Where the Heart Is

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For Stephanie,
best sister, best friend.
Thank you for the bike — and so much more.
I love you.

xoxo
I was six years old when I got engaged to Micah Sasaki. It was during coffee hour at church, when the adults were busy in the fellowship hall, eating banana bread and gossiping and letting the kids run wild on the front lawn. We were playing Sardines. I found Micah under the lilac bushes by the steps and we huddled together, waiting to be found. We held hands and giggled quietly each time we heard footsteps and heavy breathing as someone ran past.

We waited like that for a long time, and then, out of the blue, Micah whispered, “I love you, Rachel.” His breath smelled like bananas.

He squeezed my hand, and my small heart thumped in my chest as if it were a hummingbird trapped inside.
“Do you want to marry me?” he asked.

“Yes!” I said without hesitation.

He was my first and best friend, and my favorite neighbor. We liked almost all the same games and even the same food. Marriage made perfect sense.

“Move over!” Nadia Collins said, interrupting our engagement.

Micah and I smiled at each other and squished even closer together. The lilac bushes were in full bloom, and the smell of the blossoms engulfed us each time someone jostled the branches.

Cole Jenkins found us next. Then a few others, and then the game was over. We all climbed out from under the bushes, but before we went back inside, Micah gave me a lilac and kissed me on the cheek. Then we found our parents and told them the news.

They laughed and said, “How sweet,” as if it were a silly joke.

Micah got mad and stomped off, which only made the grown-ups laugh harder.

I found Micah back under the lilac bushes, red-faced.

“They don’t know anything,” I told him.

“We’ll always be together,” he said. “Right?”

I climbed under the branches and sat next to him and held his hand again. “Always,” I said. We sat like
that until our parents came and found us and apologized for being insensitive.

Even though that was six years ago, sometimes one of our parents will bring it up, asking us in a jokey kind of way how the wedding plans are going. Micah always blushes and smiles awkwardly, and maybe even a little hopefully. But more and more, I’m filled with guilt. Because deep down, as much as I love Micah, I know it will never happen.

“Rachel, wake up right now!” my sister yells, pounding on my door.

I sit up and feel dizzy. A familiar panic rises in my chest. I can’t believe I’m going to be late for school again.

Then I remember. Today is the first day of summer! Not only that: it’s my thirteenth birthday.

Ivy bangs on my door again.

“There’s no school!” I yell back. “Remember? Summer!”

“Mom wants us up for something else!” she calls. “So get up!”

I bet she made me birthday pancakes. I sniff and smell something delicious. Maybe waffles.

Outside my window, the leaves are bright green and the birds chirp extra loudly. It’s like the whole outside
I woke up for summer vacation. Better yet, for my birthday. Warm, sunny days stretch out before me. No more getting up early to catch the bus. No more homework. No more math class with Mr. Drake, who hates me because I never show my work and he thinks I cheat because I still get the right answers. No more worries! Plus I’m a teenager now. I can get more babysitting jobs. I can save money for a better bike than the crappy one my dad scavenged from the dump when I was eight. I can—

“Rachel, would you get up?” Ivy yells through my door again. “The new neighbors are here!”

I peer through my window. Across the street, a moving truck pulls into the long driveway where construction has been going on all year. The house was built on a long, sloping hill in the field we’ve used for sledding every winter and riding my old pony Rainbow in the summer. It was designed to look like a rustic barn, but we peeked through the windows after the workers went home one night and there is nothing rustic about it inside. There are fancy marble counters in the kitchen, and the bathrooms are like the ones you only see on TV, with glass bowls for sinks instead of regular old white porcelain ones. The floors are so polished,
they showed the reflection of the windows, as well as our heads, when we peeked through the glass.

“Wow,” I remember Micah saying the first time we looked in.

“They must be loaded,” Ivy said.

“Why on earth would they move here?” I asked.

