

One

When I was a kid, I drew clouds that looked like the bodies of cartoon sheep. The sun was a perfect yellow circle. Birds flew in flocks of little black Vs. And I made sure there was always a rainbow.

It's too bad the sky doesn't actually look like that. In a way, the real thing is sort of a letdown.

"Emily?"

"Yeah?" I raise my head off my towel and squint away the sun. Meg is lying on her side, with dark oversized sunglasses perched on the top of her head. She's staring at me. I give her a few seconds to say something, but her lips stay pressed together tight. "What is it?"

"I'm trying to imagine you with a mohawk," she says, leaning forward.

I laugh. "Why?"

"Oh, I don't know." She pauses to retie the plaid strings on her bikini bottom. "I bet mohawks are cool in art school. But I think you'd regret it. Maybe not right away, but definitely in September."

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Meg reaches for the coconut oil and gives her flat stomach a spritz, then fires one at mine to be cute. “Just remember, it’s not like bangs or layers that you can hide underneath a headband until they grow out. There is no graceful way to grow out a mohawk.”

I rake my fingers through the knots in my damp hair. A few dark blond strands get left behind, swirled around my fingers. It took me practically all of junior year to grow my thin hair past my shoulders. “I’m not getting a mohawk,” I say, probably more serious than I need to be.

“Okay, okay.” She lets a giggle slip. “Could you imagine if you did, though? You’d be the talk of Cherry Grove.” Meg slides her sunglasses back in place and lies down. But she’s only still for a minute before she rolls around, tugging on the corners of her towel, trying unsuccessfully to get comfortable. “Tomorrow’s going to feel so weird without you here.”

There’s a bowl full of cut lemons between us on a green glass mosaic table. I fish around, find a juicy half, and give it a squeeze over my head. I’ve always wished my hair was striking platinum instead of dark honey, which is the most unexciting shade of blond, the one that some people even call brown. A bit of juice drips into my eyes and stings them like crazy. “You’ll have Rick,” I remind her. Though I doubt she’s forgotten.

“Rick’s not my best friend.” Meg stands up suddenly. Red stripes run across her back from the thick rubber strips of her lounge chair. She walks over to her pool, sits down at the edge, and dips her feet in the water.

“It’s not like I’m moving to Philadelphia,” I say. “It’s only three days a week, and I’ll be home by dinner if I catch the five-thirty train.”

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She sighs. “Maybe I’ll get a job. Maybe Starbucks is hiring.”

We both know Meg isn’t going to get a summer job, so neither of us says anything. I let her sit with her back to me, kicking her legs through the water in slow motion. I get what she’s hinting at. Even though there’ve been lots of changes this year, and even though my summer art classes aren’t a big deal, the reality is that we’ve never spent a summer apart since becoming best friends and neighbors five years ago. Meg’s going to miss me.

I already miss her.

A cloud passes the sun and drops a cold shadow over the backyard. Meg takes off her sunglasses and tosses them onto her towel. “No use laying out now. Do you wanna walk to Starbucks?”

“Yeah,” I say. “Sure.”

We throw clothes over our still-damp bathing suits and flip-flop down the stone path that leads from the backyard to the front of Meg’s house.

Meg and I live inside a gated community called Blossom Manor, which is made up of ten cul-de-sacs shaped like thermometers. Houses run up the sides in pairs, leading to the three biggest homes curved around the bulbous tip. That’s where we live, directly across from each other, in identical mansions.

The homes of Blossom Manor are all posh and stately, with thick green lawns stretching to the curbs. The streets are named after pretty flowers, like Petunia and Bluebell, and paved with rich red brick in zigzag patterns. The low-pitch hum of purring central air-conditioning units only makes the chirping birds sound sweeter.

I’m suddenly overcome with an achy, sentimental feeling. Cherry Grove, New Jersey, is practically perfect, especially in the

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summertime. It makes me wish that I was still a kid, when summers meant I played with Meg from morning until night, pool hopping until our skin was pruned and our lips were blue, eating nothing but hot dogs from backyard grills and bomb pops from the ice cream truck. There's a weight in my stomach that doesn't usually appear until August, right before school starts up. The sadness of summer coming to an end, even though mine only just started. That's how things go when you get older, I guess. Summers matter less and less, until you turn into a grown-up and they disappear entirely.

