

## Camp Friends

Sixteen:

The summer Kira was sixteen, her best friend died. Dove into a lake on an overnight trip at camp, hit her head, and that was that. “It was over before she knew it, I bet,” Kira’s little brother said, while their mother hurried home in the wake of the news. And the boy held her hand in his chubby one.

Kira could not afford to go to camp with Naomi. At least, that is what her parents had told her years back. And while she knew it was true, she also knew her parents would never let her go to a place where they sang about Jesus and prayed before dinner. Kira spent summers babysitting her brother and writing Naomi letters on the porch. At night she and her other friends laughed about poor Naomi, out there being a Jesus freak with no indoor plumbing.

Still, every summer, Kira imagined being at Camp Green Hill, hair lying lush in two braids and voice worn raw from singing. In middle school, Naomi used to teach Kira cabin cheers while they reapplied lip balm in the school bathroom. After the bell rang, Kira would tap out the chants on her desk with her fingers. Starting around April each year, Kira would pretend to be looking forward feverishly to camp. Once, she’d even calculated the days until the session’s start. Just like Naomi, who crafted elaborate countdowns out of post-its and polaroids of her camp crew. She taped them up beside her bed. Naomi sometimes gave Kira the honor of stripping off a post-it before bed when she slept over. Forty-six days left, said the countdown

every spring. Forty-five. Forty-four. And she knew her friend would soon depart. Yet her stomach something leapt with excitement, half-believing she'd soon sit on the bus beside Naomi, rolling over mountains.

When they started high school, Kira stopped linking arms with Naomi in the school hallways, and crossed them over her chest instead. She'd think, why would I want to spend all summer in the woods? Summer, after all, meant freedom. Summer meant shedding yourself. Especially when your best friend, the person who knew yourself best, was gone for eight weeks. Maybe she'd give a blowjob while Naomi was gone, or get bangs, or convince their other friends to take edibles. Naomi couldn't do these things at camp. But then Naomi's camp friends would visit. Naomi glowed giddy and ravenous before these visits, showering Kira with kisses on the cheek: detritus of her towering love for the Green Hill girls. When she saw Naomi link arms with her camp friends, Kira's twitched with the wish to join.

After Naomi died her envy fierced. She no longer had to babysit her brother, since her parents wanted her to "work through her trauma." So they scraped together tuition to send him to Robotics Day Camp at the community college. In the cavernous silence her family left behind each weekday she lay sweating on her sheets, and imagined dawdling on the lake's shore while Naomi dived in. She willed her ears to hear the shocked silence of the bus back to camp. It was the weight of witnessing she craved. The memory of Naomi's death should have throbbed red as a wound, proof that there had been a friendship preceding it. Surely, for the camp friends, that was how it felt. But for Kira the moment was blank. She barely cried, even. Naomi used to say that camp was another world, and it felt like one now. Naomi might as well have died in a movie. Kira looked inside herself for a touch of survivor's guilt, nightmares or flashbacks or tears so thick she couldn't breathe. Those things would serve as permission to claim grief as her own.

But no. The closest thing she had to a flashback or nightmare was a dream where Naomi was a dog, a white shaggy one. The two of them, Kira the Girl and Naomi the Dog, swam together in Naomi's pool, and Kira said, "Good thing you're a dog so you can do the doggy paddle," and Naomi said, "I don't doggy paddle, they taught us the butterfly stroke at camp."

None of Naomi's camp friends had come down for the funeral. Not Lilly, not Celia, not Megan. A part of Kira hoped that, after the accident, the camp would have to close. But camp did not close. Not one kid went home, Kira's mother reported, hush-voiced, while her parents loaded the dishwasher. Kira listened from the dark doorway. She longed to be picked up like a child. Her mom sounded begrudgingly impressed. "Her parents, they're saying they want the kids to stay at camp. Can you imagine? They're saying they want them to heal together."

