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ALL THE PEOPLE TRAIPSING

ON THE MORNING WE HIGHTAILED IT AWAY FROM DAD in New Hampshire and moved to Burrostucky Park in Maine, the housing manager, a woman with feather earrings and a tight bun, warned us that the street “roughed up” the closer you got to the cul-de-sac.

“Drugs?” Mom asked.

“A range of issues. Some boys like to throw rocks and such.”

“Well, we won’t be here long—just until I get back on my feet. I want more for my girls than this.”

The manager nodded and assigned us an apartment in the first condo, farthest from the cul-de-sac. We paid \$36 dollars in rent a month, which I knew couldn’t be that much because a Brazilian Barbie doll cost \$20.

“We’re lucky,” Mom said. “This half of the street’s not so bad. I think the manager sees we’re not like everyone else. We’re on our way out.”

Mom determined our bike route would end at the mailbox, which squatted yards from our apartment like a giant steel guard, but I caught Mom busy with the classifieds when I asked her about the woods behind the building. She just waved in the trees’ general direction.

“Stay in sight of the house,” she said. “And, Samantha, look out for your sisters.”

I took liberties in defining “sight of the house,” of course, but that benefited everyone, including Jane and Kirsten.

The trees in the woods swayed so slowly they seemed to breathe, and I liked to imagine that the trunks sensed my fingers and that everything I didn’t say leaked out into the bark—not like at school, where there was always too much confusion. I didn’t mind schoolwork, but hair braiding and *A Sailor Went to Sea Sea Sea*? Forget about it. And why was there so much shouting on the playground? How was it that my peers already knew which frivolous words to say, as if they had arrived pre-trained with words to whoop at each other?

I was scared of the monkey bars and lacked the coordination to jump rope, but early that spring I built my first fort. I told Jane and Kirsten to watch, being that they were only six and four, but they insisted they help, and we wandered through the woods in search of a suitable spot. We found a flat area scarcely in sight of the apartment, pockmarked by lingering snow. We gathered long sticks several feet taller than ourselves, and I delivered a tutorial in the voice of a gentle adult.

We watched the branches accumulate, stick over snug stick. The gaps shrank and disappeared beneath a layer of brush. We wove pliable branches between the poles so thoroughly, the walls held beneath an afternoon rain, and we were able to squat knee to knee and remain completely dry.

When I was at school, the trick was to remain invisible enough to lose the burden of having to invent the right words to say and to assume the correct postures and necessary facial expressions to ward off any adult that petted my head and asked why I wasn't having fun with the others.

It was such a relief to meet Elliot, solemn and alone on the swings. Although it was early April and still cold, she dragged pink jelly sandals through slush. She appeared, from a short distance, like a young Carol Brady with short hair, a wholesome nose, and sad, approachable eyes.

I practised two scripts with my mother. The first, and most often rehearsed, involved how to tell a stranger (driving a van and wielding a piece of candy) to buzz off. The second described how to make a friend. In this script, a little girl looked for a nice kid playing alone. As soon as the girl identified the kid, she initiated friendship by way of a series of questions. How old are you? What's your name? Do you want to play?

I approached Elliot ready with the script only to find that she was actively engaged in crying. I hesitated but persevered.

"How old are you?" I asked.

No response.

"Hey, how old are you?" I repeated.

"Eight," she eventually said.

"What's your name?"

She ignored the question and resumed crying. Instead of repeating myself, I searched my memory for another script. I recalled an episode of *Fraggle Rock* in which Red cries and Mokey asks, "Why are you sad?"

I asked this question of Elliot, and she dragged a knuckle beneath her nose. She explained that a teacher scolded her or that she scraped her knee.

I don't remember which, but I do remember that I instantly liked her formal way of speaking, the sweet tangy smell of her strawberry lip gloss, and the way the sun reflected itself in her pink crystal studs. She was the first real friend I ever had.

It turned out that Elliot had recently moved from Connecticut to the same housing development where I lived, except her condo sat on top of the cul-de-sac, where my mother forbade us to go.

I asked Elliot about boys throwing rocks, and she nodded grimly. You gotta stay away from those kids.

She showed me her New Kids on the Block key chain—a band I wasn't allowed to listen to—and I read her a poem from my library book, *A Light in the Attic*. I also showed her my sticker book—a pink notebook three-quarters full of metallic stars, rainbows, and cartoon animals that I had painstakingly unpeeled from homework assignments, doctors' offices, and trips to the bank.

"I got a sticker from Ms. Roberts today," Elliot said in that brisk voice I loved.