They were a mystery, and the whole neighborhood was speculating about who these people could be and where they might come from. Behind the house, they’d built a real barn, with stables, several little sheds, and what looked like a chicken coop. They seemed to be planning on having lots of animals, which Ivy was very excited about. Micah and I made up a whole story about the types of animals they’d have. We decided the new neighbors were rare animal collectors and they’d have tigers and zebras and things, but that got Ivy all upset, so we stopped.

The cat meows from the foot of my bed when I get up and step into my slippers. George hates being woken up as much as I do.

“I’m coming!” I yell.

I pull my hair into a ponytail. “Go back to sleep,” I tell George. “It’s summer!”

He walks in a circle and settles down again in his
little nest in the squares of sunlight coming through my window.

Downstairs, the sweet smell from the kitchen is even stronger.

“Go back up and get dressed, Rachel,” my mom says, pushing me away before I can go into the kitchen to see what she’s made. She has on a red apron that’s covered in flour. There’s some on her face, too.

“We need to take a pie over to welcome the new neighbors, and it’s almost finished. I want you dressed so we can all go over together to introduce ourselves.”

Pie? So that’s what was baking. Not my birthday breakfast? I hope she didn’t make an extra pie for my birthday cake. Pie is good, but not for birthdays. I want a tall layered cake with thick frosting and fourteen candles because you always have to have one to grow on. Licking syrupy fruit off a candle just isn’t the same as licking off frosting.

I wait a minute before going back upstairs. I look around for the familiar birthday banner my mom made, which she hangs from the ceiling on the morning of our birthdays. It isn’t in the usual place above the kitchen table. Maybe because this is a special year, we’ll eat in the dining room, which we only use to celebrate big holidays. The rest of the time, the dining-room table
is piled with mail and newspapers and bills and homework and lots of other junk.

“Go on!” my mom says, still not wishing me a happy birthday.

I turn away from her slowly and take my time walking back to the stairs, just to give her a chance to remember.

“Hustle your buns!” she yells at me.

Sheesh.

From my bedroom window, I watch the new owners boss the movers around. They don’t seem very promising. They look too old to have kids our age, which is fine with me because I don’t really feel like having to make new friends with someone who lives in a house like that. Just walking around, peeking in the windows and being that close to something so nice made me feel crappy about my holey sneakers and cutoff shorts. Micah said maybe they’d have older kids and I’d get their hand-me-downs. Whoop-de-do! It’s bad enough I have to wear the things family friends hand down to us, or cheap clothes my mom finds at the local thrift store. I get itchy just thinking about it. Micah says I sound like a snob when I complain. I tell him I’m just a clean freak, and he says that’s what washing machines are for, which
is a good point. But still. I’ll never like wearing other people’s old clothes. They have all these memories in them that I don’t know about. Sometimes I wonder what interesting places they’ve been to. But mostly I try not to think about it.

“Rachel and Ivy, get down here!” my mom yells up the stairs.

I pull on my old shorts and a T-shirt and go to the bathroom to brush my teeth, but Ivy is already inside. I bang on the door, even though that’ll probably make her stay in extra long.

“Mom’s calling us!” I urge through the door. “Get moving!”

She finally opens the door and shines her clean teeth at me. “All yours, sucker!” she says.

I step in and get accosted by the smell of her poop. “You are so gross!” I scream. I hold my breath, grab my toothbrush, and run downstairs to use the other bathroom.

“Can we please get going?” my mom says when I finish brushing my teeth.

I glare at Ivy again. “So gross,” I say again. “You’re eight years old, not five.”


“Don’t be disgusting,” my mom says. “Now, let’s go.”
We follow her outside and down the driveway. Even from across the street, we can hear the new neighbors still giving orders to the movers, who roll furniture out of a massive moving truck. We weave through the parked trucks up the newly paved driveway. It smells like burning tar in the hot morning sun. Everything over here smells new.

“Hello?” my mom calls, stepping toward the neighbors.

The wife turns around. She looks like she’s in her sixties or so. She’s so tan that the creases in the wrinkles in her face look like someone made them with a dark-brown pen. Like she’s spent so much time in the sun, her skin has turned to leather.

“We’re your new neighbors from across the street,” my mom says to the lady. “These are my kids, Rachel and Ivy. I’m Lydia Gartner.”