And heal they did. The Green Hill girls posted videos. They tagged Naomi in photo collages. They posted ling letters to Naomi, which Kira screenshotted and read each night when she couldn't sleep. She had long ago followed each of them after they visited. Or else Naomi had done it for her, taking Kira's phone into her friendship-braceleted hands, saying, "Sunny and I got so close this year, it's insane. You have to follow her." Phones were forbidden at Camp Green Hill, Kira knew. Plus, there was no cell service there. But Kira also knew that some kind counselors handed confiscated phones back for overnights or field trips to the Dairy Queen in town. Naomi used to call Kira from the privacy of the Dairy Queen bathroom.

"#GreenHillResilient. We will stick together for Nomes," posted Celia, from that same Dairy Queen. Kira read this in a mall changing room, zipping a too-tight romper for yet another memorial service. Her school friends tried on black outfits of their own in adjoining rooms. Celia's post sent envy surging through Kira. She wanted to use Naomi's camp nickname. She hated the romper, and she hated the friends with her in the changing rooms because they were

not Green Hill girls.

When Naomi died, Kira had been working on a daydream. In fact it had been close to perfected, tinkered half to death in the shower and the car. In the daydream, Naomi sat in the passenger seat as Kira steered them smoothly through the suburbs. They sipped iced coffees. Then Naomi would turn the music down. She'd say, "Kira, you're even more than just a best friend to me. Even when we are not together, it's like we are, because we are so close that we're pretty much inside each other's heads. You don't go to camp with me, but you might as well, because you understand everything that we do there and you are part of it. Please, call me Nomes." Then she'd wink. This wasn't so far-fetched, really, because the girls did carry one another around in their heads. Naomi had said so once, and in fact Kira often heard her best friend's voice, commenting from somewhere behind her right ear. It commented still, even though the real Naomi was lying underground. "That outfit's a little tight for a memorial service, you wild child," it said. "Just borrow my gray dress. Actually, keep it. I gained so much weight at camp."

Kira no longer counted down days until camp. She counted days since Naomi had died. On day sixteen, Naomi's favorite counselor—the only counselor Naomi had ever honored with a birthday Instagram—posted a video. It showed what looked like the entire camp holding one another in their arms. They swayed and cried and sang, "To everything, turn, turn, turn, there is a season..." Behind them, trees rustled. The counselor tagged Naomi in the video, captioned it, "So proud of my girls. We're staying strong and remembering Nomes." How strange, that Kira could look at these pictures and videos and feel Naomi had not died at all. It was no different from other summers, when she'd look at photos from camp, almost hoping to spot her own face in them.

At home, Kira's school friends began to go to parties again, and picked up shifts at their summer jobs. They began, it seemed, to get over it. But Kira wrote long letters to Naomi. She wore her friend's old t-shirt to sleep until it became a matter of stubbornness. Memories of Naomi still came unannounced, though she feared they'd run dry. In the bath, one of those memories hit: the time Kira had told Naomi that she didn't want children.

"I'm not going to sacrifice my freedom," she'd said, while the two of them printed essays in the school library. Naomi replied,

"I'm a woman, I want a billion kids. But I'm giving you the annoying ones. You can whip them into shape." There in the bath Kira decided she'd have children, because Naomi could not. The oldest would be named Naomi.

A part of her thought summer's end would mean Naomi's return. It always did. But come autumn, when Kira drove to school, there was no Naomi in the passenger seat. The weight of her friend beside her was replaced with a new weight, of imagining. Imagining drowning. Imagining watching, from the water's edge. She imagined this all winter and it kept her warm. She imagined it the next summer, when she finally got bangs and gave a blowjob, but still wore Naomi's t-shirt to sleep. All that time, Kira fed and raised an adopted grief, willing it to become her own.

Twenty-Two:

"Where," said Lena, "Should we go for break?" And Kira tried to slow the eager spill of her voice as she said,

"Well, what's our budget?"

