing bubblegum on the front steps. We had never talked before and I was a little bit afraid of her because she was one of the oldest girls, because she was playing a man on stage, and also because she was one of the two black campers in our whole camp.

Danny jumped up when she saw us though, and carelessly ambled in our direction.

"A package," she said. "What's in it?"

Excited to be addressed by someone so highly ranked, I put the box down in the dirt and said, "I don't know. Want to find out?"

She nodded and reached into her curly black hair and unclipped a barrette. Using the sharp edge of it she deftly sawed through the packing tape, in a one-two-three maneuver.

Margarite and I watched her peel back the edges of the box and look inside.

She took out a bag of tootsie roll pops, and a pair of slippers that looked like dogs.

“Cool,” she said.

She rifled deeper in then, cooing and exclaiming as she excavated batteries, chocolate kisses, hair bands, stickers, jelly roll ups, playing cards with daisies painted on them, and some sort of bottle of body lotion.

“So sweet,” she said, having unpacked it all, the tissue paper crumpling in the dirt by the side of the box.

“My mom goes overboard,” I said, laughing a little, and she laughed too. I felt like we had forged a friendship over my overboard mom. During a break in practice I imagined we could play with the cards and eat the kisses. Danny wasn’t scary any longer like I thought she had been when she was on the stage looking searchingly into another girls’ eyes.

Margarite and I watched Danny put all the items back into the box carefully, and then fold the edges of the box back under each other to hold them down. She nodded absent-mindedly in our direction like she was dismissing us and without another word she picked up the box and walked into the theater.

I looked at Margarite and she looked at me and we were both puzzled.

“What just happened?” Margarite asked me.

“Danny is going to meet us inside,” I told her, but I wasn’t sure.

I picked up some pink tissue paper that had been left on the ground and we headed into the theater. Inside, I saw Danny showing her package off to the older campers. She was unpeeling the box again, and holding the booty up for them to see.

Margarite said, “Um,” as we watched and then she said “Aren’t you going to do something?”

I shook my head because I couldn’t think of a thing to do.

I knew that the package had been mine, at one point, but somehow it had become Danny’s. To accuse her of stealing my package was not all right because in some ways she hadn’t stolen it. In some ways I had given it to her because she was older and because she was black. If she was white it might have been a theft and I might have tried to take it back. But I told myself it was only fair that she have the package because it must be hard to be one of only two in a whole world and I was also worried that in accusing her of taking something from me I might be considered a racist. The next moment, however, I began to worry that it might be racist to assume that she didn’t have parents who sent her packages. Was I thinking that I should let her have the package as some form of charity?

I watched her showing the dog slippers to a friend. I didn’t want the dog slippers anyway, or the cards or the kisses. It was just junk, anyway. She put one hand into the slipper and made a barking noise and then she and her friends laughed loudly and she looked my way and caught my eye. Cocking her head then, Danny smiled right for me,

carefree and dazzling, but also personal like the two of us were in cahoots and our secret made us both special. So I smiled back and lined up for choreography. And Danny sure could sing.

Chapter 16. Going Tribal

The next night we were assigned colors. I and Johanna were green while Margarite and Kate and Ari were blue. I instantly imagined that blue was the superior color. I asked Joanna if she felt that way too and she shook her head without saying that she didn't completely disagree.

Part of the fun of the whole process was putting on our bug spray and getting dressed in our Indian garb. We decorated our headbands with sharpies and made sure our feathers, died with our colors and attached to the bands, stood straight up like wagging tails.

The green tribe met in the gymnasium where our tribe leaders, several adults including the lacrosse coach, the sailing instructor and Nadine, herded us into a line.

I turned to Johanna and asked her, "Does Ari have a job?"

"She's our counselor."

"No, I know that," I said. "But like, does she teach anything here?"

Johanna shook her head again. "She's usually by the lake, if she's not in the cabin," she said. "But I'm not sure if she really teaches."

If you weren't a camper I had always assumed that you did something during the day that had to do with instructing campers. But until that point I somehow hadn't

questioned Ari's presence in our cabin when I'd stop between classes to change my clothes or grab some piece of sports equipment.

In order to explain further, Johanna said, "Dennis is her uncle."

"Oh," I said, but I wasn't entirely sure why that exempted her. I imagined her days might not be very fun if she spent them lounging all the time. She always seemed slightly tired and slightly ornery, as though we were interrupting her. But, what were we interrupting her from?

"Is Donna her aunt?"

"Well of course," said Johanna, but that didn't answer the question about whether or not Donna was Dennis' sister or his wife.

The lacrosse coach was handing out papers with our team songs on them which were all songs whose lyrics had been changed from the classics of our day.

"You need to learn these songs because they will be our call to arms," the lacrosse coach boomed out. "Failure to learn these songs will be grounds for being expelled from our tribe."

"This evenings games will only be for fun, but it will give us a chance to see what our competition looks like," said the sailing coach, a bit more nicely. After Margarite and I had ground our boat into the bracken of the shoreline, she had come out with the small motor boat to tow us back to the dock. What she seemed most genuinely concerned about, when she came to rescue us, was not about the sailboat which had been dented and scratched, but about Margarite and I. She kept asking us if we were hurt, and putting her

hands on our limbs to make sure that everything bent the proper way. I almost told her I was hurt because she seemed to care so much about me. I wanted to make her keep on caring. But for that day, damaging the sailboat had been enough.

The green tribe practiced our call to arms on our way up the mountain to the Tribal Grounds. Our song was one of those examples you find at places where children are where a classic of the day has its words replaced with the words announcing the young people's intent. We walked in a straight line with our arms folded over our chests like, we were told, the Indians did it.

"Karma karma karma karma come on green tribe," we sang, "What we'll do, is beat the blue."

The Tribal Grounds were at the very top of a hill, deep in the heart of the camp's forest. We could tell we were close because before we got there the air began to get more warm and we could smell the charred and beautiful scent of the huge bonfire that had been banked by white painted rocks.

Even in the colding air with the trees whipping softly, the heat from the campfire made the air seem toasted. And the blue team was there, raucous and loud, and seemingly larger than us.

"Bang bang dynamite," they sang at us, angrily it seemed, like they wanted to blow us to smithereens. I decided that our song was much more classy.

The first game of the evening was between the oldest campers. They lined up, each team designated by their feathers, and the girl in the head of the line was given a

long wooden bat. There seemed to be an absence of explanation, but everyone also seemed to already know the rules. I worried about what they were going to do with those long wooden bats.

Zoe was on one side holding her bat and another girl was on our side, holding hers. I instantly knew what the rules were. Each girl was supposed to clobber the other one with their bat until one or the other could no longer stand. Or maybe until one or the other was dead. It seemed like a terribly barbaric game, but perhaps that was how the Indians did it.

Zoe swung the bat from one hand to the other.

“Have you seen this before?” I asked Johanna.

“We’ll win,” she told me proudly.

At the shrill blast of a whistle, both of the girls began to run with their bats to the far side of the cleared space beside the campfire, and when they reached the place where Nadine was standing they both put their bats down on the ground and placed their foreheads on the tail-end of the bats and spun themselves in circles around the bats three times. Then they wobble-ran back to their tribe and passed the bat off.

Everyone around me was up on their feet and screaming for their team. I saw Kate from afar on her side of the Tribal Grounds and her face was red with passion and her mouth was open and I could see her white glinting teeth and her eyes sparkling in the light of the fire.

None of us knew who was winning, but we all crowed and screamed. There was a heat in our ferocious desire to win. It felt like if we screamed loud enough we would win.

I was incredibly happy that no one was being pummeled to a bloody pulp. Though, the truth might have been that I was also a little bit disappointed. Sometimes a girl wants to see a little bit of blood. I knew that when I would fall, or sliding hard into the rough asphalt of a man-made first base, the blood that came from me, that smelled like me but darker, made me proud and made me feel uniquely alive.

The rest of the games that night continued to be some sort of cross between marathons and game shows. As a younger kid I wasn't called upon to do more than watch the older ones strain themselves in front of the fire. Did the campers know which was the difference between Coke or Pepsi? Points to the blue team. Which counselor could jump rope the most times in a minute? How we cheered our Lacrosse coach on. Points to us. If eight people held hands on each team who could be the first to untangle themselves? I watched the human knot with a satisfaction bordering on hunger. I didn't want them ever to get undone.