She dug through her bag and withdrew a math sheet on which a teacher had placed a large and lovely sticker: a teddy bear in a blue sweater with three hearts floating near its head. Beneath the bear in cheery pink letters swooped the words: "Beary Good!"

"That's a good sticker," I said.

"You can have it."

Her jelly shoes stilled their swinging, and she poured furrowed effort into unpeeling the sticker.

"I don't want it to tear," she explained.

Success! She paused to admire her work and then handed the sticker to me.

Things had gone so well with Elliot that I tried to recreate the scene with other kids, and I pulled out the notebook on the playground, at day care, and finally with Savannah in the fort. Savannah lived on the other side of our condo, but I wasn't allowed in her apartment on account of the men my mom said she saw traipsing in and out of her apartment's revolving door. I didn't understand how the door revolved, but I understood the word "traipse," which my mom used to describe not just Savannah's mother and

boyfriends but other misbehaving people: the woman across the street who wore tight dresses, the man to our left who didn't work because of his back brace but still lifted canoes on his truck, the nosy social worker who traipsed into my classroom and asked questions about my home. Our street was full of people traipsing. My mother always told us never to traipse. "I want my daughters to hold their heads high."

Savannah could do a lot of things I couldn't, such as watch *Baywatch*, play cat's cradle, and do a roundhouse, which is an elaborate kind of flip. I tried showing my fort to Savannah, but she got bored within minutes. I wanted her to stay, so I sprang to my feet, told her to wait, sprinted around the condo, and slammed into my apartment.

Back around Savannah's birthday, I'd looked through her bedroom window, and her apartment looked just like mine, with grey carpets and walls. The only exception was the Polly Pockets, Barbies, and Care Bears splayed across her neon comforter, like an exploded Toys "R" Us aisle of playthings. I stood on tiptoe and wiped mittens to clear my breath from the glass. One by one, she pressed the toys to the pane.

"Nice one!" I yelled. "Wow!"

She had at least four Polly Pockets. My mom always insisted that one was enough. "Especially here," she said. "Who has that kind of money?"

"Can you bring them outside?" I shouted through the window.

Savannah frowned and shook her head. "NOT ALLOWED!"

But the sticker book was mine, and I was relieved to see that she'd waited for me, lounging in the fort with unspooled bubblegum tape she shoved into her pocket the moment I sat down. I opened the book to page one.

"Is the whole thing full?" she asked.

"Mostly. You want to count? I've got two hundred sixty-four. No, sixty-five."

I liked to count the stickers before bed to update the tally and look at each one. I liked to touch the smooth glittery surfaces.

"Let me see them," she said. "Go ahead."

I realized she wanted me to turn the page, so I counted more quickly. I said the numbers in my head. Thirteen, fourteen, fifteen.

"Hello? Are you home?" She waved a hand in my face.

I turned the page.

"I like the puffy one." Savannah pointed at a puffy rainbow sticker I also liked.

"You want to count?" I asked again.

"No," she said, but she didn't get up either, so I sat and counted silently as quickly as I could.

Four pages in, she announced that she was bored.

"I don't have to count," I said, but I wasn't sure if that was true. "I can count faster," I amended.

"*Baywatch* is on," she said and left.

A few bedtimes later, when the sticker book turned up missing, Mom asked where I'd taken the book.

"Too many places," I replied, crying into my pillow as I ticked off my attempts to share. I imagined people traipsing by my sticker book.

"Samantha, honey," Mom said, "if something's that important, you need to leave it at home."

My mother refused to relax her mailbox restrictions, but she agreed to retrieve Elliot for a play date in our yard. My sisters kicked a soccer ball in the front, but they stopped playing when we arrived. Savannah and Jake came over too, and I swung my arms as if it were perfectly normal for a friend to join me to play, as if I were just like any other girl who could cart-wheel and woohoo and here was one of the many friends from whom I could pick and choose.

I dragged Elliot past the waiting kids and into the woods. She carried a yellow suitcase that bumped along her leg, a riot of refracted light.

She pointed, I think, at Savannah. "I know that girl from school."

"She's nobody," I said because I wanted Elliot for myself.

When she saw my fort, Elliot gasped and crawled inside.

"I love this place," she said.

"That's good," I said.

"I brought Barbies in my suitcase," she said.

I looked around for something else because Barbies made me nervous and I didn't like all the talking back and forth.

"Want to play adventure?" I asked. "We could build another fort."

"Can we be princesses?" she asked, still on all fours.