"You know my budget. Like, twelve bucks. Thirteen if we only eat ramen this week."

Smooth as anything, Kira said:

“There’s this place in Tennessee. This little town. A friend of mine used to go to camp there.”

“You want to go to a small town in Tennessee for spring break?”

“Well, where do you want to go, Cancun?” Lena did not want to be the kind of person who went to Cancun for Spring Break. “Look at this.” Kira brandished her laptop. “It’s a real B&B. Not an Airbnb! A real one. If we share a room it’ll be zero money. Plus, it covers breakfast.” Lena, dry-shaving her legs into the trash can with an awful scraping noise, looked up at the website.

“Ok, that’s super cheap,” she conceded, “And maybe we could do meth or whatever they do down there. I’m kidding, not meth. Moonshine? Oh, fuck.” Blood welled from Lena’s leg. Kira jumped up to get a wad of toilet paper from the bathroom and handed it to her roommate.

“It’ll only be four hours from here with your car. Ok, and this town is so cute. There’s all this hiking. There’s blueberry picking. It’s rustic.” She had no idea whether this was true.

“Yeah, why not. Which friend was it who lived there?”

“She went to camp there,” said Kira. She hoped Lena would not ask more questions, and at the same time, prayed she’d prod. In those first first months when their friendship hadn’t hardened into its current form, she had not told Lena about Naomi. How could she start now? Lena would gasp, hug her, say, “how could you not have told me, babe?” She would cry for Naomi, harder than Kira ever had.

Always, Lena did the crying in their friendship. Sophomore year, when they first lived together, Kira had fallen victim to a weekend-long crying jag. There had been a crush, a kiss, a melodramatic coming-out post. And then a rejection, deleting the post with shaking hands, and a

gush of tears. The tears came from embarrassment more than anything else: Kira had succumbed to begging for attention online and then felt hideously stupid. She had exposed herself. Lena had brought her cups of tea, cups of wine, cups of soup, while she cried. Lena had wiped a few tears of her own. “I hate seeing you sad,” she had said. “It’s me who’s supposed to be the emotional one.” After that, it became impossible for Kira to talk about Naomi.

True, she hinted. Only last week, in heated conversation at a party, she’d butted in: “Don’t you think the performance of grief on social media is interesting?” and Lena had said,

“Grief, sure. Any emotion. It’s all currency these days. The article I mentioned, it has a whole section on that.” Kira’s limbs had gone leaden after Lena said this. But what had she expected? Lena wasn’t a mind-reader.

That’s when she’d begun to think about Spring Break. Maybe this trip would nudge it all into the open. A descent to the hot South, to the place where it had happened. Kira briefly pictured herself crying into Lena’s shoulder beside a lake.

So she closed her laptop, and said, “Let’s see if anyone wants to come, and I can book the place.”

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“Has anyone seen my hand sanitizer?” Jawbone asked for the billionth time. Jawbone was a friend of Avery’s. Avery was a friend of Lena’s. Sometimes she came around to Kira and Lena’s place for dinner. As Lena drove them over the hills, she and Kira had passed a flat ginger ale back and forth, groaning with carsickness. Nausea had never figured in Kira’s fantasies of the Camp Green Hill bus. Kira had met Jawbone only this morning. Her real name was Mariah. Only Kira called her Jawbone—the girl’s chin could have sliced glass—and only inside her head. Jawbone examined Google Maps with a face that made it seem like the map had spilled a drink

on her, but she was, after all, the only passenger who wasn't too carsick to navigate.

Soon the hum of air conditioning welcomed them from their spot on the B&B's driveway. Opening the car door, Kira inhaled the milky smell of damp woods. She pictured Naomi climbing out of the bus, taking a big whiff of sacred Camp Air.