The last part of the evening was a talent competition. Whichever team won this would presumably take the evening home. It was getting late and I was getting dreamy in the haze of the fire, imagining the pleasure in finding my way to the top of my bunk, into the heat of my covers and myself where I would settle into the sounds of others' sleep. But then Ari emerged from her side of the bonfire and walked heel toe to the center of the large circle.

She stood then, her arms crossed, and her blue tail-feather standing straight up, looking out on all of us as though she were doing it for us, and also as though none of us existed. Her makeup had smudged over the course of the night, and there was a darkness coming down from her eyes. There was a silence that was steady and that I could feel inside my stomach while she stood there and we all waited for her to begin.

When the music started she arced her body in one exaggerated movement that suddenly made her liquid. It was as though she had lost all the bones in her body. She swayed, letting her hands meet the ground and then search for the sky. Her body dipped and leered and strained to become a part of the music that was blaring through the crackling speakers. She had a greedy look on her face which seemed oddly contrasted to the soft almost eel-like undulations she was letting loose, her body starkly dark against the fire's brightness. The truth was, she looked like she had emerged from the fire itself.

I thought to myself, *Ari can dance*. So maybe that was her skill, the thing that had kept her enrolled in school when they wanted to kick her out. The thing that maybe she taught here at camp, though none of us had seen her do it.

It was all terribly beautiful actually, and definitely within the confines of decency and maybe even art, until Ari began to grunt. A throaty almost choke-like sound at first, it turned into a heavy nearly-gorilla utterance as she progressed. As she let loose those thick and loud bellows, her body began to twist and contort. Her face was red, glowing, and the noises she was making were not the noises it felt that a human being should make. Not a normal human being, at least. Not a human being that wasn't being tortured.

I watched, aghast. Several girls began to giggle, but I didn't know why, or maybe I thought I did. Abruptly, from across the way, someone turned the music off, and Ari looked up through her daze, her arms still outstretched, an impish embarrassment and pride on her face.

In the silence there was a loud burst of cheering from the blue side and then it caught on and everyone was standing and applauding. I was cheering as loud as anyone else, but I wasn't sure why, except that she was mine, and I felt proud of her and excited to see her being appreciated. Ari smiled and pretended to curtsy, using her hands to lift an imagined skirt as she dunked at the knees.

Chapter 17. Adventurers

As our bunk walked back to the cabin the night was starless and cold. Ari led the way and was in a wonderful mood.

“Do you teach dance?” I asked her.

“I should, shouldn’t I?” she asked her face beaming even in the dark.

“You were fantastic,” Kate said. “We won because of you.”

“Wasn’t it only for practice?” Johanna asked.

“We still won,” said Kate.

But Ari wasn’t paying attention to us. She was still walking with the erect posture of a person about to perform.

Ari said, “You know girls, I think it’s about time for another adventure.”

“What is it?” we clamored.

But she patiently held us back.

“Not everyone gets to go,” she told us, and we eyed each other like traitors. We probably would have done anything, including scalp the bunkmate to our right, in order to go with Ari on an adventure.

None of us asked why we couldn't all go. If Ari said that was the case, there almost didn't need to be a reason. But we did ask how many of us could go with her and she smiled and held up her hand with a peace sign.

"It should be me and Johanna," Kate said, quickly.

"And why's that?" Ari asked.

"Because we've both been here two years so we know more."

Kate had a way of putting her nose into the air that I did not find becoming. But she also had a point.

Ari nodded her head wisely and seemed to agree. Even though I agreed, too, I didn't nod my head

Kate's pretense of all-knowing was a sham, and yet, she had acquired a skill which was one of imparting that the quality, rather than the quantity, of what she knew was of greater worth.

"Anything to say for yourselves?" Ari asked me and Margarite diplomatically.

Margarite shook her head and then I did, too.

"OK," Ari said to me and Margarite with a shrug of her shoulders that was painfully nonchalant. "Maybe you'll have better answers next time. But for now, to the cabin, and to sleep." Then she turned to Johanna and Kate.

"Where do you want us?" Johanna asked.

“To the lake,” Ari said, and she raised her arm in salute to herself. Then, remembering us for one moment more, she turned back and looked at Margarite and I.

“Don’t tell, of course,” she said.

We watched them turn from us then and the three of them headed off in the opposite direction. I watched as they disappeared from view into the darkness and felt both jealous and relieved. Whatever was there at the lake in the dark was an unknown, while our cabin was our home, it was safe.

However, as Margarite and I headed slowly back to what we knew, it felt as though we were walking a track we hadn’t before. The trees made screeching noises in the wind.

I didn’t ask Margarite if we were going the right way because a part of me knew that we had to be, and yet it felt strange in the night to be walking alone in this way. Even together we were very alone.

“Do you think the clown,” Margarite asked.

“It was only a story.” I said.

“Yes,” she said, but it was like she had also said no.

“It was a story we made up ourselves,” I said. “It was only lies. Don’t you remember?”

We kept walking and she was small beside me. Or maybe I was small beside her. Even if we had made the story up, it felt very real.

“My father isn’t a drunk,” I told her, in the dark.

“Mine is,” she said.

“Mine is, too,” I said.

We happened upon the cabin at last, as it startled us, large and looming. The stairs creaked at our steps and I couldn’t find the light switch by the door. I imagined, as I put my hand searchingly along the wall, that what I would find instead would be nests of spiders, sliding skittering down my arms into my clothing, into my skin.

“Where’s the light?” Margarite asked softly.

“I’m trying,” I said, feeling blindly against the wood of the cabin’s wall which was harsh and splintery. And then I found the small switch and we were bathed in a soothing light. Cowed by the door, Margarite finally entered the room.

“Of course we have to stay up until they come home,” she said and I nodded.

“Do you think it’ll be a long time?” she asked.

And I said that I didn’t think so, even though I did.

The two of us crawled into bed with the lights on and fell asleep that way, what felt like hours into the waiting.

The next morning no one had anything to say about the adventure, but the adventurers seemed tired and out of sorts. Over pancakes at the mess hall Johanna covertly mouthed to me across the table the single word: “Bust.”

Chapter 18. Making Omelets

I didn't see my bunkmates for the rest of the day because I had signed up to go on a hike in the mountains of New Hampshire. The girls I was with were all strangers except for Sandy, who slid in beside me on the bus ride to the mountain.

"Hey, you," she said, as though we were close friends.

"Hi," I said.

"Your counselor is a hoot," Sandy told me. "Can you believe her last night?"

I hadn't heard the phrase "a hoot" before. I imagined that Sandy was telling me that Ari was as crazy as an owl and I wanted to say something to combat it, but I didn't know what to say.

"She's always doing stuff like that, everyone says," Sandy said.

"Stuff like what?"

"You don't have to act younger than you are," Sandy told me. "Don't you know you're already young enough?"

Sandy opened a book and didn't look at me for the rest of the ride.

I wanted to ask her if what she had said about my mother was only for fun, a way to pass the time. I looked out the window, and watched the trees pass and then watched

the cars pass and counted them. I counted 256 cars and 831 trees. I didn't count the telephone poles.

The trail leader was a leathery young woman with rippling muscles in her arms which she lifted to point out birds and woodland creatures' paw prints in the mud. I felt as though I had already seen all the birds that there were, even though when she pointed to them she gave them odd names liked "Crested Owl Wood Finch" and "Doddering Toadie." They were the birds who flocked to my mother's bird feeder on the porch outside our home. There was nothing new on the trail, only dirt and only walking.

On our way down Sandy strode by my side, going quickly but seeming to want me to keep up. Her black feathered hair was in a ponytail and swished as she walked.

"Enjoying yourself?" she asked me. I wasn't sure particularly what she was asking me if I was enjoying, but I nodded.

As we trailed down the group got de-segmented, and Sandy and I, somewhere in the middle, found ourselves more or less alone when I eyed a nest at hip level in the knot of a tree. I stopped to look at the nest, a small assortment of woven twigs and campground trash, and Sandy paused beside me.

We headed off the trail to look closer, and inside the nest were three speckled white and blue eggs. They were roughly the size of grapes.

I looked at Sandy looking at the eggs. Her eyes were sharp and focused and her mouth was twisted and pursed. And then I knew what would happen.

“If you touch them,” I warned, “the bird won’t come back. The mother won’t feed them and they’ll die.”

She put her hand out and looked at me. She smiled slowly.

“Then why would I do that?” she asked.

“I guess you wouldn’t,” I said.