The lady smiles, and her face lines deepen and darken even more. “Well, hello!” she says, all friendly. “It’s so nice to meet you!”

“We baked you a pie,” my mom says, holding it out. “Peaches aren’t quite in season yet, so I hope you like strawberry rhubarb.”

“So thoughtful of you.” The lady takes the pie and smells it. “My name’s Greer. Greer Townsend. My
husband over there is Bev. Bev, honey, come meet our new neighbors!”

Bev seems like a strange name for a man. I wonder what it’s short for. He has the same kind of tanned and wrinkly leather face as Greer. He’s wearing bright-green shorts that have little white boats embroidered on them, and a matching white polo shirt. He looks like a guy you might see playing golf on TV. Greer has on a similar outfit, only a skirt, not shorts. It’s pink, and I think it’s a tennis skirt, the kind with shorts underneath.

Greer and Bev seem old but sporty. Just like the rest of their stuff, their clothes look brand-new. Like they haven’t even been washed yet, or sweated in.

“How do you do?” Bev asks, reaching for my mother’s hand.

I didn’t know people said How do you do? in real life. He has a funny accent, like his voice is still being haunted by his rich English ancestors or something. Later I’ll learn that he says things like baaaaath instead of bath and lauuuugh instead of laugh, the way a sheep might if a sheep could talk.

Ivy holds out her hand and Bev shakes it, then mine. He squeezes pretty hard for an old man. His hand is soft and smooth, not like my parents’ hands, which are
rough from gardening and stacking wood and all the other outdoor work we all do.

“You have nice weather for moving day,” my mom says. “Is there anything we can help you with?”

Greer nods distractedly and motions for a mover to be careful with a tiny wooden bookcase. “No, no, that’s what the movers are for, dear,” Greer says. “But thank you.”

“Well, we’ll leave you to it. Welcome to the neighborhood.” My mom is acting so awkward, like she doesn’t know how to behave around rich people.

“Thank you for the pie,” Bev says, turning to walk up the driveway.

“We’ll have to have you over for drinks when we’re settled in,” Greer adds.

“That would be lovely.” My mom motions for us to go.

“Snobs,” I say when we cross the road to our side.

“Don’t say that,” my mom says. “Just because people are wealthy doesn’t make them snobs.”

“They took away our sledding hill,” I say.

“Oh, Rachel, it was never ours. We were lucky to be able to use it as long as we did.”

Ivy runs ahead, but my mom and I walk slowly
up the driveway, with the weeds growing through the cracked pavement. Our old farmhouse is red, and the paint is peeling. Some of the shutters hang a little off-kilter. Even though we don’t really live on a farm, my grandfather made a sign for the house, just like real farms have. My mom decided on the name Bittersweet Farm when she and my dad moved in, before Ivy and I were born. She had taken a walk on the property with my father and discovered bittersweet running all along the stone wall that ran next to the road and defined the property line years ago when it was still a working farm and the stone wall kept the cows and sheep from getting out. Every fall she cuts branches and makes bittersweet wreaths to hang on the walls throughout the house. The vines are full of bright-yellow shells that open up when they dry to reveal a red berry inside. My mom says they make our drafty old house feel cheerful on cold, dark days.

Whenever we come home from someplace, the sign welcomes us and reminds us that life isn’t perfect, just like my mom always says. It’s a little bitter and a little sweet.

We stop midway up the driveway to look at the sign, which also needs painting. My mom puts her hand
on my shoulder. “Happy first day of summer,” she says, squeezing.

But not *Happy birthday*.

In fact, the whole day no one says a word about me turning thirteen, and I finally realize that they’ve forgotten. Micah always says there’s no such thing as lucky or unlucky numbers, but thirteen sure feels pretty unlucky so far.
I always thought my tenth birthday would be remembered as the most awkward and disappointing in history, but my thirteenth takes the cake. At least when I turned ten, everyone remembered. But it was really the best day for my mom, not me. She called me downstairs for my “birthday meal,” but instead of having anything ready, she was holding a winter scarf.