Meg and I reach the back of the development and squeeze through a line of tall, tightly packed bushes that serve as a natural fence to keep nonresidents out of Blossom Manor. When Meg and I first discovered this passage, we felt a rush. It was like our little world had suddenly become huge.

On the other side, there's a steep sandy hill. Meg and I slip and slide as we amble our way up, clinging to each other for traction, and then again for balance as we reach Route 38 and brush away the grit that sticks to our coconut-oiled legs. Even though we live right off the highway, you wouldn't know it. The noise of the traffic gets tangled in the bushes.

The Starbucks is an oasis in the middle of the sun-baked parking lot. The heat of the blacktop burns through my flip-flops, so I run for the door. Inside, it's refreshingly frosty. My hair blows around my face in damp wisps, and goose bumps compete with mosquito bites for space on my legs and arms.

When we step up to the counter, the barista rings us up without even asking for our order, because Meg and I always get the

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same thing — two grande frozen peppermint mochas and one old-fashioned glazed donut, cut in half.

“My treat,” Meg says, and hands me a crisp twenty from inside her woven straw purse. “And I’m sorry if I sounded like a wet blanket earlier. I mean, it’ll suck not to hang out whenever we want to this summer, but we’ll just make the most of the days when you don’t have classes. And, like you said, you’ll be around for parties and stuff at night.” She smiles. “I’m so proud of you, Emily.”

“For what?”

“For following your passion! Pursuing your art!” It sounds corny when Meg puts it that way, but she truly means it. She puts her hand to her chest and fiddles with the delicate M charm hanging off her silver necklace. It was my Christmas gift to her, from Tiffany’s. Meg bought me an E one in gold, because she said gold looks better with my coloring. We never take them off. “It is seriously inspirational. I mean, I wish there was something that I was good at. I’m so untalented, it’s ridiculous.”

“Please. You have lots of talent.” Meg is really pretty, she’s in all honors classes, and she has a popular boyfriend. But I don’t mention any of that out loud, because they only seem like talents to the people who don’t have them. Instead, I grin and say, “You’re double-jointed!”

Meg laughs, and my heart surges with love for her. Meg is the kind of best friend you read about in old books. She’s that sweet all the time. A lot of girls in our high school think she’s fake, but they’re totally, totally wrong.

While I wait for the drinks, Meg drags two overstuffed armchairs to our favorite table — the checkerboard table centered at

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the big window. I drop into my seat and tuck my legs underneath me to keep them warm. Over Meg's shoulder, traffic whizzes along the highway. A big green sign hovers over the road. My eyes trace the reflective white letters twinkling in the sunlight.

"Can you believe Philly is only thirty miles away?" I take a small sip, because frozen peppermint mochas are too sweet to gulp and I want mine to last forever. "I mean, thirty miles is actually pretty close. We could walk thirty miles, if we had to."

Cherry Grove doesn't have a trace of city to it. A lot of people commute from here to Philadelphia for work. People who don't like the city. There are no tall buildings or high-rise apartment complexes here. Things feel very quaint — most of the buildings are old, and if they're not, they're eventually made to look that way. Like our town hall. Before the fire last summer, it was an ugly office building, with brown stucco and mirrored windows. But then it was rebuilt with fieldstone shipped in from somewhere in rural Pennsylvania, and black shutters were attached to all the windows. They even added a big clock that hammers a brass bell on the hour.

Meg uses her tongue to chase a drip of whipped cream off the side of her cup. "Do you remember freshman year, when Becky Martin came back from Easter break with those bangs she cut herself? She had to wear that floppy velvet hat to the spring dance." She closes her eyes and shakes her head. "I felt so bad for her."

I remember. Becky's bangs were so short that they stuck straight out like a visor. She cut them because she was bored. I overheard her say that when she was crying in the bathroom, trying to find someone with extra bobby pins. Boredom can be dangerous in a place like Cherry Grove. It can make you do things you'll regret.

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But I don't get why Meg is bringing this up now. I don't need to be scared out of a hairstyle I don't even want.

Meg picks off a few crumbs from her half of the donut and pops them into her mouth. "Ooh! I almost forgot. I have a big favor to ask you."

"Yeah?"

She spins around in her chair so that her tan legs dangle off one armrest while the other supports her back. Then she twists her long chestnut hair up into a messy bun. Like clockwork, freshly snipped layers fall out the sides and frame her face. "I want to surprise Rick with a great gift for our six-month anniversary. Not like a dumb shirt or video game." She looks sad for a second, but then she brightens. "Could you help me think of something special?"