“Don’t tell me what I wouldn’t do,” she said.

I looked up at the sky. It was a beautiful day.

“A part of me wants to smash them,” she said.

“I know,” I told her, and I did. I wanted to see what was hidden inside them, the yellow yolk, the unfinished bird. But more than that, I wanted to see them hit the ground and crack and burst open and be ruined.

I watched her hand hoping she would just get it over with, reach in and dash them to the ground already.

But her hand remained paused mid-air and then she fisted it and put it into her pocket.

“Come on,” she said, “I want to be the first ones down,” and so I followed her.

Chapter 19. My Mother's Voice

At the base of the mountain there was a convenience store with two pay phones.

“Anyone who wants to call home is welcome to,” a counselor sang out, and the girls who were lounging around jumped up to line up for the phones. It was the first opportunity we had been given to talk to anyone outside the camp. I got in line behind Sandy, and waited as I heard the other campers' phone conversations. They all sounded effervescent, like they had been sucking on balloons. They laughed and giggled into the phone. They talked much too loudly.

Sandy showed me how to call collect. I said my name when they asked me to, and then I waited, fearing that my parents wouldn't pick up or wouldn't accept the charges.

But then I heard my mother's voice.

“Agnes!” she practically sang.

“Hi, Mom.”

“Darling, how are you? Have you gotten my packages?”

“Yes,” I said. “Thanks.”

“Did you get all of them?” she asked.

“Yes,” I said. “Thanks. A lot.”

“Did you like them?”

“Yes,” I said. “They were great. I liked the dog slippers. I wear them every night.”

There was a pause that came, I realized, because both she and I didn’t have anything to say to one another. We hadn’t talked in over two weeks and I knew so much more and so much less than when I had left her. But I didn’t have a thing to tell her.

“How are you, darling?” she asked me.

“I’m good,” I said.

“How is camp?”

“I still can’t water ski,” I told her. And then I wanted to bash my head against the wall of the phone booth. The first thing I had chosen to tell my mother was of a failure. I felt as though my mouth was betraying me.

“That’s OK,” she said, sweetly, so sweetly, I felt like I had never loved my mother more than when she was accepting me for not being good enough. “I’m sure you’ll learn, soon,” she said.

“There are other things,” I said. “Other things I’m not good at.”

“I’m sure you’re wonderful, Agnes. I’m sure you’re having such fun, aren’t you?”

“I won a tennis tournament,” I told her.

“How nice,” she said, but she seemed less interested in what I had done well.

“The addition is going on swimmingly,” she added. “But you won’t recognize our house.”

“I liked our house,” I said.

“You’ll like this version much better. It’s like icing on a cake.”

“OK,” I said.

“Have you been washing your hair?”

“Yes,” I said. And I was angry at her for asking. “Of course I have,” I said. “We do it every night in the lake.” I liked the way the lake water would fill up with suds, and I liked the camaraderie of it, lathering our hair together and then dunking.

“You do it in the lake?”

“Yeah,” I said.

“Is that sanitary?” she asked.

“Yeah.”

She paused. “Well, I can’t wait to see you,” she said.

“Me, too,” I said.

“I love you,” she said.

“Me, too,” I said. “I mean, I love you, too. Is Dad there?”

“No,” she said. “He’s not. When is he ever there, really?”

I laughed because she expected me to. I laughed loudly so that the campers behind me would know how happy I was.

Chapter 20—Going to Bed

That night Ari hadn't given up.

"Take two," she said. "And this time it's the clean-up crew."

I didn't know what she meant but she was looking at me. I realized that it was my turn to head down to the lake in the dark. We had just gotten back to the cabin after dinner and I was beginning to get a stomachache.

"Don't worry," Ari said, sitting down on my bed next to me where I was making a bracelet. She could tell I was nervous. "Margarite will take care of you. Right, Margarite?"

"Yeah," I heard from across the room. "It'll be fine, Agnes."

"And I will too, of course," said Ari. "It'll be fun."

"It was actually really great," I heard Kate chime in. "It was like we were the bad girls. You know, the ones that should get in trouble but don't. From the movies."

"I really do want to go," I said, pretending to look devastated, "but I have play practice all night. I mean, Margarite and I both do. We had to change Rizzo's song from 'won't go to bed til she's legally wed' to 'won't go to sleep until she's got him for keeps.' It's pretty stupid, but we've got to practice it, and Rizzo, I mean Lana, she's always messing up so it's going to take a long time. I mean..."

Ari smiled. "This place is absurd," she said.

“I’ll go,” said Kate.

“The show’s in two days,” Margarite said. “I’m really excited.”

“I don’t even know why they changed the lyrics,” I said.

“You’re such a kid,” Ari said.

“You know,” said Kate. “Go. To. Bed.” She looked hard at me. Her eyes were the kind of blue that they make the sky when there’s a cartoon where everyone’s happy.

“Oh, yeah,” I said, “I get it.”

“Do you really get it?” Kate asked.

“Yes,” I said.

“But you don’t have to come to practice tonight,” Margarite said. “Because you’re a boy.”

I didn’t know I hated Margarite until I suddenly hated her.

“I do have to go, actually.” I said. And then, “Do you still want this bracelet?” I asked, turning to Ari. I had made it with her two favorite colors, purple and orange. I had asked her what her two favorite colors were so I would know. My favorite colors were also purple and orange.

Ari looked down at my hands where I was weaving the strings together. “That looks great,” she said. “But it’s a friendship bracelet.”

“I know,” I said.

“Maybe you should give it to someone else,” she said. She got up and went to the bathroom.

“You know,” said Kate, “because friends support one another.”

I wanted to say something about how we shouldn’t be friends with our counselor. That our counselor should give us more than friendship. Being taller and wiser and better than us, she shouldn’t just be our friend. Friends were less than what I wanted.

That evening, during play practice I didn’t talk to Margarite. I went to the theater and watched the girls rehearse having a sleep over and making fun of Sandra Dee because she was a kid like me who didn’t want to have sex with all the guys. Since it was a dress rehearsal the girls wore frilly night gowns. As they sang and moved across the stage their night gowns spun away from their bodies like fancy dresses.

And then the girls watched us rehearse being all the guys, who were practicing how to thrust our pelvises and have sex with all the girls. We wore bandannas which were supposed to signify that now we were guys. I thought that it would take more than a bandanna to make me be a guy and do all the things that they seemed to do. I didn’t like the way the director had showed us how to thrust our hips. I didn’t like Grease, to be honest.

I wondered how old you had to be before being a guy and being a girl completely took over your life. I remembered distantly a before where it just didn't matter in the same way.

"Do you know why they call them the pink ladies?" Danny asked me, while we waited in the wings for our turn to go on to the stage.

I shook my head.

"Don't you get it?"

"No."

"It's because that's the color of their hoo has!"

We were shushed from across the way by the theater director.

"My stomach hurts," I said to no one. There wasn't anyone to say it to. The feeling in my stomach was like the feeling I got when I thought too hard about the things about my brother that confused or frightened me.

My brother has always been four years older than me but also, in some ways, younger than me. At least, I realized he was younger than me from the time I was seven or so, so he had been younger than me for several years. My brother was someone who got fixated on things, I guess like everyone does. But he stayed fixated on things, like measuring how fast rain can fall, or mapping the Richter scale of every earthquake since 1930. He liked to measure the things in nature that surprise us, like tsunamis and hurricanes. Man-made things like war and genocide, or even arguments or family didn't interest my brother. He liked the way the earth itself caused destruction. And he drew

diagrams that were oddly beautiful, meticulously complete, the lines going every which way on the graph paper like he was making magic eyes.

Sometimes I would want to tell my parents, who treated him like he was stupid, that he was a lot smarter than them. But he was also a lot stupider than them, just like me. He and I had the same bedtime at home. My parents thought that would make things easier, but I'm not sure. When my parents would try to make him go to bed, if he wasn't watching TV, he was usually in the middle of a project, surrounded by rulers and protractors and sheaves of paper.

They'd always start nice. They'd say, "Eric, it's time now. To go to bed."

Sometimes they'd talk to him like he was toddler. Sometimes they'd reason with him like he was their age. "If you don't go to bed you are undermining our authority and your sister will suffer," they'd say. "Now go to bed. Baby. Please?"

