

A Cool Dry Place PART 1

by Melissa Corliss DeLorenzo

It is winter.

She woke too late to shower. The whole family woke up late. Someone forgot to set the alarm. Mandy thinks maybe Mom.

"Please!" she wails.

"Honey, we just don't have time," Dad says. He holds his hands out to her like some kind of offering. His smooth smooth hands, soft from the raw fat of animals. The suet that rubs against them as he slices through the flesh - carves steaks, filets, grinds the cheaper cuts into hamburger.

Mandy doesn't care about his sympathy. She only wants a shower. Her mother only allows her to wash her hair every second day. She insists a shampoo every day will damage it. But Mandy's hair is oily. Sleek and shiny. Almost pretty, on the days she shampoos. Flat from bed and oily on the days she doesn't. (The girls have made note of it, in an off-hand way. But it is only a matter of time.)

This day, the day the alarm clock does not go off, is a shampoo day. But she can't — she has been told there is not enough time. It has been two days now since her hair was washed. She is panicked.

"But my hair is dirty, Mom!"

It is winter.

She is twelve. Seventh grade.

"Mandy, you look fine. It's not a big deal. You can wash it later or tomorrow before school."

It does not look fine, though. Mom is just saying that.

Mandy dresses quickly. Jams a knit hat over her hair. Dreads the moment she knows is coming when she will have to remove the hat. She pictures her hair vividly dirty and matted — even more than it usually is every second day. The boys, some of them, will laugh and say some stupid things she will almost be able to ignore or at least successfully pretend to brush off. But the girls, who might say nothing at all, will look at her sharply and shrewdly and efficiently

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and with cool nonchalance and cooler blue eyes or brown or some other color. And with no words at all, they will say more.

The entire school day she runs her hand over her hair lightly. She imagines it slippery and wet-looking. Dripping onto the collar of her white oxford shirt. Trips to the girls' room prove it is not quite as bad as she thinks, but still her mind keeps slipping back to the greasy image of herself. She thinks it and thinks it until it becomes her. Not the hair, not the oiliness but some bigger, more horrible thing. It overtakes her to the point that she forgets the day has just about come to an end. She almost forgets that she is not the unnamable thing, heavy and slow and slunk down in the wooden chair with the desk part attached like a big flat arm. She almost forgets there will be other days, other moments.

Then the bell rings. Relief more like joy floods her.

She gathers her things. Shoves her hat on her head before she puts on her coat.

She moves quietly away out of the classroom, meets up with her sister, Lara, in the schoolyard.

It is bitterly cold, like ice on teeth.

It's winter and Mandy is in seventh grade.

As she walks away from the school on her way home, she talks with Lara. They laugh. Space between her and the school lengthens. The space starts out thick and heavy, wide and dark, growing thinner and transparent until enough space has uncoiled and the space, thin as spaghetti and light as organdy ribbon, turns to white smoke and is gone, absorbed into the blue of the sky.

There are times when she is heavy and times when she is light.

The day is cold and brittle. Hurts the teeth to laugh. But they do. Bring forth the hot insides of mouth and tongue and exhale warmth where it needs to be.

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Summer is the best time of the year.

She wakes to the sound of the shade snapping against the frame of the window. Being sucked in and blown out by the cool morning

breeze. Mandy nestles under the cool sheets and light summer-weight blanket on her bed. The sheets and pillows smell of fresh air. Her mother dries everything on the line during the summer. Sometimes she or Lara help hang clothes and sheets on the clothesline. They have wooden clothes pins — the kind with the little springs in them and a few of the old-fashioned kind that look like little bald people with no arms or faces. At Christmas, they make ornaments from the same kind as these, angels and Santas. But in the summer, it's about sheets and clothes.

The pulleys are stuck into the house outside Mandy's bedroom window on one end and on a tall wooden pole on the other. It squeaks crazily when she leans out the window to run it towards her or away.

"I've got to get Daddy to spray those with WD-40," Mom says. Mandy's Dad always gets those little jobs. Mom has plenty of her own, like her job at the high school. She is one of the English teachers.

The window shade snaps and Mandy rubs the bottoms of her feet over the sheet under her body. The sheets and blankets smell wonderful like summer. Cool and soft.