"Umm, sure," I say. But I don't have any ideas right this second, maybe because I myself have never had a boyfriend, an anniversary, or even a French kiss that didn't occur during spin the bottle or taste like beer. Before junior year, Meg hadn't either. We'd both been equal.

Meg's purse buzzes on the floor. It lies just out of Meg's reach, so I dig the cell out for her. At the bottom, I touch a chewed-up blue pen. My fingers cling to it like it's magnetized. It's almost like I can't help but pick it up.

Meg flips open her phone and starts texting. While she does, I brush the crumbs off my napkin and start to draw. The pen fits in my hand so comfortably, like an extension of my fingers. I draw a lot in moments like this. It gives me something to concentrate on while life happens to everyone else.

There's a tiny dip between Meg's nose and upper lip, and it's shaped like a perfect teardrop. I draw that pretty quickly, but it

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looks funny there, floating on the napkin. It needs more context. And since Meg is otherwise occupied — texting away with Rick, no doubt — I draw the flat lines of her lips. Then I add her nose and the sloping angles of her heart-shaped face. I don't try to map the couple of dark freckles she has, because the pen is leaky and the napkin only too happy to soak up the extra ink.

As Meg appears on the napkin, it makes me excited. I mean, I'm relatively new at this — drawing for real. Not cartoon-style where eyeballs are round circles with big black dots inside and feet face outward at an impossible angle. It's still surprising when I'm able to draw something that actually looks like what I want it to. Each time feels like a tiny miracle.

When I glance up from the napkin, Meg is staring at me. “Emily, are you drawing me?! Like, right now?”

I take a quick sip of my mocha and put the cup down so it blocks her view. “Sort of. Not really.”

Meg rises up out of her seat, trying to peek. “Yeah, right! You never show me any of your drawings. Come on! Let me see it.”

My first instinct is to crumple it up, because it's just a quick sketch and not anything I'm even trying to make good. But I know I have to get better about showing my work to people, especially considering my art classes start tomorrow. So I hand it over, and pretend I'm not nervous about what she thinks.

Meg takes the napkin carefully, cradling it in her hands. “Wow,” she says slowly, like each letter is its own sentence.

“You like it?” I'm not trying to fish for compliments, but I want to make sure she's being honest. Meg definitely prefers niceness to truthfulness, and when you know that about somebody,

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it's practically impossible not to feel insecure, no matter what they tell you.

And then it hits me. Maybe I could draw a portrait for Meg to give to Rick for their anniversary! Nothing too colorful or big. Just a simple sketch done in pencil on a small sheet of heavy paper — the kind where you can see the spidery veins of the tree pulp. Then we could go pick out a nice frame to put the portrait in. It might seem like a girly gift for some guys, but not Rick. He's got photos of Meg all over the place — in his wallet, tucked into the visor in his truck. He even keeps one underneath the insole of his baseball cleat for good luck.

But just as I'm about to share my idea, Meg's head drops to the side and her bottom lip gets so pouty, it shows a rim of the slick pink inside.

"I would seriously rather get a nose job than a car this summer."

My stomach muscles get tight, like they don't want to do the work it's going to take for another breath. "What?" I reach for my napkin.

But Meg won't hand it back to me. She keeps staring down at it in her manicured hands, blinking a lot. "I just hate how fat the tip looks," she says quietly, and scratches the drawing with her nail, as if she could shave the pen marks down.

"Here, let me fix it," I stutter after a few awkward seconds. The thing is, Meg's nose *is* kind of round. Not in an ugly way. In a Meg way.

The door opens and the air makes a suction sound as Rick steps into Starbucks. He's wearing stiff gray coveralls, mud-caked

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Timberland work boots, and a red baseball cap embroidered with the name of his family business, WILEY LANDSCAPING. Rick is so tall and broad-shouldered that he blocks out most of the sun shining through the glass behind him.

Meg and I stare at each other in a moment of panic, my napkin drawing hanging in limbo between us. I absolutely don't want Rick to see it, so I reach for it, but Meg snatches her hand back first.

Rick rests his hands on Meg's bare shoulders and plants a kiss on the top of her head. She climbs onto her knees and hugs his torso. I watch her discreetly slide my drawing into the back pocket of her red terry cloth shorts.