Usually he'd yell when they made him go to bed. The way he would yell was like a yowl of a cat, it was very loud. He would often throw things, which is why most of the stuff in his room was made of plastic. But once they told him he had to go to bed and he looked up from what he was doing and without making a sound, he just began to weep. The fact that there was no sound made his crying a terrible thing, much worse than him yelling. It was like his face was a hole, it was like he was a hole, and his tears just came and came. My parents didn't know what to do. No one did. I watched from the corner of his bedroom door like it was theater.

My brother hated going to bed. I'm not sure if I hate it in the same way. I don't make the same commotion about it. I usually would listen to him clamor to stay up, and

listen to the sounds of his footsteps as he ran around the house, the sound of him crashing up the stairs and then back down them. And the smashes and bangs of things becoming parts of themselves, like when he took the picture frames off the walls and stomped them to pieces.

At home, I guess I didn't like going to bed because it's dark and there is no one to see. I wonder if that is what it was like for him, too. He didn't really like to talk to me or anyone. But having someone nearby, sometimes when I was near him, I thought that it made him happier. The proximity of our bodies. The fact that we existed, somehow, together. He seemed happier. And I think I seemed happier, too. In my room at home in my bedroom, I was alone as the last of my kind or any kind. In my bunk that aloneness existed only when everyone else was asleep. Going to bed, into the quiet, is like waiting for something to creep into your mouth and lay eggs in your lungs.

So I understood, I guess, why Sandra Dee wouldn't go to bed until she was legally wed. She didn't want to be alone.

Chapter 21—Not In Bed

Another thing about Ari is that she doesn't give up. I'd want her on my team if I was heading off to the Olympics and we were supposed to be the losers but we wanted to believe in ourselves enough to make it happen. Maybe we were even handicapped, and it wasn't the Special Olympics. It was the real ones. Then Ari being on our team could make it happen. She won't take no for an answer.

And so, in the thick dark of the night, after Lights Out, long after Margarite and I, still not talking, had trudged home from play practice, Ari led the way with a flashlight down to the lake.

Neither Margarite nor I knew what the plan was, but we followed Ari and that was the plan. She led us to the boat house and she took a bunch of keys out of her pocket and she knew the right key to unlock the door which swung open loudly in the silence of the night air.

"Come on in," Ari whispered, and we followed. Ari shone the flashlight into the boathouse where the canoes lay upside down like the dark masses of dead sea life that has floated to shore.

"Let's grab one," she said, and went around to the far end of the nearest canoe. She put the flashlight into her mouth and lifted her end of the boat. The flashlight glowed from her face, so she became a body with a face of fire. Margarite and I reached down to hoist the wooden boat from our end. It felt so light in my hands I wondered if I was

lifting anything at all. We walked backwards, stumbling at times, back through the door and down through the grass and then the pebbles by the lake's edge.

Ari helped us turn the boat over.

"Are there any spiders in there?" she asked, shining the flashlight into the canoe.

Margarite and I shook our heads.

"I'll get the oars," Ari said. She seemed full of a kind of manic anticipation. She ran, long legged back up to the boat house and I looked to Margarite in the dark that she had left us in. I could only see the shade of Margarite, the small shape of her standing against the large shape of the boat, lit up slightly by the moon and my growing accustomed to only seeing the half of things.

"Where do you think we're going?"

"Well," Margarite said, and her voice was soft, but I could tell she was trying not to be mean when she said, "it looks like we're going out onto the lake."

"This is completely illegal," I whispered to her.

"I guess it's not like murder, or anything," she said back to me, and it was actually reassuring.

Ari raced back to us carrying an oar in each hand.

"All right," she said, "you two get in and I'll push you out."

She handed us the oars as we got inside the canoe that was resting on the shallowest part of the lake. I suddenly grew terrified that she was going to push us out onto the water alone, and then head back to the cabin. I wasn't sure that that wasn't what the plan was.

We sailed into the water as Ari pushed us. I hadn't realized how strong she was until she was pushing us and we were going fast. As she pushed us, she got shorter and shorter, until only her shoulders were above the canoe. Then, as though they had planned it, though I knew they hadn't, Margarite came over to my end of the boat and Ari jumped in on the other end.

She handed each of us an oar.

"All right," she said. "Row."

And so we did, we rowed, deep and straight out into lake which seemed to have no end. I'd never seen the end, though I knew it had to have one. We rowed quietly and fiercely, the two of us. The sky was black and the lake was black, reflecting the sky, but there was a moon and Ari had turned the flashlight back on and was aiming it forward so that we could see the water as our direction.

No one said anything. We just listened to the soft splash of the water as the boat cut into it and the echoes of the water clinging and then parting from the oars every time we lifted them to take another stroke.

"This time it's definitely going," Ari said.

"What is?" I asked.

And she grinned. I could see it, even though she had the flashlight pointed away from her. I could see her grin because I could feel the way it contorted her words as she said, “you’ll see.”

Several minutes later, Margarite and I began to paddle more slowly. We were getting tired. I mean, I was getting tired and it felt good to think of Margarite and I as a we, especially in the dark. My arms were beginning to get heavy and my hands felt like they were chaffing against the wood of the oars.

I guess I did wonder why Ari had only brought two paddles and why she hadn’t given herself one. She sat at the end of our craft, straight backed, unmoving, lighting up the night. I didn’t hate her because she was still so beautiful, maybe more beautiful now, but I also felt that there was an unkindness to her, a distance and a disinterestedness, which peeked around the edges and made me uncomfortable.

Suddenly we heard a whistle. It came three times, shrill, like the sound a bird makes. But we all knew it wasn’t a bird.

Ari lifted her head when the whistle ended and she made the sound of a rooster crow.

“Keep going,” she told us and we paddled until the dim light of a flashlight from another canoe came into focus.

“Hi boys,” Ari called out across the lake.

In the other boat, which was quickly approaching, we saw two counselors rowing, and one of them lifted up his hands and waved into the night sky. Then they pulled up beside us, their boat making a rude wooden crashing noise as it knocked into us.

“Agnes and Margarite,” Ari said, “this is Rob and his friend Joey.” She didn’t look at us when she said it, but had her eyes only on them.

“Hi,” we managed, somehow, as they looked at us and they were smiling.

“How are you?” one of them asked in a low voice. In the dark it didn’t seem like a question that it would seem like in the day. It seemed to have implications, like the person asking wanted to be tied up in the answer.

“Getting better,” said Ari and the lilt of her voice was soft and caressing. It was not the voice that she ever used to talk to us. I realized that I wanted to be talked to in that way, or maybe I wanted to do the talking. This was how a woman talked to a man, in a strong way that still invited him to be stronger.

The two guys, Ari had called them boys, but they were not boys, were big with thick waists and necks and thick hair and large smiles that looked yellow or maybe it was green in the flash lights’ glare.

“I have something for them,” the bigger one said, and he handed across his boat two red lollipops. “For sucking,” he said.

I wasn’t sure how old he thought we were. Did he think we were children? He held out the lollipops for us and before I knew what I was doing I had taken one and Margarite had taken the other.

“Thanks,” Margarite said dully.

“Want to go swimming?” the man asked Ari.

“Yeah,” she said. “The girls can watch the boats.”

Ari had a dreamy look on her face. “Thanks for the lollies,” she said, but she had never looked at them, or at us. She was staring at the boys in the boat and she had her flashlight trained on them and they had their flashlight trained on her. I held my lollipop in my hand and was angry, suddenly, but I didn’t know who I was angry at.

“You sure they don’t want to come along,” one of the guys asked.

“No,” Ari said, quickly. “They don’t want to. I’m sure.”

But then I did want to go, because Ari had said that I didn’t. It was the first time I wanted the opposite of what Ari had said I wanted. I felt scared to think that, but also defiant. I wanted to say something defiant, but nothing came to mind.

The bigger guy handed me a rope that was tied to his boat.

“Hold on tight,” he said and I had to look away from his face because his eyes were glittering and there was a meaning in his eyes that I knew like you know when you’re in danger.

As I looked away I looked to Ari. I thought maybe she would say something to us that would make this all OK. But she was looking out across the lake. She was looking at the water or at the dark night sky. She shrugged her shoulders and then lifted her shirt above her head and took it off. We could see her clearly, because the guys’ flashlight was

pointed straight at her, illuminating her. She wasn't wearing anything under her shirt. She kept looking out across the water then, as we all looked at her breasts, two of them, pointed, like children's party hats with pink nipples. The surprise of it seemed coupled somehow with the strangeness. My mouth fell open and I held onto the rope and looked down at the water. I'm not sure what Margarite did.