"Come carry these ladies' bags in," said the B&B owner to her son. The kid shuffled out, an attempted mustache ranging over his lip. Inside, the owner trailed a red fingernail over a notepad on the fridge. "Alright, we've got two rooms for the four of you. We have the French Country room—that's my favorite—and the Rustic Americana room. Upstairs, let's go."

"You don't sound very...you know...country," Avery said to the B&B owner, while they lugged bags up the stairs. "I thought the people here would."

Kira didn't think it was a coincidence that the owner shoved Avery and Jawbone into the plaid-choked Americana room, saving her porcelain-and-blue favorite for Kira and Lena.

After changing into shorts and sundresses they left the house behind and floated down the main street through humidity thick as water. "Correct. Correct. The place has changed a whole lot. You know, more turr-ism," nodded the cashier in the consignment store. Avery leaned over the countertop, nodding. The town certainly didn't look how Naomi had described. She'd made it sound like an extension of camp, a place where you'd be lucky to find indoor showers. But it had some cafes that would have been cool years ago in the city. Whitewashed walls, a poster of Audrey Hepburn.

Yet Kira saw no Dairy Queen. Had she imagined Naomi's stories? In line for a latte, she googled it. Dairy Queen lay on the edge of town. A mile from it, the concrete road turned to dirt. This dirt road wound through woods, and—the hairs on Kira's arm stood—became a path to camp.

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“Honey, you good?” Lena murmured, while they leaped over a stream. All four girls were sticky and bitten from the hike. Jawbone’s jawbone glinted in the sun.

“I’m just tired,” Kira told Lena. She hoped Lena would prod.

“We should head back soon, guys,” Avery said, with anxiety creeping into her voice. “It’s getting pretty dark.” Anxiety often crept into Avery’s voice. Her home zip code, she’d told Kira once, had the second-highest average SAT score in the nation. At the start of their hike, she’d said that the town would be a good place to headquarter a socially conscious startup. “The rent’s so cheap,” she’d explained. The most susceptible to the town’s charms by day, the most eager to buy roadside jars of pickled okra, Avery was also most fearful by night.

“It won’t get all the way dark for a while. It’s already April,” Kira pointed out. She wasn’t sure if this was true, but wanted to keep going, to glimpse the “Welcome to Camp Green Hill” sign.

“If we turn around now, we won’t see the lookout point,” Jawbone called from down the trail. “You guys just need to speed up and we’ll get there before sunset.”

“Exactly!” Kira said, and pressed on without waiting for an answer. She left even Jawbone behind. Only minutes later, the first raindrop punctured the open sky of a clearing. She said nothing, pretended not to remember Naomi’s stories about how the rain at camp came down so hard that they’d shampoo their hair in the storm. A warning would have made no difference. The storm charged in on the tail of those first uncertain drops. Mud rose and clogged the space between Kira’s sneakers and feet. Water pooled in her ears. Twigs descended vengeful and scraped her face. Kira hardly heard Lena’s shouts behind her.

And then, stepping between trees, squinting in the rain: Naomi. Her braids lay heavy and

soaked. She looked older than last time. Then again, Kira thought, I must look old too. Kira noticed flyaways in Naomi's blond hair, blotches of red on her skin. If she was a ghost, or a fucking angel or something, then she'd be perfect. She'd have no flyaways.

"Y'all get stuck in the storm?" Naomi called to all four girls. Kira waited for one of them to reply. Hearing someone else speak to Naomi would prove she was real. But, if anybody spoke, the rain pounded their words to silence.

"Yeah," said Kira finally, "we did."

"Come with me. I'll take you where it's dry." Naomi turned and kept walking through the woods, off-trail. Kira looked back at the others. Through sheets of rain, only Jawbone's face was visible. She looked resolute and pissed off, as always. Behind her, blurs of Lena and Avery stayed put too. Kira turned her back on them. She followed Naomi out of the clearing, between tree trunks, into camp.