“Close your eyes and let me cover your face,” she said, wrapping the scarf around my head.

It was an old woolen scarf she’d knitted for my dad years ago when they were still dating. It was brown with white stripes and smelled like an ancient sheep. It scratched my cheeks.

“What you lead you outside,” my mom said.
“What’s happening?” Ivy asked as she bounded into the room. “Why are you tying up Rachel?”
“I’m not tying her up. I’m covering her eyes so she can’t see.”
“How come?”
“We have a special birthday present for her.”
“Is it outside?”
“Yes.”
The door slammed, and I heard Ivy *woot* in the distance.

I hoped that meant I was getting a new bike.
My mom led me slowly across the room and out the front door, down the old loose and wobbly stone steps.
“Just let me lead you,” my mom said, guiding me down the driveway.
“Are you ready?” she called out to someone in the distance.
“Ready when you are!” my dad replied.
My mom stopped me and put her hands on my shoulders. The scarf was really starting to itch now, and the smell was making me feel funny.
“Here we go,” she said, untying the scarf.
I blinked a few times and looked around. We were at the foot of the driveway. At one corner was a horse trailer and next to it was my dad, standing with a tiny
horse. It was black and white and had a bright-green halter.

“What’s that?” I asked.

The tiny horse stared at me suspiciously.

My dad was clutching the halter tightly, as if he knew the horse might bolt at any second.

“It’s your birthday present!” my mom said. Tears slipped down the side of her face. “Your very own pony. His name is Rainbow. Isn’t he just beautiful?”

He blinked at me as I stepped closer. Beautiful wasn’t the word I would have picked. He was cute, though. He nodded his head at me and I patted his nose. The hairs around his eyes were gray, and I wondered how old he was. Surely not a “new” pony like you might expect a kid might get for her birthday.

“He’s a rescue,” my mom said. “He’s going to need a lot of love and patience.” She hugged him then, and I could tell without a doubt that this was definitely a present for her and not me.

The favorite story my mom likes to tell about her childhood is the day she got her own pony, Buddy. The story goes that for three whole years she prayed every night for a horse. Finally, on her tenth birthday, her prayers were answered. My grandfather took her out to the front lawn on the morning of her birthday, a scarf
wrapped over her eyes, and when he took it off, there was Buddy, a palomino pony with a big brown patch over one side of his face and all white on the other. There’s an old photo of my mom on the back of Buddy that she keeps on the mantel in the living room. She’s sitting backward and leaning forward, resting an open book on his rump. He’s tethered to a stake in the ground, eating grass on the front lawn of the house she grew up in. This is the way I picture my mom’s entire childhood: carefree summers sitting on Buddy, reading the days away. The problem is, it’s how she’s always envisioned mine, too.

Rainbow sniffed my hand, then licked it, leaving a trail of sticky saliva.

My mom pulled a plastic bag filled with baby carrots out of her pocket and handed them to me. “Put one in the palm of your hand and hold it out flat so he doesn’t nip you,” she said. “Like this.”

I put a carrot in my hand and held it out, and Rainbow slurped it up with his big velvety lips. “I want to try!” Ivy yelled. Rainbow reared his head at the sound and stepped back, frightened.

“Don’t scare him, Ivy. You have to use a gentle voice,” my mom said.

“Hi, Rainbow,” Ivy whispered, letting him take a carrot from her hand.
We spent the rest of the day preparing a stall for him in the old barn behind the house, and Ivy and I took turns walking him on his lead while the other rode bareback. My mom said we needed to spend a lot of gentle, loving time with him in order to bond. But I think Rainbow would be friends with anyone with a carrot and a soft voice. My favorite thing to do with him was put Ivy on his back and tie him to a stake in the grass, just like in my mom’s photo. Then I’d sit in my mom’s old plastic lawn chair and read to Ivy while she braided the bits of mane she could reach.