"Your turn," she said to the boys, and they took their shirts off. It was so quick. There was a lot of skin and I didn't know where to look until Ari finally turned to Margarite and I and said,

"Close your eyes."

Instantly the world was blacker and I felt better, for the first time comforted at being alone in the dark. I heard rustling, and the lurching of the canoes and laughter, high-pitched, low-pitched, ugly. Then the sounds of two forms dropping into the water. Our boat leered to the side as Ari slid herself out of our canoe and the splash of her sinking down was very loud.

From the prow she called up to us. I opened my eyes and looked down at her, and then lifted the flashlight from where she'd left it in the boat and shone it down in her direction. She was wet and beaming.

"Keep the flashlight aimed at the sky, so we don't get lost," she said, and then she dunked under and was gone.

The noises we heard that night as we waited were mostly the noises of the waves lapping, and the noises of our two boats knocking woodenly into each other. Neither of

us had watches so neither of us knew how long the three of them swam together, how long we listened to them murmur to each other, and laugh cackling into the night air.

“I’m not mad at you anymore,” I told Margarite.

“You never had a reason to be,” she said.

“Well, I was just saying.”

“OK,” she said. “I’m glad you’re here, too,” she said.

Later, in the darkness, she reached out her hand to take mine, but it had the lollipop in it. I switched the sucker to my other hand. She was sucking on hers.

“It isn’t bad,” she said.

I threw the candy into the water, but we couldn’t see it and we couldn’t hear it. It didn’t even make a splash.

Chapter 22 – Royalty

The next day while I was brushing my teeth, Kate sidled up beside me. She and I eyed each other in the mirror as we both bared our teeth.

“So,” she said.

“Yes?” I said, and spit.

“How was it?”

“Oh, you know,” I said. I shrugged, and began putting my toothbrush back into my toiletry kit.

“You don’t brush your teeth for long enough,” she said.

“If you brush them for over a minute they fall out,” I told her over my shoulder and went back into the main room to get dressed. I noted with pleasure that she came back out of the bathroom soon after.

Ari was curled into the fetal position on her bed. When Joanna asked her if she was all right, she raised an arm from the covers and said in a sweeping voice: “Children, I will be unable to make it to breakfast today. Please give Nadine my regrets.”

It was almost funny, like she was some duchess.

The four of us headed off to salute the flag. Once the door closed, Kate turned to Johanna and said, “I bet it was another bust.”

“Was not,” I said, and Margarite nodded her head in emphatic agreement.

“What happened?” Johanna asked. Without Joanna I wondered if Kate would seem as great.

“We went out onto the lake in a canoe,” said Margarite.

“We did that too,” Kate said, with her nose in the air.

“And we met the boy counselors,” I said. “And then we all got into the water and went swimming together.”

Margarite didn’t nod her head but she didn’t say anything to refute it either.

“You went swimming with the boy counselors?” Johanna asked, her eyes wide.

“They were naked,” I told her. “But it was OK. It was actually pretty cool. But I shouldn’t even be telling you this because Ari said if anyone finds out she’ll get kicked out of camp.”

“She can’t get kicked out,” Kate said. “Dennis is her uncle. And she’s a counselor. Counselors don’t get kicked out of camp.”

“Doesn’t matter,” I told her. “It’s that big of a deal. And I don’t want her to get in trouble. Do you?”

I looked at Kate then like I sometimes looked at my brother when I was conning him into doing something so I could get my way, like when I would con him into telling my mother that he wanted peanut butter sandwiches when she said we were supposed to have turkey. Sometimes he would forget that he didn’t want peanut butter sandwiches,

and he would get angry and not eat anything until she made it for him and me, and I would win.

“Whatever,” Kate said, and then the bugle sounded and we put our hands over our hearts and said the pledge of allegiance.

At breakfast Nadine asked where Ari was and before Kate could say anything I told her that she was sick.

“What a shame,” said Nadine. “Today was bunk day. But I guess you can join my cabin, if you’d like. After breakfast we can just pop on down to check on her. It might be that she has a fantastic adventure for you planned. She might just be faking.”

“She didn’t seem so well,” said Margarite.

There was a part of me that hoped Ari was faking, but I didn’t think it was likely. She was probably just tired, like I was tired, but she got to stay in bed because she could do whatever she wanted.

“Are you guys excited about the play?” Nadine asked.

“I guess,” I said. “I’m only a guy in the chorus.”

Nadine was buttering a piece of toast but she stopped what she was doing and put the knife down beside her plate to look at me.

“Hey,” she said, “are you all right?”

I looked away from her.

"I'm fine," I said. The mess hall was loud that day. Everyone seemed like they were in such a good mood to be spending their bunk day together.

"I hope you're not coming down with what Ari has," Nadine said.

"I'm not," I told her, and looked away from her because I didn't want to look at anybody.

Chapter 23— Ourselves

The thing about Ari is that she's not just one thing. I guess no one is, but I think she's more not one thing than most people. She's not one thing the way a piece of origami is a piece of paper but it's also waiting to become a swan or a sailboat, or crumpled up in the trash.

Nadine had invited my bunk to participate in her plans to make rings at the Art Studio down by the lake which seemed OK. She had checked her art supplies on the way back to the cabin and told us that luckily she had enough metal that we could all make as many of them as we wanted.

"Rings for every finger," she told us. "Your hands will sparkle."

She was jolly about including us, and tried to make us feel like she wanted us to be part of her group's plans. She even waddled with us to our cabin to check on Ari.

When we got there the lights were off and our front door was locked.

Nadine's round happy face changed instantly, and she looked scared in a way that grown-ups do when they don't want you to know what it is they're scared of or that there's anything to be scared of at all.

"What's wrong?" Kate asked.

"Well," Nadine laughed in discomfort, "you see, I didn't think these doors were supposed to lock."

She began to bang on the door.

“Ari,” she called loudly, and sort of desperately. “Hey, Ari. Are you OK in there?”

No one answered, and Nadine banged harder.

“Ari!” she yelled.

And then the lights switched on from inside and we could hear the sound of the bolt being unlocked. Then the door opened and Ari stood there, wearing a paint smeared smock and a beaming smile.

“You guys made it,” she said. “And you’re just in time.”

She opened the door wide for us and the room was full of paint cans and huge rolls of parchment paper that she’d unrolled so that the room was more paper than floor.

“What’s going on?” asked Nadine.

“We’re doing self-portraits,” said Ari. “It’s our bunk activity. Now get out of here, Nadine, we have work to do.”

Nadine frowned. It seemed like a friendly frown. She seemed happy to see Ari awake but maybe hesitant to leave us with her.

“You’re feeling better?” she asked.

“I’m feeling fantastic,” Ari responded, “And I’ve got a great day planned for my favorite girls.”

Nadine nodded her head, but we weren't looking at her anymore. We were Ari's favorite girls, she'd said so, and she was ours, all day. It felt like the sun.

"What are we doing?" asked Kate.

"Come in and see," said Ari, and we all looked at Nadine to make sure she was leaving.

"Well, I guess let me know if there's anything you need," Nadine said and she left and we were free of her and who wanted to make rings anymore, when we could draw ourselves, and what was better than ourselves, except for Ari.

"This is a whole lot of paper," said Margarite.

"They're going to be full self-portraits. Whole bodies. Lay down. Margarite goes first."

Margarite lay down on the paper like she was making a snow angel and looked up at the ceiling.

Ari got down on her knees with a pen and began to trace Margarite's shape onto the paper on the floor. She started with her feet, and drew the pen swiftly up her legs and up her waist and then into the curve of her arm pit, and out towards her hands.

"It tickles," said Margarite, giggling.

We all watched Margarite being traced, the way the pen mimicked her body, the way Ari leaned over and into her and spent the time to trace around each of Margarite's

extended fingers, and then deftly, painstaking, tracing the way that Margarite's hair fell, so that each piece of her curls got their own spiral out onto the paper.

"So when you paint yourselves," said Ari, "the thing is to paint yourself and more than yourself."

"Did you guys really go swimming last night?" Kate asked.

Ari stopped smiling and stopped tracing. She adjusted her body so that she was no longer leaning into Margarite and looked up from Margarite's shoulder where her pen rested.

"What?" she asked.

"Agnes said that you and she and Margarite and the boy counselors, she said that you guys all went swimming together."

Ari looked from Kate to me. She held my eyes with her green ones for what felt like several minutes and then she looked back at Kate.