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As they stepped out from the forest the storm settled like a tantruming toddler taken by sleep. Still, the paths and porches of Camp Green Hill were empty, ringing a slimy lake Kira knew from a thousand photos. Naomi stopped at one moss-soggy cabin with the screens hanging loose from its window frames. The door groaned as she opened it. As Kira followed Naomi it swung shut on her body, so unexpectedly heavy that she knew she wasn't dreaming. Murmurs rose from a maze of bunk beds.

"Who'd you bring back, Nomes?" a girl, sprawled on the floor, asked. A woman, actually.

"Just ran into an old friend. Got stranded out there." Naomi grabbed a towel clumped on a nearby bottom bunk. She tossed it to Kira with a wink. It smelled like mildew. The way

Naomi's stuff used to smell, come August, when she unpacked with Kira lounging on her bed.

Women lay on their backs and their stomachs, scattered across the floor and on bunk beds. Some wrote in notebooks. Others painted each others' nails. Each one wore her age awkwardly. Their shorts were too small and they stank contentedly, faces shining with sweat and the thrill of this place.

"So, I mean, what is this?" Kira asked.

"This is camp!" One woman called, from a top bunk in the far corner.

"But it's not summer yet, is it?" Kira's question echoed between her ears, mocking her: *it's not summer yet, is it?* Meanwhile a dead-and-buried girl stood before her, sponging her braids with a towel.

"It's ALways SUMmer at CAMP GREEN HILL!" someone in the top bunk chanted, the others joining on those last three words. Kira's fingers had once tapped out that chant on a desk in Biology class. The woman in the top bunk sat up. Kira saw her face.

"Holy shit, are you Celia?" she said.

"Kira! It's been forever. Like, since Nomes' birthday, right? Tenth grade?"

"But I'm Facebook friends with Celia." Kira turned to Naomi. She heard accusation rise in her own voice. "She's in nursing school. Is she still a counselor here?"

"She's here with me!" Naomi said. "Everyone is here with me, at camp. Isn't that fun, that you wandered over here, and you can see everyone?" A tinge of drawl used to color Naomi's voice after camp. First day of school she'd say, "You got a pin I can borrow?" Kira and the others would dangle a pen, say "you mean one of these?" But now Naomi's accent plunged slower and deeper than Kira had ever heard it.

Raindrops ran down Kira's spine and made her shiver. She wanted a bath at her parents'

house in Florida, the house they'd sold when she left for college. "You know what, Nomes?" she said, testing the syllable on her tongue. "How about we go catch up?"

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"What the fuck, Naomi?"

The two of them walked down the muddy main path towards a bloody, sinking sunset. Around them, women stepped out of cabins dressed for the lake or horseback riding. Their mouths were ringed by laugh lines, but neon braces showed in their smiles. Kira had never seen such practiced hands drag the strings of a friendship bracelet, like surgeons stitching skin.

"Well," said Naomi, "You know how much I love it here. How could I ever leave?"

"Okay, but babe, you died. You got buried, and everything. They had to bring your body down to Florida."

"I know, I know. And I'm sorry. I know that was hard for you. I honestly can't imagine. But think of how it was for people here, the people who saw it. Was I supposed to just leave them? We *needed* each other. And Kira, going through something like that—it made us all so, so close." When Kira did not answer, Naomi held out an arm crooked at the elbow. They linked arms, the sweat inside their elbows mixing

Soon Naomi dodged off the main path, into a fringe of trees. The girls reached a cool clearing. Kira wasn't sure they were still inside the camp, but she thought she'd seen pictures of this place. In those pictures it must have been packed with chanting, dancing girls, maybe screaming color war chants. Now she heard only the shrieks of roosting birds. Naomi said, "The activity is supposed to be here. I guess we're a little early." She sat and leaned on a tree trunk. Kira rested her head on Naomi's shoulder, smelling her sweat. She let cold mud seep through her shorts.