For my eleventh birthday, I got a new bridle for Rainbow, since the one he came with was so worn, the leather reins kept splitting in two and my mom kept having to patch them together with duct tape. I don’t even know why I bothered to try to ride him, he was so fat and lazy. The girth on the old saddle he came with barely stretched over his round belly. No one knew how old he really was, but the guess was that he was in his twenties. There was something special about him, though, and whenever I came toward him with his bridle, he’d sniff my hand for a treat and sometimes lick it fondly, like he did the first time we met. I knew it was his way of accepting me, even though I was sure he preferred being read to in the grass than taking me
for rides. I was allowed to ride him to the bottom of the field across the street, but it was agony getting him to go. The only time he picked up speed was when we turned around and he knew he was heading for home. Then he would trot slowly with his ears perked up and pointed straight for the barn, where he knew my mom was waiting with a sugar cube. Riding in the field felt like our special time, and sometimes I’d sing “Over the Rainbow” to him as we trudged along. I know it sounds silly, but I think it made him feel special.

For my twelfth birthday, I got a new saddle pad for Rainbow, which was white and was supposed to look like sheep’s wool but was fake. It made his old saddle look even more shabby. But by then it didn’t matter because Rainbow had decided he was done with giving me rides and refused to cross the street to the field, even when I swatted him lightly with a crop my mom made out of a stick. Not even the promise of sugar cubes and singing his favorite song would work.

“He’s an old guy,” my mom said to me when I finally gave up trying. “But you got a lot of rides out of him. Maybe you should just sit on him and read, like I did on Buddy.”

“OK,” I said. But instead I put Ivy on his back and read out loud because I didn’t like to read alone the way
my mom did. It was more fun sharing stories than reading them by myself.

But today, on my thirteenth birthday, all I get is a phone call from Micah, who sings “Happy Birthday” in an operatic voice so loud I have to hold the phone away from my ear.

“Thanks for remembering,” I say.

“What’d you get?” he asks.

I don’t want to answer at first. But Micah is patient. Silence never makes him uncomfortable like it does me.

“Nothing,” I finally say. “I guess they all forgot.”

“Your parents? That’s impossible. I bet your mom is just waiting for some special moment to surprise you. She always does stuff like that. Remember the scavenger hunt when you turned eleven? You were convinced you weren’t getting a present, but your mom hid all those notes that led to Rainbow’s new bridle. That was the best! I bet they have something like that planned.”

“Maybe.” But it’s already seven thirty and we had dinner and it just seems like if there was going to be a surprise, it would have happened by now.

“Well, I love you,” Micah says. “And you should have invited me over because I could have brought you
your present and then your family would have clued in and felt guilty and probably gone out and bought you a huge cake or something.”

“It’s OK—they can’t afford it anyway. I would have at least liked a homemade card, though.”

“Sorry, Rachel. That stinks.”

We get off the phone, and I go over to my window to breathe some cool air. It’s dusk, but across the street I can see a big horse trailer in our neighbors’ driveway. The new barn they built has three stalls with actual wood floors, not dirt like the ones in our old barn. I bet it’s a lot easier to muck out the stalls when you have a wood floor.

As I look out the window, feeling sorry for myself, the sky gets darker and darker. And then a strange, flickering light comes from the bottom of the driveway. Then another. Three altogether, marching toward my window. They’re sparklers. As they get closer, I can see my mom, dad, and Ivy each carrying one, swirling them in the air to make circles and hearts that last just a second before dimming into black. Then my dad spells out Rachel before his sizzles out and he has to light another.

“Happy birthday to you,” they begin to sing as they
approach my window. “Happy birthday to you. Happy birthday, dear Rachel. Happy birthday to you.”

“Come on out and see what we got you,” my mom calls.

“Did you think we forgot?” Ivy says. “You didn’t, did you?”

“Of course not!” I lie happily.

I quickly text Micah, They remembered! and run outside.

“Stay here while I go get your present,” Ivy says, all excited. “Sorry to keep you waiting, but I wanted it to be dark. You have to guess the surprise before you can see it.”

“I hope you didn’t think we forgot,” my mom says.

I shrug. “Maybe. But I’m glad you didn’t.”

“Ivy’s been planning this for days,” my dad says. “Even the sparklers were her idea.”