"We all went swimming," she said. "In the dark deep of the water. You could barely see anything, but you could feel everything. It was darker above the water than below. It was heaven."

"Oh," said Kate, and she didn't say anything else.

"That was going to be the plan last time," said Ari, "with you and Johanna, but it was too cold. We'll go again, just us, so it's fair, OK?"

"Yeah," said Kate. "OK, that's fair."

“You can’t tell anyone though,” said Ari. “It’s ours and no one else’s. That’s what makes it special.”

Ari began tracing the rest of Margarite’s body.

“OK” said Kate, “I won’t tell. As long as we can go, too.”

“Do we have to go?” asked Johanna.

“Of course you don’t have to do anything. Jump up,” said Ari and Margarite jumped and we looked down on her outline.

“That’s you before you make it yourself. What will you make yourself?” said Ari.

Margarite was beaming. “Look at me. I’m empty,” she said.

“Who’s next?” Ari asked. “You can pose in any shape you want.”

Kate got down onto a piece of paper and made a pose like she was doing a jumping jack.

We watched Ari trace her. She allowed her pen to slide up Kate’s thighs and into the apex of her crotch and then down again.

“You can paint yourself realistically. You can paint yourself full of stars like a constellation. Kate can paint horses in her stomach and dogs in her knees. Agnes can paint herself fifteen different colors, I think we have fifteen different colors or more.”

“Can I paint myself to look like my sister?” asked Johanna.

Ari continued to trace Kate who was laughing.

“You can’t paint yourself to look like your sister,” said Ari. “That’s the one rule. Or like your mother. No mothers at all.”

Johanna frowned.

“If you’re prettier than your sister, and better than her in a million ways,” said Ari, “why would you want to be her?”

And Johanna didn’t have anything to say to that. Except that she blushed. And she didn’t lift her hand to cover her nose.

“If you could do three things before you died, let’s say you die tomorrow, what would they be?” asked Ari.

“I’d win a race,” said Margarite.

“I’d punch someone in the face,” said Johanna.

And we laughed again, because Johanna said she wanted to punch somebody and I was proud of her. I wanted to bring her someone to punch, right there and then. I wanted to volunteer, but then Kate began listing what she would do, which included kissing a boy and eating fifteen doughnuts.

Ari asked me what I would do with 24 hours left to live and I didn’t know what to say, until the words came out of my mouth.

“For real?” I asked.

“For real,” said Ari. “For once.”

I looked at her hard when she said that. I began to wonder if maybe Ari had been listening to me more carefully than I had thought.

“It’s a tough question,” I said. “But with 24 hours left, I would have a real conversation with my brother.”

“What do you mean?”

Johanna was now on the ground being traced with her hands on her hips. She had decided she would paint herself sticking her tongue out at the world.

“I guess I just mean that I’d want him to hear what I was saying and then say something back to me and then I would say something back to him.”

“Agnes’ brother is autistic,” said Margarite.

There wasn’t anyone talking so I continued.

“What I mean is,” I said now, too loudly, “I would like him to be able to grow up. I’d like him to grow up with me.”

“No magic powers,” said Ari quietly.

“Yeah, I know,” I said. “Just,” I said. And language does that thing where there aren’t the right words for you to say the way you’re feeling. You can just try to be near someone and hope that they are getting a part of it.

“You’re done, J,” said Ari. “Agnes, strawberry queen, it’s your turn.”

I lay down on the paper and lifted one knee up and put one leg out. I raised an arm and put the other one out half raised.

“What’s that supposed to be?” asked Margarite, standing over me and peering down from a giant’s height to take in my body’s position.

“I’m not sure, yet,” I said.

Ari leaned over me and I could smell her breath as she put her face directly over my face and traced my head and my hair and then ran the pen down against my neck, over my shoulders, down my waist.

“What would you do with 24 hours left to live?” I asked, looking up at her.

“Don’t move,” she said and I froze.

“I would forget all the things that ever upset me and adopt a kitten and ride a motorcycle,” she said.

“That sounds good,” said Kate. “I want to adopt a kitten, too.”

When Ari had finished drawing my shape onto the white paper I leapt up and stood over myself. I was akimbo, legs and arms spread out and everywhere. I had thought I might look like I was running. I realized I looked more like I was drowning.

“OK, girls,” said Ari, “let’s paint the shit out of ourselves.”

Chapter 24— Without a Hitch

Danny dazzled and everyone else was pretty good. Sandra Dee was sufficiently prudish until the end when she changed costumes and then she and Danny hugged each other close in the final number. The campers who weren't in the production watched and laughed at the right times and clapped to make us feel like it had all been worthwhile. It didn't feel as good as winning the tennis trophy. I hadn't made any shots. In fact, I had forgotten some of the song lyrics as I stood behind the stars, because I was looking into the audience to see what they thought of me. Did they like me or believe that I was a guy? Did my hips thrust right, was I desperate enough?

When we left the theater that night Ari gave me and Margarite a dandelion each, but by the time we got back to the bunk, the seeds had all blown away in the wind. I left my empty stem by the side of the cabin. Margarite brought hers in and put it in her trunk.

Kate had a riding show where we watched her and a horse jump over crates and barrels. She rode the horse, a white one, with grace and a studied determination. I thought to myself how rich a girl can look riding a white horse. She won a medal which she proudly hung on the post of her bed.

The night after Kate's show I woke up in the middle of a dark sleep to go to the bathroom. The light in the bathroom was already on.

When I opened the door I saw Ari standing still like a zombie, staring at herself in the mirror. She was crying, I could tell, because there were still tears on her face and she didn't wipe them away when she turned to look at me.

"Are you OK?" I asked.

"Go away," she said. "You're bothering me."

"Can I do anything?" I asked.

"No," she said. "Go away."

I stood there looking at her and she looked down at me from where she stood and then she walked towards me. She looked angry and I thought that maybe she was going to hit me.

But then she took me into her arms and hugged me for a very long time. I felt confused and good wrapped in her thin arms which were stronger than I had expected them to be.

"I hate everyone," she said as she held me. And then she pushed me from her suddenly and made her way to a stall where I heard the dead bolt of the lock click heavily.

Chapter 25—Letters to the Outside

The next night the whole camp attended a barbeque. In order to get into the barbeque, each camper had to bring a letter to their parents because Donna and Dennis had announced that campers' parents were growing grieyed at how rarely they heard from them.

"We know you're having a great time here at camp," Donna announced over the loud speaker, "but we'd also like your parents to know. You've been here three weeks so I'm sure you all have some wonderful things to share."

We had finished our self-portraits and hung them by our bunk beds. We were a mess after it was done, and had gone down to the lake to wash the paint off our bodies. The paint probably was not very good for the environment. We could see the oil of the paint rippling out across the water after we had finished.

"Do you think we ruined the lake?" Margarite had asked me as we walked back to our cabin.

"No," I said, but I wasn't sure.

My self-portrait was blue and gold and purple, and had me half on fire and half frozen. My body was a mosaic and I had a huge smile on my face, and then each of my hands had faces on them which were not smiling. I liked my self-portrait because I believed that I had done enough of the assignment; I had been truthful enough to admit that there were many layers to me, without perhaps admitting too much.

Kate's self-portrait looked the most like her. Not that she was an artist. Her portrait just looked blond. She was wearing overalls and she had painted the kind of smile on her face that small children imagine you can keep forever. The fact is, I think the moment you grow up is the moment you no longer draw an upturned half-moon for everyone's mouth. Or maybe it's the moment, when you're drawing a tree, that you realize that each of the branches has hundreds of individual leaves on it. Or, the moment when you realize there isn't a line that designates where the sky begins.

Margarite had drawn music notes all over herself. It was hard to see who she was because she was covered with notes and clefs and numbers designating different tempos.

But my favorite of the self-portraits was the one that Johanna had completed. She stood on her feet with both of her hands on her hips like she was against the world and who were they to stop her. I'd never seen her stand like that in real life, but I thought it was wonderful that she could imagine herself that way. The defiance with which she had drawn her tongue sticking out at the world made me feel like she'd be OK once camp was over and the reality of life began all over again.

No one had traced Ari onto the white paper. I don't know why we hadn't thought of it. It wasn't until we were half way through our painting, while Ari hovered like a graceful fairy, helping us here and there with a brush stroke or an idea, that Kate realized that Ari was not doing one of herself.