For a while, Naomi held Kira's hand and picked at her nail polish. Then two counselors arrived. Kira could tell because their Camp Green Hill T-Shirts said "STAFF" across the back. One of the counselors pulled tea lights from a wrinkled Wal-Mart bag, and placed them in brown paper bags, placing these along the clearing's edge. She skipped the spot where Naomi and Kira sat, but said "Hey, Nomes," as she passed. The other followed with a lighter, reaching into the paper bags. When she clicked the lighter and straightened up, the bags gleamed like eyes staring through the dusk. The counselors finished and sat down across the clearing from Naomi and Kira, talking softly, leaning on each other's shoulders too.

Naomi had chipped the polish from half Kira's fingers by the time others arrived. Naomi's whole cabin. Celia, Lilly, Megan, Erin, others Kira knew from pictures but could no longer name, not when they'd grown so much older. They sank into a rough circle within the wider circle of paper-bag lights. Kira saw a carpet of legs, tanned and mosquito-torn. Some hugged to chests, others criss-crossed. A few girls stretched their legs towards the circle's center, and their friends sat inside the V-shape they made, leaning their backs on their friends' chests. Kira's own legs looked shaved and vacant between Naomi's on her left and Megan's on her right.

A counselor, the one who had held the lighter, stepped into the circle's center. Her muscles bulged between waterproof sandals and running shorts, as if she'd been climbing these hills for years. She addressed the circle. "You have all been so strong this summer." She said. "We brought you all to this quiet place, away from the rest of camp, to heal together. Like Naomi's parents asked us to, we will continue to remember her. So tonight each of us will share a memory we have of Nomes." A quivering breath. "I'm going to go first. I remember she used to sneak to the coffee station at breakfast, even though she wasn't allowed. And me, I'd pretend

not to notice, because she was so funny when she was hyped up from the caffeine.” Some of the women in the circle had already started to cry. Naomi was tearing up.

“How often do you guys do this?” Kira whispered.

“Every couple of days,” Naomi said. She held hands with Lilly on her opposite side. Megan, who (Kira knew from Instagram) was raising adopted twins, raised her hand with a sob. It brushed Kira’s arm on its way up.

“Yes, Megan,” the counselor said.

Kira raised her own hand high.

“I want to share a memory,” Megan said through tears, “Of this time I had mono at home. And Nomes called me every single day after school so I wouldn’t get bored. She even wrote me these funny songs, and she’d sing them to me.” So it continued. Kira held her hand raised the entire time. Her arm ached and her chest ached. She heaved with years’ worth of tears, waiting her turn. But Naomi, her own dirty face tracked with tears, reached up to pull Kira’s hand down. “This is just for the girls in the cabin.” She explained.

And Kira saw Lena’s outline appear through the screen of candle smoke. To take me away, she thought. While a girl named Serena wept about Naomi’s bedtime ritual (dramatic readings of romance novels she’d bought at the Goodwill in town) Kira watched Lena. Lena tiptoed around the circle’s edge until she stood behind Kira, then waded inside and crouched so that the two were face to face. Lena’s eyes were wide and frightened, her face slick with rain. As she reached out to touch Kira’s shoulder, Kira clamped her eyes shut.

She knew that when she opened them, the clearing would be empty of Green Hill girls. Blue chill would replace the candles’ stare, and there’d be nothing but the waterlogged bit of trail where they’d been caught in the storm. In front of Avery and Jawbone, Kira would not be able to

speaking freely. Once again, her chance to tell Lena would shrink, then disappear. She knew she would have to go back to the B&B that night, shower, and pick blueberries in the morning. She would not be spending the night at Camp Green Hill. And her envy grew greater and greater and greater.

Kira felt a terrible wind. She forced her eyelids up and saw Lena, still crouched so close that her breath warmed Kira's face. But Lena was looking at the place Naomi's face had been. And for one moment, before Lena took her by the hand and pulled her to her feet, Kira watched her friends watching one another.