My mom and dad stand on either side of me, squeezing me tight. It’s a good sandwich to be in, feeling love from both sides like that, when no one can see us so I don’t have to be embarrassed.

“Are you excited?” my dad asks.

“I can’t really imagine what it could be,” I say.

“Your sister put a lot of work into it, so if you don’t love it, pretend to anyway,” my mom says.
I wish she didn’t feel like she had to tell me that.

Pretty soon there’s a familiar *click click clicking* sound a bike makes when you’re coasting along, and then I can see reflectors shining as Ivy begins pedaling toward me, then a light flicks on the front. She squeaks the brakes just before she gently bumps the front tire into me.

“Ta-da!” Ivy steps off and flails her arms like a game show host presenting a prize.

My dad runs into the house and turns the outside lights on so we can see better.

“I saw an ad in the *PennySaver* and grabbed it quick before anyone else could,” my dad says. “Ivy has been making all the repairs, greasing the chain and making it as good as new.”


“Try it out!” Ivy says. “It’s a million times better than your old piece of junk.”

“Ivy!” my mom says.

“Well, it is!”

My old bike really is a piece of junk. Riding to Micah’s is a huge risk because I never know if the chain will fall off or the worn brakes will give out when I go down the big hill on the way to his house and I’ll end up in a ditch. Plus it’s way too small for me, so my knees rise up high when I pedal and I look ridiculous.
I climb on, and the seat is already set just right for me. Ivy looks genuinely excited. Usually when she smiles, it means she has set up some sort of prank, but on holidays like Christmas and my birthday, I can usually rely on her smile being genuine.

“Do you like the light on the handlebar? That’s my favorite. It’s why we had to wait until tonight to give it to you!” Ivy points to a flashlight she duct-taped to the handlebars.

I click the light off and on. “Yeah!” I ride in a circle around the driveway, the flashlight casting a yellow glow in the space a few feet in front of me, as they all watch.

“What do you think?” Ivy asks.

“It’s great!” I say. “I love it!”

After I ride around for a bit, my dad leads us out to the back porch, where my mom has hung my birthday banner after all. There’s a cake with lots of frosting, and a vase with wildflowers set in the middle of the table surrounded by homemade cards with funny drawings. There’s even a card from old Rainbow.

My thirteenth birthday is pretty good after all. Maybe the best one yet. I can’t wait to ride my bike to Micah’s and show it off.
That night, after I help clean up, I go to my room and lie in bed. A warm breeze drifts through my window. My parents’ bedroom is below mine and I can hear their bedtime voices from their open window, but not enough to make out what they’re saying. The sound steadily gets louder and eventually turns into one of their fights. A door slams, and footsteps pound through the house.

Ivy peeks her head through my bedroom door. “Did you hear that?” she asks.

“The sound, not the words,” I say.

“They’re fighting about money again.”

“What else is new?” I ask.

“I hate it,” she says.

“They’re just stressed—don’t worry. They still love each other.”

“They sure don’t sound like it,” she says. “They sound like they hate each other.”

“We fight all the time, and we don’t hate each other.”

“That’s different.”

“How?”

“Sisters are supposed to fight and stuff. Not Mom and Dad.”
“It’ll be OK,” I say. “Try not to worry.”
“Aren’t you worried?”
“I’ll worry for you, OK? Now go to bed.”
She hangs her head sadly. “All right. G’night,” she says, and sulks off down the hall.
“Thanks again for the bike!” I call after her. But I don’t hear a reply.

The house is quiet again, but I can’t sleep. I wait and wait until finally I hear the floorboards creak below and my parents’ voices again. They get low and quiet, and I can tell they’re making up. I hope Ivy is still awake so she can hear, too.
“This is pretty great!” Micah says when I ride my bike to his house the next day.

Micah always gets new stuff when he outgrows something. He never has to sort through hand-me-down bags like I do. He probably doesn’t even know what one is.

“Let’s go for a ride,” he says. “To celebrate summer. We can pack a picnic.”