"I've been doing mine my whole life," she said, and she spun around and posed for us as though she were a super model. "Plus, I'm helping you all," she said, and went down on her haunches to help Margarite draw a treble clef.

Before we left for dinner the night of the barbeque Ari had us sit down and told us that we had 20 minutes in which to write our parents the truth.

“Have it out,” she said. “I don’t want you to pussy foot around. Do you know what that means? You need to pretend that this is the only chance you’ll have to tell them everything, and maybe it is. Why not? You have to write it down to get it out.”

We all sat down to write our letters, and we had a spirit in us, a fire maybe, that made us write some very interesting notes to our parents. I only know this because after we were finished and had sealed each letter and had licked the stamps and written the addresses down, Ari picked up our letters and put them in a pile and then sat cross legged on her bed and announced that she was going to open each one and read them out loud.

“I hope you didn’t use too many big words,” she said.

“I don’t want my letter read out loud,” said Johanna.

“It’ll be good for you,” said Ari.

“I don’t either,” I said, and I felt something inside me break. “They are private,” I said.

“I don’t mind if you read mine,” said Kate.

“Which means it can’t be very interesting,” said Ari, but she opened Kate’s first.

“Dear Mom and Dad and Sarah and Morris,” Ari read.

“I am loving it here at camp. Ari told us to write down the truth and that is the truth. I think I am probably the best rider of my age group, but sometimes Sasha gives me

a worse horse than the other girls. Do you think she is jealous of me? I won 1st place in my age group competition yesterday. Did you know we made self-portraits of ourselves? Mine was the best. In order for everything to go right when parents weekend comes, please make sure to bring my change of clothes for the ride home because I don't have anything but my blue and white and I am sick sick sick of it. That is the truth. Yesterday I got a purple feather in lacrosse. Also, I am going to go swimming in the lake at night! Yes, but you can't tell anyone. Only the special get to.

Kisses and Love and Hugs,

Kate"

"OK" said Ari, when she had finished, "that's fine, you can have the letter back and put it in a new envelope and send it to your parents."

Kate took the letter back and held it in her hands. She looked around the room at us as though expecting us to congratulate her on her writing style. No one said anything, so Kate sat back down on her bed.

"Who's next?" Ari asked.

"I want mine back. Unopened," I said.

"Me too," said Johanna.

"Then we'll do Margarite next," said Ari.

I looked at Margarite but she wasn't looking at anyone. She was tracing the pattern on her comforter with one finger and looking at the tracing as though that was the only thing that mattered in the world.

"Dear Mom," Ari read out to us.

"Sometimes I feel very alone and small. Sometimes I wish you were here to sing to me but I am being brave. I am learning a lot at camp. I think my mind is getting stronger and I don't feel like hiding as much as I used to. I wouldn't tell you this except I feel that I should tell you that I wish dad was around more. I know that you guys know what is going on but I sometimes wish I could know, too. I want to be like you, but also maybe make some different roads.

Love,

Margarite"

"That, too, can be sent," said Ari, and handed the letter back to Margarite who took it from Ari's hands but didn't look at anyone else as she did.

"My parents split up, too," said Ari.

"Mine aren't split up," said Margarite. "I don't want to talk about it." And then she said, "Did you know, today was a good day until now."

“I just thought we should all be honest with each other,” Ari said. “Come on, it’s for the best.”

Margarite stayed sitting on her bed and looked back at the covers and we all looked at her but pretended that we weren’t. I wanted to leave the cabin like I wanted to leave my house before I left my house and ended up at camp. I was always in a perpetual state of wanting to leave the place I was.

But I didn’t leave. The room was quiet now. No one was protesting anymore. In fact, I almost felt as though I couldn’t have said a word if I tried. I was a statue. And Ari opened up Johanna’s letter.

“Dear Mom and Dad,” she read to us.

“When you had a second daughter I’m not sure if you knew that she would be like me. The thing is, maybe you should have quit while you were ahead. I’m not angry that you had me, I just wish sometimes you wouldn’t mind it so much. When I grow up I’ll make enough money to get a nose job and then maybe things will be different. That’s all the truth I have for now.”

When Ari finished reading Johanna’s letter she didn’t say anything. She just held the letter in her hands and it looked like she was reading it over again.

“Johanna,” she said. “Why do you think you need a nose job?”

Johanna didn’t say anything.

“Her mom told her so,” said Kate. “It’s not the worst idea,” she added.

Ari tapped the paper against her lap twice and then shook her head.

Johanna had drawn herself into herself, and was small and compact on her bed. Her portrait, beside her bed, leered out, asserting itself, saying, who cares. But, Johanna still cared.

“Quit while you’re ahead,” she said. “Johanna,” she said, but then she didn’t say anything else, she just took the paper and crumpled it up into a compact ball. She let it drop onto the wood floor where it bounced once and stayed still.

“Last but not least,” Ari said.

Chapter 26. The Case Here

“What you’re doing isn’t fair,” I said.

“I’m revealing,” said Ari. “It’s not fair not to, actually.”

“Where’s your letter?” I asked.

But Ari’s response was to tear open the envelope addressed to my parents and unfold the paper and begin to read. I didn’t need to hear my letter to my parents in Ari’s mouth. I already knew that it should not be sent. It should never have been written.

“Hello,” Ari read. “I would like more toothpaste. I both want and do not want you to come to parents’ weekend and am actually growing nervous. I don’t want you to spill the beans. When you come, please don’t tell anyone that Eric is dead. Because that is not the case here. As far as any one knows, our family is very much not perfect, in fact I told everyone that dad drinks but really he is just boring. Maybe we are all boring. But here at camp that is also not the case. Everyone can be alive here. I don’t want to go home but I sort of hate being here. I also would like a pet when I get home. Kate has a dog.

Sincerely,

Agnes”

Ari let out a whistle when she finished the letter and then looked back down at it again.

I had thought I could send it to my parents and then that would be that, we would never have to say it out loud ever again. Eric had been dead for four months. Eric was an idiot and I hated him and I didn't care that he was dead. I could care less, I thought to myself, the dumb stupid idiot who was nothing to me, was nothing to me dead or alive and I didn't care.

"Agnes," Ari said, but I didn't respond. I stood up to get my letter back from her but then I was standing up and not sure where to go.

"I want to hear your letter," I told Ari.

"I didn't write one," she said. "Is your brother really dead or is that another lie, Agnes?" she asked me softly.

"I hate you," I told her. And finally I was able to leave the cabin.

Chapter 27– What We Miss

That night I missed the barbeque. I climbed the hill that leads out back to where the water ski equipment was housed and I sat behind the shed and picked the grass and the flowers until I was surrounded by bare earth.

No one came to find me. It felt like the time I had tried to water ski and had fallen down for my third time, far out into the lake and the instructor had pulled the motor boat around and told me that I wasn't trying hard enough and now I would have to swim to shore with my skis because she didn't take failures back in her boat.

I hadn't believed her until I only saw the white of the spray that the boat left behind. And then, clutching the skis to my chest, and whimpering, I doggy paddled back to shore. It seemed like it took me hours, which it didn't, but it did take me much longer than the class time allotted for water skiing, and when I returned, there was no one waiting for me. I had dragged the water skis to the shore and left them there. I didn't put them back in the boat house. I slunk back to my cabin and had found Ari there, dancing to reggae music on her boom box. When she asked me what was wrong I couldn't tell her, because it would include the part about me being a failure and I didn't want her to see me that way.

I sat out by the water ski equipment and relived that embarrassment and others. Sitting outside while the other campers danced and kissed. Sitting outside while everyone seemed to be living their lives. The time when I was six and I had hidden in the spare closet at a house we had gone to look at to see if we wanted to move there. How I had

hidden there, waiting to be looked for and found. How my parents had forgotten all about me until they had driven all the way home. I guess a majority of my life had been spent trying to get them to remember.

My parents had moved on after being sad about Eric for what seemed like much too short of a time. They seemed relieved after they were sad. It was their relief, the lack of exhaustion in my mother's eyes, my father smiling and laughing over dinner, that was unbearable. I wondered how happy they would be if I was gone. And then I realized that I was.

Johanna's parents were in Spain, and my parents were also on vacation while I was here. They were practicing losing another child, and I didn't imagine that they minded in the slightest. I hated that I had waited for over an hour in that closet for my parents, that I had waited for Ari to read my secrets to everyone, that I had waited and waited while Ari and those men swam in the water with their nakedness and had laughed and had left me stranded and afraid.