"Okay." I stuck two forked twigs in the ground and balanced a roasting stick between them for a spit. "We don't really fit in anywhere," I said, "except with each other." I rubbed two other sticks together, as if to make a fire underneath. "We're starting a new society."

"What are you going to cook, princess sister?" she said. "My name is Latiana."

I liked the idea of fixing something for her. "Let's hunt for berries," I said, flipping imaginary princess hair away from my princess face. "Maybe we can look for a stream."

We left the fire and wandered sideways, careful to keep the apartment in view until we came across a tree with a low sloping branch.

"This can be our ship," Elliot said as she clamoured onto the branch. "We can be pirates."

I didn't like the sudden change in storyline, but I climbed on. The branch was only four feet off the ground, but my legs shook, and I pressed my back against the bark. Elliot kept climbing.

"That's not the boat," I said, but she climbed higher still. I said, "This branch, here, is the boat. It's our raft, see? Help! You're floating away! Come back! Help!"

"Ha," she said. Her jelly shoes dangled over my head. Little pebbles stuck inside the bottoms.

"You disappeared into the sky!" I shouted, and she hung upside down. I was glad not to be looking at her shoes.

She pointed, "Hey! I see those kids!"

Suddenly there was a crash and a whoop, and Savannah, my sisters, and Jake appeared between the trunks.

"This is an ambush!" Savannah shouted.

Jane threw a stick like a spear.

"Not allowed," I said, but Elliot was already half way down the tree.

"You'll never catch us alive!" she screamed.

Savannah laughed, "Ah ha!"

"I'm coming," I shouted. "Just you wait!"

But I was too slow edging onto my stomach and easing my feet with caution to the ground.

Later, Elliot told me that her uncle touched her.

"Uncle Mark," she clarified.

We were on the bus, three stops away from Burrostucky Park.

"Like a bad touch?" I said, thinking of how my mother pointed through bathwater, warning me about what to do if anyone ever . . .

"He did it when my mom went out," she said. As usual, her voice was all

business.

“Did you tell an adult?” I asked. There was a script for this too.

She nodded and twisted a fruit roll up around her pinky. “He’s not around anymore. He moved to Florida.”

“Good,” I said to the black rubber seat.

Her hands wedged between her knees, wrists crossed, and it got quiet, as if all the kids turned down their volume and the seats stopped rumbling. I snuck a glance at Elliot’s pink shoes, which I coveted, and her face, which was solemn with concentration.

After our afternoon snack, I banged on Savannah’s door. “We’re going to make a fort city,” I announced. “Get your brother. It’ll be ours! No adults allowed.”

“All hands on deck!” I shouted into my apartment, and my sisters appeared with Ritz Crackers in small plastic bags. “It’ll be enormous!” I shouted and felt triumphant as we, the large group, rounded the corner and barrelled toward the woods. I bade them deeper, after bigger sticks, until our condo’s grey siding disappeared behind the branches and trunks.

My sisters protested, “We’re not allowed this far!”

“Who cares?” I said. “I know these woods. The trees are magical, and they’ll tell us which way to go.”

“The trees are magical!” Savannah repeated. I looked to see what she meant, but she walked ahead of me, and I couldn’t tell.

We found bigger sticks in the expanded territory, and my sisters helped me drag one at least eight feet tall. Savannah and Jake dragged another. We were all headed back for more when Savannah pointed.

“Look,” she said, and we saw yellow through the trunks.

The meadow was straight from a movie, the waist high flowers in bloom. We gathered along the edge, and a wanting filled me. I longed for this good place to hide, but Savannah saw the meadow first, and there were rules—finders keepers and first come first served. But Savannah had a whole comforter full of toys, and she didn’t care about these woods. Sure, she was poor, but we were all poor.

Our mothers warned us about ticks, but I loved how the blades brushed my palms, and I stepped into the middle to face my sisters, Savannah, and Jake, their tidy grove bodies in a row.

“Let’s keep this place a secret,” I said, my voice sudden and loud as I

stared into each of their faces. “No one else knows about this, okay?”

My sisters automatically nodded, and so did Jake.

“This is serious,” I said. “Or you’ll have to—I’m sorry to say this—but you’ll have to get kicked out of Fort City. This place is special, and people will ruin it, okay? It’s got to be a secret, alright?” I looked directly at Savannah, and she shrugged like she didn’t care.

“Alright,” I said again.

We built a second fort, two feet taller than the first, and a crawlspace to connect them. A kid could crawl from one tepee to the other without seeing a speck of sun. I could tell from the way Savannah crossed her arms and strutted that she was impressed.