I guess I should feel relief that it's hidden. Only it's kind of weird, how upset it makes me to see my drawing become a lumpy wad. She should have just given it back to me.

Rick smiles at me. "Hey, Emily. I like your flip-flops."

"Hi," I say back, and then shove my straw in my mouth. My flip-flops are the same old Havaianas that everyone in town wears. But Rick always finds some random thing like that to compliment me on. Meg says Rick's afraid I don't like him. Which isn't true, exactly. He's nice, nicer than a guy of his good looks should probably be. He's just not that smart, especially compared to someone like Meg. But he understands how tight Meg and I are, close enough so that our names are always mashed together in conversations around school, like *MegandEmily*. He gets that I'm important, that I matter.

Rick stretches and yawns. His armpits are damp, but he doesn't smell stinky. He wears the spicy smell of fresh-cut grass like a too-powerful cologne. "I thought you guys would be hanging out by the pool all day. I've just got to take one last trip to the greenhouse

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and then I can come over and swim.” Since Rick’s dad owns their landscaping business, he pretty much gets to set his own hours. Which is to say, he’s always around. “Do you guys want me to drop you off anywhere on my way?”

Meg turns to me. “Do you want a ride back home? Or we can walk. It’s just hot out and I’m kind of tired. But whatever you want, Emily. It’s your last summer afternoon.” She’s talking fast. Her light blue eyes sparkle. She still gets so excited about Rick driving us around, even though he’s probably given us over a million rides.

“Hey, that’s right!” Rick says. “Emily, are you dreading summer school or what? I was so happy when I passed my US History final so I wouldn’t have to go again this year and lose out on all the money I’d make working for my dad. But don’t worry. The classes are way easier than regular school.”

Even though I don’t want to get into it with Rick, I feel the need to defend myself. “It’s not summer school,” I tell him. “It’s a pre-college art program.” Rick looks at me blankly, like I’m speaking another language. “It’s at the Philadelphia College of Fine Art.” Still nothing. “I chose to go to it.”

Rick takes off his ball cap, runs his hand through his matted brown hair, and puts it back on again. Thinking. Then he chuckles in a friendly, quiet way. “Okay, that makes sense. I’ve never heard of anyone failing Art at Cherry Grove High.”

I don’t know why this annoys me so much, because Rick’s right. Ms. Kay’s Art class is an easy A. That’s why it’s so popular. That’s why I took it in the first place.

No one takes it seriously. In my class, all the boys ever drew were sports players or weird *Alice in Wonderland*-type drug stuff. Amy Waterman turned every project into a chance to practice her

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bubble letters. And the rest of the girls were obsessed with glitter pens and making origami roses for each other. Everyone but me slept during the weekly slide-show presentations. Though it was actually hard to pay attention, since Ms. Kay always had the projector tweaked slightly out of focus, and unless you squinted the whole time, you'd get nauseous.

But for whatever reason, I really did like it. I looked forward to tying on my musty apron, even the eggy smell of the water in the slop sink. It was a place where I didn't have to think about anything other than what I was drawing.

So when Ms. Kay offered to recommend me for the invitation-only summer program, I felt relieved. Though, honestly, I doubt anyone else in our class would have been interested. But I needed a break from it all, and taking some art classes in Philadelphia a few times a week was as good an idea as any I could think of. Meg got a boyfriend and I got a hobby. That's just the way things worked out.

"Well, don't worry, Emily. Meg's going to be lost without you." Rick shuffles backward toward the register and grabs a bottle of water. "But I'll take good care of her while you're gone. Promise."

I say "thanks" — not because I'm thankful, but because it seems like that's what I'm expected to say.

Meg pivots so Rick can't see or hear us. She pulls my napkin out of her pocket, smooths it out against her thigh, and hands it back to me. "I'm sorry, but I didn't want Rick to see your drawing before you had a chance to fix it. You're not mad, are you?"

Meg's apology is sincere. I can tell by how her mouth refuses to close until I let her know that things are okay, that I'm not upset.

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“It’s fine,” I say, and give her arm a squeeze. “And we can get a ride home with Rick.”

“You sure?”

“Seriously.” And I take the tray and napkin from her hands and throw everything away — including my drawing — to prove it.

Meg and Rick wait for me outside, standing closer than close. I watch as Rick twirls a piece of Meg’s long hair around his finger. She stands on her tiptoes, gently picking bits of cut grass off his neck.

I make sure to put on a smile before stepping through the door.