Chapter 28 -- Waiting

I came back to the cabin after it was dark and the only one there was Margarite.

“Where is everyone?” I asked.

“Are you all right?” she asked.

“Are they looking for me?” I asked.

And she shook her head.

I wanted them to be out searching for me, through the bracken of the woods. I felt upset that I hadn't thought to stay out longer to make them more frightened that I wouldn't return. I felt weak that I had returned, and only Margarite was there to greet me and it didn't feel like nearly enough.

Margarite stood up from her bed where she had been lying. She was wearing her tweety bird pajamas which I thought were juvenile the first time I saw them and then I began to like them and now I thought they were juvenile again.

“What?” I said.

“She read us your letter.”

“She read your letter, too,” I shot back.

“I know. You're right. It wasn't fair.”

“I don't care,” I said.

“Is your brother really dead?”

“Who even cares?” I said.

“Don’t you?”

I took off my sneakers and my socks and then I stood barefoot on the floor. I looked up at my self-portrait which seemed flimsy now. All of the self-portraits we’d hung so dotingly, so proudly, they were just paper.

“She didn’t even make one,” I said.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” she said.

“It doesn’t matter.”

“My grandmother died,” she said.

“That was your grandmother,” I said. “That’s an old person. That happens.”

“Where were you?” Margarite asked me. She was still standing, only a couple feet from me and we were looking at each other and I felt very aware of my body. I felt like I was waiting to spring at her and hurt her and she was waiting too, bracing herself, for me to do it.

“I was just outside, pulling up grass,” I said.

“When I was little I was with my grandmother and I pulled up some grass and she grabbed my hair and pulled it really hard. It made my eyes water, it was that hard. She said, that’s what you’re doing to the grass. She wasn’t actually very nice,” said Margarite.

I didn't know what to say.

"Not that that's the reason," she said.

I didn't know what to say.

"I guess you should know where they went. They went out on the canoe again, I'm pretty sure."

"There should be more people looking out for us," I said. "I feel like this shouldn't be allowed."

She shrugged her shoulders.

"Where are the adults?" I asked.

"Do you mean Dennis and Donna?"

"I don't know," I said. I was done with crying for the day though, so I didn't cry. I sat down on Margarite's bed and then she sat down with me.

"Do you hate Ari?" I asked her.

"It's hard to hate her even though," she said.

"I hate her," I said.

"I guess the thing is that now I can tell you about my parents."

I wanted to tell her that I didn't give a damn about her parents but I realized that she wanted me to give a damn and it mattered that she wanted that from me. She was looking at me.

“Well.”

“My father moved out and now he lives with someone else.”

“I’m sorry,” I said.

“When he moved out I thought it was because he hated me. But my mother told me it was because he hated her. So then we both had a hard time, except he still comes over and he still pays for everything.”

I had nothing. I just wanted to go to bed. Margarite could usually pick up on clues. She was always giving in to what people wanted to do. But now she wouldn’t stop talking.

“He takes me out with him. We went fishing one time. And another time we went to a museum. But he’s not my father in the same way. And I saw the woman he lives with and she wears this bright red lipstick and she has the most huge boobs I’ve ever seen. And Ari said that men are like that. That they go from port to port to port.”

“I don’t know. Maybe,” I said.

“I guess I don’t care,” said Margarite, hopefully.

“Yeah, that’s a good way to look at it.”

“Is it?” she said. “Because when I say I don’t care sometimes I still do, and it feels terrible. If he still pays for everything, it’s like he owns us.”

“I don’t know about that.”

“It’s how it feels.”

I nodded my head. That was how it felt.

“How did your brother die?” Margarite asked me.

“He was hit by a car,” I said.

“Oh,” she said. “But you don’t care.”

I opened my mouth to respond but nothing came out.

“Let’s go to bed,” said Margarite.

I got up from her bed and she got under the covers and I got into my own bed. My bed was cold when I got in and it didn’t warm up.

“Are you sleeping?” I asked.

“We should turn out the lights,” she said.

“Let’s leave them on,” I said. And then I said, “Can I get in with you?”

“Yes,” she said.

I climbed down from my top very high bunk-bed that didn’t feel high anymore, it just felt lonely. She opened the covers for me and I crawled in and we curled into each other’s arms. It didn’t feel so cold after that.

Chapter 28—After the Bugle Should Have

That morning, long after the sun had risen, long after the bugle should have blown, Margarite and I were awoken by Nadine. Looking up into her face, I was surprised by how pretty I thought she looked.

“Darlings,” she said in her thick accent, “Darlings, wake up.”

Margarite was sitting up in bed and Nadine stood in the middle of the room. Ari and Johanna and Kate were not in their beds.

“There’s been a problem,” said Nadine.

“What?” asked Margarite, but Nadine just kept shaking her head like she didn’t have the words to explain it.

“Where’s everyone?” I asked.

“There’s been a problem,” said Nadine.

She led us outside after we had hurriedly dressed and the day was gorgeous and hot. There were a couple of campers sitting listlessly on their porches. They watched us follow Nadine like lost ducklings. She was not walking slowly now, but forcefully, and we were skipping to keep up.

Nadine led us to the Director's cabin and we found Kate and Johanna sitting in chairs in the front office. They had red eyes and looked like they hadn't slept all night.

"Are you OK?" I asked.

They nodded their heads absent-mindedly.

Donna came out of her office and looked at the four of us and Nadine. She clapped her hands together. She was not smiling. I had never seen her not smiling before.

"Where's Ari?" said Margarite.

Donna clapped her hands together again. "Now we've got all our brave little soldiers," she said. "Now we're going to do some calling of your parents and we'll get this all sorted out."

"Where's Ari?" I said.

Johanna said, "We think she's drowned."

There wasn't anything then but the air in the office.

"She never came back to the boat," continued Johanna. "She wouldn't let us get in the water with her and she never came back. And the boy counselors never came either. It was just her and we waited all night," she said.

Nadine and Donna stood in front of us all and their hands hung by their sides.

“We don’t know anything definitively yet,” said Donna. She had dead eyes. She had unwashed un-brushed hair. We all did. “We’re going to drag the lake before we jump to any conclusions,” she said.

“All night,” Johanna said again.

Kate hadn’t said a word. I couldn’t see the color of Kate’s eyes but the color looked as though it had changed.

Donna clapped her hands for a third time. The sound was loud. We turned to look at her.

“Let’s call your parents,” she said.

“Maybe we should get them some breakfast,” said Nadine.

“I’m not hungry,” said Johanna.

“She’s a good swimmer,” said Kate. “She’s probably fine,” she said.

“I’m cold,” said Margarite.

“Let’s just call your parents,” said Donna. And then she went back into the office and Nadine looked at us all. Big Nadine, her arms limp at her sides, she seemed to want to say something that would be the right thing to say, but what is the right thing to say?

“Let’s get some breakfast,” she said. And we followed her to the mess hall.

Chapter 29 The Lake

After they dragged the lake they did find Ari, because she was there at the bottom, beautiful as ever, and clothed this time. They said it was an accident. Everyone said that. What a horrible accident.

But that day as we watched the boats dragging nets to the bottom of the lake, and waited for our parents to drive up to the camp to pick us up early, Joanna and Kate told us what happened.

“She was angry,” said Johanna. “She couldn’t talk right, her sentences were all jumbled. The boys didn’t show.”

“The truth is,” I said, “they never cared about her, did they?”

Kate didn’t say anything. She held her knees to her chest.

The truth was, we were the ones who cared about Ari, if anyone did.

“She told us she was going for a swim and she jumped into the water. She told us we weren’t allowed to come with her. She said we were supposed to wait for her to come back. That we weren’t allowed to come in or she would never talk to us again.”

Kate said, “I’m sure she’s OK.”

We watched the large boats slowly cross the lake, their nets dragging behind them like wedding trains. We wanted to see what was in the nets but we also didn’t. They looked empty from far away.

“If Ari isn’t OK,” said Margarite, “is it our fault?”

“Yes,” I said.

“Yes,” Johanna said.

“Hey listen,” said Kate, “I’m sure she’s fine.”

She and Johanna had been waiting in the canoe on the lake for more than eight hours when the speedboat finally came to get them.

We saw Nadine trudging towards us, with her arms held open, motioning for us to come and join her.

“Your parents are here,” she called to us loudly. “They’ve come,” she said, as though at long last we could all breathe a sigh of relief.