“How many you want to build?” she asked.

“At least three or more.” I pointed at where the forts would go. I didn’t mention the meadow because I wanted that for myself. “We’ll make a kitchen, a living room, and two bedrooms at least. We can make beds out of pine needles and a library of books. It’s definitely safe enough. We’ll make a whole Fort City, and we can come here whenever we want.”

“Sure,” Savannah said. “Sounds fun.” Then she looked at her Swatch. “*Baywatch*,” she said. “I’m out.”

My sisters also ran off, even though we weren’t allowed to watch anything besides PBS, but I was glad they went because I could return to the meadow and say “I love you” to each tree.

Flowers bounced along my legs, and I flopped on my back, spreading and snapping my limbs, as if to make a snow angel. I thought about Elliot and wondered if someone touching you made you a different person—if it made you more touchable or less. Flowers popped around my face until my vision blurred yellow, and I closed my eyes to beg the trees to send a deer, a bunny, or even a chipmunk to confirm that I belonged here as much as I believed. Nothing came, but I saw a bird and decided that was enough.

I told Elliot I would build her a city.

“A whole city?” she asked.

“Even the rain won’t fall on us,” I said.

Elliot came more often and helped with the construction, but while the others didn’t mind getting dirty or bruised she complained if the tiniest sap smeared her sleeve. I offered her easier jobs, like clearing rocks and pinecones or weaving brush between poles, but whenever Savannah and I came

back with our sticks we found Elliot inside a fort with her Barbie suitcase.

One afternoon I got angry and shouted, “You’ve got to do your part! You can’t just lie around! Don’t you care?”

But that backfired because Savannah invited her to watch *Baywatch*, even though they knew I wasn’t allowed, and Elliot disappeared for a whole forty-five minutes before I gave up and worked on Fort City alone.

Toward the end of the school year several things happened at once: I finished Fort City, my mom interviewed at JCPenney to be full-time general manager, and Elliot’s mother went to rehab. For two weeks Elliot played witness to my life, to my mother rationing cereal, to our Happy Meal bath toys, and to my mom’s lunchbox letters: *Have a happy day! Jesus loves you! Let your light shine!*

It rained for the first week and a half of Elliot’s visit, so I read books while she dressed Barbies. She didn’t dare ask Mom if she could play her New Kids on the Block cassette, even though it was a gift from her mother. She was polite and said thank you, but her shoulders scrunched whenever Mom patted her head.

I was proud of my mother, who kept watch over us. She read to us every night, her voice as lively as television, but Elliot always sat stiffly on her cot instead of joining us on the bed. Alert to Mom’s gaze, she was always quick to smile. “Thank you, Miss Lancaster. I appreciate you having me.”

After school, Elliot would toss her jelly shoes on my sneakers, and I liked to stare at them snuggled by the door. I didn’t understand what rehab was, but I understood that people walked rather than traipsed into it. While Elliot missed her mother, the change would be good for her.

“We’re on our way out,” Mom said into the mirror through a haze of hairspray while Elliot talked to her mom on the kitchen phone.

“Out of where?”

“JCPenney pays a lot—way more than I make now. If I get this job, we’ll get a real apartment.”

I imagined our street like a deep, sideways hole. We could climb out, but poor Elliot had farther to climb. She lived at the bottom of the cul-de-sac, where the street went round and round.

When the rain broke, I took Elliot to visit Fort City alone. Since she’d last helped I’d added three more tepees for a total of six—three connected by

tunnels, the other three apart.

“Even richies don’t have Fort Cities like this,” I said.

She just stood and looked with her solemn mouth and eyes that moved from one tepee to the next.

“It’s all yours,” I said. “This whole city. You can come whenever you want.”

“No, I can’t,” she said.

“Yes, you can,” I answered. “You want to see the meadow?” I hadn’t mentioned the meadow since that first day, and electricity shot through my gut. “You can never tell, but it’s yours too.”

I grabbed her wrist and had to pull, but once she got started she walked on her own. I called her deeper until leaves and bark surrounded us on all sides, and she froze.

“Your mom said we can’t go this far. I can’t see the apartment.”

“It’s fine. I’ve been here before.”

“No, it’s not. Your mom said.” She frowned and crossed her arms.

“I want to show you the meadow. It’s magic. No one knows about it.”

She opened her mouth, like she was going to say something else, but then just shook her head.

“Come on, Elliot. We can play pirate princesses.”

“No,” she said. “Your mom will get mad. I’m not going. Savannah’s right: you are bossy.”