I follow him inside. His parents aren’t home, so we raid the kitchen for snacks. We make peanut butter, lettuce, and mayonnaise sandwiches. They’re my mom’s favorite and have become mine, too. The first time I made one for Micah, he almost threw up when I told him what it was. But then he took another bite and realized how delicious they are. We add a bag of chips
and half a box of ginger cookies. Then we put it all in Micah’s backpack and head out.

I follow behind Micah and get used to my bike, trying the gears and testing the brakes just to make sure they really work. I’m so used to being scared on my old bike that I can’t seem to stop worrying.

We didn’t agree on where to go, but I have a hunch we’ll end up at our usual place, the small local beach that’s only a short ride away.

It’s early summer, so there aren’t too many people here. The lifeguard looks bored. We lock up our bikes and find a spot at the far end of the beach where no one likes to sit because tall grass grows where the beach ends, and there are lots of frogs and crayfish.

Micah unzips his backpack and hands me a small box wrapped in neon-green wrapping paper. “Happy birthday,” he says.

I slowly unwrap the paper, careful not to rip it. The box is white with a horse head drawn in blue pen.

“Did you draw that?” I ask.

He laughs in an embarrassed way. “You know I can’t draw horses.”

“I like it.”

Inside, there’s some folded tissue paper, which I lift out to reveal a woven friendship bracelet.
“Wow,” I say. “Did you make this?”

“Of course I made it. That’s our rule. Do you like it?”

I nod, turning it over in my hand. “Thank you.” He chose all my favorite colors: purple, blue, and green. When we were younger, we made a pact that we had to make whatever presents we gave each other. I know this was partly Micah’s idea because he felt bad for me and didn’t want me to feel like I had to spend money on him. I like our tradition, though. It makes all of our presents more special.

“So what are you going to do all summer?” Micah asks as he helps me tie the bracelet around my wrist.

I shrug. “Probably help my parents out with gardening chores, and find some babysitting jobs.”


“They live the closest.”

“Those kids are horrors, though. Remember that time they tied you up and then wouldn’t let you go?”

“They have boundary issues.”

“They have life issues.”

“At least their dad pays well.”

“Well, if you take a job with them, tell me and I’ll come help you.”

“I can’t afford to split the money. Sorry.”

“I’ll do it for free! That’s how good a friend I am.”
“You just want them to tie me up so you can laugh and take a picture.”

“You don’t know me at all!” He makes a fake offended face.

“Fine. You can come. Maybe you can teach them some manners.”

“Exactly.”

We lean back on the sand and look up at the sky. There isn’t a single cloud up there, just blue, blue, blue forever.

When we’re too hot, we walk to the shoreline and stand up to our ankles in the water.

“Too bad we didn’t think to bring our bathing suits,” I say.

“Who needs bathing suits?” Micah starts to wade into the water.

“We don’t even have towels!”

“We have the sun! Come on!”

We race to see who can go under first. Micah always wins because I hate the ice rush. But I can’t be outdone, so I force my head under. Beneath the water, the world feels completely different. The echoey sound of the water surrounds me, and I open my eyes.

Micah swims over to me and waves as we hold our
breath. I move my hands through the water to keep myself under, and my hair dances out around me. Micah makes a funny face, then blows bubbles at me. “Can you hear me?” he yells, but it sounds all distorted and strange. I pop my head up and gulp fresh air.

“I won!” Micah says.

I splash him and go back under and swim away from shore, out to where the rope line is. I’m going to be the first to touch it this time. As I push my arms through the water, it feels like I’m swimming through another world. Underneath me, I can see the sandy bottom, with a few rocks. Above me, the sun shines on the surface, making it look like a ripply window. The underwater sound echoes through my ears in a peaceful way, and it feels as though, for this brief moment, this is all there is and I am the only one here. Ahead, I make out the rope line and swim toward it, just as I feel a hand on my foot, pulling me back. I cough and breathe water and have to break the surface.

“Hey!” I say, sputtering.

Micah laughs and swims past me.

“Cheater! That doesn’t count!”