“I’m not bossy. I brought you here. Savannah’s mean.”

She started marching in the wrong direction.

“You don’t even know which way to go!” My heart pounded so hard I couldn’t think straight. “It’s like the one place,” I said. “You don’t even know.”

“Know what?”

“Just please? I’ll show you real quick. It won’t take long.”

She looked all around. Her arms flapped then crossed again. “How do I get back? This way?” She pointed.

I shook my head in all directions so she wouldn’t know the answer.

“Just let me show you,” I said.

“Fine,” but she walked with her arms crossed and kept saying “Ow” because tiny rocks got stuck in her shoes.

I could see the flowers in the distance. Their petals looked orangey-brown. “See!” I shouted, and her eyes flew open. I laughed, ran into the

grass, spun around, and landed, sprawled on my back like a star. "Come on! You can lie here too."

I sat up to welcome her, but she just scowled and shook her head. I got a little nervous because I thought she'd get the point when she saw the meadow.

"No way," she said. "That grass is crawling with bugs."

"But the flowers," I said, picking my way back through their bobbing faces. I didn't care about the bugs, even though it felt as though they were crawling and poking my skin.

I reached for her, but she crossed her arms and said, "No. I don't like it here. It's creepy. I want to go back. I want to watch *Baywatch* and listen to New Kids on the Block. I want to go home."

I couldn't get a word in, so I pushed her into the grass so she could get the feeling I was trying to share. I pushed her too hard, and she fell. The tall grass closed around her.

"Get up," I said. "You'll miss everything."

She wouldn't get up, so I crouched and saw petals squish beneath her hands.

"I think I hear a deer," I lied.

She wouldn't stop crying. "We're going to get in trouble," she said.

"Don't you like the flowers?" I said. "The bugs won't hurt you."

She sniffled.

"This is our special place."

She dragged a hand beneath her nose and sat all the way down. She looked like a princess with the flowers around her and her pink crystal earrings.

"We're best friends, okay?" I said. "Okay?" I repeated.

"Okay."

I petted her hand, and we sat. I remember feeling happy. I stared at the trees and wordlessly greeted each trunk. Hello, hello, hello, I thought in my mind without speaking. Hello, hello, hello.

"I hate it here," she said. "I want my mom."

"But I made you a whole Fort City!" I yelled, tearing the head off a flower and throwing it in her lap. "Now you can get away from that cul-de-sac with all those people traipsing."

She stared and started crying again, so I ran off.

"Come back!" I heard her yell. "I don't know where to go! Please, Sa-

mantha! Help!”

I stopped running to listen and imagined that I was a tree.

After a while, she stopped shouting, and I made my way back to the meadow, winding slowly between the trunks.

She cried the whole walk home, and she wouldn't look at me during dinner. For the last three days until her mom came back, she refused my seat on the bus.

Even then, it was hard to tell what was important. My mom got her job and bought us jelly shoes. The Fisher Price cow mooed, and Kirsten stepped the farmer across the linoleum floor. My sweater smelled like mothballs. My mother cried softly in the next room.

She told me Elliot needed to settle in at home, which was why she didn't come over to play. She didn't come for weeks, and when I called to ask why her mother said she was busy.

I don't recall what I was doing before I saw the dead flowers, but I can say one thing: I walked alone to Fort City and saw someone had covered my fort, the original, in a snarl of wilted petals. A few fresh blossoms arched over the entrance, but the rest of the flowers curdled brown. I froze, electric with question. A sheet of pink notebook paper was wedged between branches. The thick red cursive read: NO SAMANTHA ALLOWED. The border was filled with scribbled hearts and a giant sticker with a bear in a sweater, but I crumpled it so fast I couldn't tell. I knew it had to be Savannah. She stole everything: my fort, my sticker book, Elliot.

My face felt like it was on fire as I tore the flowers free. The sticks loosened, the fort toppled, and the tunnel collapsed, but I didn't care. I just went to the next fort and kept pushing.

I sprinted across the yard when I got home and ran past my sisters playing soccer. I was crying wildly, and I felt the shame covering me like a million dying flowers. I didn't know how to keep a friend, and I didn't understand how I could break something I loved so much.

I saw Savannah and Jake traipsing toward me. I saw a man traipsing down the sidewalk too. I thought of all the people traipsing, and I wanted nothing more than to be like everyone else, but I couldn't do even that.

My hand struggled with the knob, and I ran crying into an apartment that looked like every other apartment along my street. My mom turned slowly from the sink as I came in, and I wondered if she could see her daughter traipse.