I cough again. My throat and nose sting from the water going down the wrong way. I swim as fast as I
can, but I can’t catch Micah. He grabs the line and lifts it up a little, smiling. He doesn’t even have to say *I win*.

The lifeguard blows her whistle at him.

“Hands off the line!”

“Sorry!” he calls at her. “Sorry not sorry,” he says to me as I swim up to him. He grins.

“You’re a jerk,” I say.

We float on our backs and squint up at the sky.

“Wouldn’t it be great if life could always be this easy?” Micah asks.

“Yeah,” I say. “Imagine if I didn’t have to get a summer job and we didn’t have any chores, and we could just come here every day all summer.”

“Do you think we’d get bored?”

“No way. We could swim, sleep, have picnics. Maybe get a boat . . .”

“How would we get a boat?”

“Maybe we’d inherit money from some long-lost rich aunt we never knew existed. And we’d never have to work a day in our lives.”

I think of all the relatives I know. I’m pretty sure none of them has a secret stash of money.

“Or maybe we could just win the lottery,” I say.

“I watched a show about people who won the lottery, and they all ended up miserable and poor.”
“What? That’s crazy. If I won the lottery, I’d be so happy. I could pay off my parents’ mortgage and give them enough money so they could quit their jobs. And then I’d buy my own house, with a big barn with wood floors for Rainbow.”

“Yeah, you could buy him one of those fancy blankets horses wear for the winter!”

“Only he wouldn’t need it because the barn would be heated.”

“Right! And he’d have an indoor riding ring, and he wouldn’t have to go out all winter unless he wanted to, and that’s when he’d wear his fancy coat.”

“Exactly.” I picture Rainbow in a fur-lined horse blanket and golden halter. He looks ridiculous. “What about you? What would you do if you won the lottery?”

Micah thinks for a minute. “I guess I’d pay off your parents’ mortgage and buy you a house and a barn for Rainbow.”

Micah always says selfless things like this. I wish I had thought of saying something I would get for him.

We’re quiet for a while after that, both floating on our backs, slowly turning in the water.

“If there were clouds in the sky, this would feel like a scene in a movie where we say what we see and argue about which animal the clouds look like,” Micah says.
I picture us in our own movie and wonder what the plot would be. Two bored friends doesn’t seem like much of a blockbuster.

“I see a bluebird,” I say. “The color of the sky.”

“No, it’s a sky-blue whale,” Micah argues.

“A blue pony. With a blue mane.”

“They have to be real things,” Micah says. “That are really blue.”

That ends our game because I can’t think of any other animals that are blue like the sky.

We swim to shore and lie on our stomachs to let the sun dry our backs, then flip over to dry the other side.

“Do you think being eighth-graders will change everything?” I ask. “What if we don’t have any of the same classes together? What if all our friends get divided up?”

“You really think not being in classes together will change things?” He sounds surprised and disappointed, so I don’t tell him that I do think it could. What if Micah meets someone new? Someone more interesting than me. What if he gets a girlfriend?

He reaches over and takes my hand, as if he can read my thoughts. “I’ll never leave you,” he says. “Together forever. No matter what.” He squeezes my fingers tight, and I squeeze back.
I concentrate on his hand in mine, wishing my heart would feel like a hummingbird trapped in my chest again, like when we were six.

But it doesn’t.

If I would let him, Micah would be my boyfriend. He used to try to kiss me sometimes, but I finally told him to stop. I don’t have those kinds of feelings for him. Or any boy. I never have, at least not since that time we got engaged under the lilac bushes. It’s something I’ve only told him once, last winter, when he tried to kiss me at midnight on New Year’s Eve.

“You don’t like any boys?” he asked.

I shook my head. “I don’t think so.”

He was quiet for a minute, studying my face. “Does that mean you—?” He paused, looking awkward. “Does that mean you like girls?”

I shrugged. I wasn’t sure about that. “I guess I don’t know how I feel at all,” I said.

He nodded and then got quiet for a while. “It’s OK,” he said finally. “This stuff is confusing.” And that was the end of the conversation.

But sometimes, like now, the issue comes back silently. And silently, we let it slip back away.