Clothespins end up in the grass and soft moss underneath the window. They drop them sometimes as clothes are being hung on the line. When enough have gathered on the ground, sunk in the soft moss and the tender green of the grass, Mom calls to them as they play outside.

From the window she calls to them, "Mandy, Lara! Can you get the clothespins?" They run to her, stop to pick them up and stand on tippy-toes to hand them to her as she hangs from the window. The girls hand them up in little bunches. Some of them are wet and weathered, the ones that fell first, weeks ago. They all laugh as some fall again from Mom's hands.

Summer is the best time.

Mandy nestles under the sweet grass-smelling sheets and summer-weight blanket and listens to the shade snapping. She doesn't need to move yet or open her eyes. Maybe just move the

soles of her feet or the palms of her hands across the smooth sheets. Her favorite ones. Green and yellow flowers, sun-faded, washed so many times, rubbed to thin softness.

It is the summer after seventh grade. She is twelve but not for long. She turns thirteen at the beginning of the school year, just after Labor Day. Not that she's in a hurry to be thirteen like her friends. They are all already "teenagers." They love to talk about their teenager-ness. Favorite topics include: boys, teen magazines, periods, boobs, *high school* boys. To all of this she smiles enough to show interest, though careful it is not enough to be called out. But she's not thinking about any of that right now. It's far away and now she can smell the sheets.

It is very quiet outside this early on a summer morning. A cool sweet-smelling hushed thing with its own weight pressing into the new day. And the birds make their sounds. The same ones over and over like last year and like next. (But she's not thinking of that right now.) The shade snaps in that way that it sounds only in summer. As air pushes it away from the window, bright white sunlight erupts into the room, then, as quickly, rushes away like the ocean, as the shade is sucked back into the window frame.

It will be a sunny hot day. They will go to the beach.

And the day will be some variation of the beach days before it. Mandy likes it this way. She enjoys the predictability, the comfort of slipping on days like a best-loved sweater. Soft, cottony, fat loopy weave, unraveling. Some pretty faded color.

She listens and hears her sister talking with their Mom in the kitchen. She can tell from the quality and volume of their voices that that is the room they are in. Mandy throws the covers off, tosses her thin tan legs over the side of the bed. Her feet touch the wood floor and slap lightly to her bedroom door, are silenced on the pile carpet of the hallway.

She'll make her bed later. Her mother will make sure she does before they leave for the beach.

This morning Mom has sliced some strawberries for the corn flakes. Sprinkled with sugar, floating in the creamy white.

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It's not winter Mandy dislikes. She doesn't mind the cold. She actually prefers it to the oppressive heat and humidity of late June, July and August. She likes the cold on her skin, the red noses, icy toes and fingers. Likes the scarves and hats and boots and snow.

It is winter. Mandy is twelve. Seventh grade.

"What're you gonna ask for for Christmas?" Lara asks her.

The house is decked out for Christmas. Their Mom has boxes and boxes of decorations — for the tree, the walls, every surface, every room. Somehow Mom has the touch to pull it all together so it's not tacky. Just nice and homey. Mandy and Lara, and even Dad, think it's great.

They listen to the Perry Como and Andy Williams Christmas albums. Mom's old vinyl LPs. Every year, unpacking the boxes of decorations, they all forget about a lot of the stuff, so opening the decorations boxes feels like Christmas presents themselves.

"Oh! The crescent moon Santa!"

"I love that one."

"Now where did we get this one?" Mom says every year about one or another.

So now the lights twinkle on the tree as Mandy and Lara discuss their Christmas wishes. It's dark by 4:30 in the afternoon and they turn on the tree lights as soon as the sun drops below the horizon. Everyday, one of them says, "Can we turn on the tree, Mom?"

"When it's dark," she calls from wherever she is in the house.

"Is it dark now?"

A pause. "I guess it's close enough."

The girls have discussed many times what they each want for Christmas, but never tire of the conversation. So when Lara asks Mandy what she is going to ask for for Christmas, Mandy doesn't acknowledge she has told Lara several times already, she simply answers.

"Well," she says, "the new Barbie is nice, but maybe one of the new dolls." She means Cabbage Patch. They are the craze of this Christmas season.

"Yeah," Lara breathes. "Me, too."

Lara is in fifth grade. Lots of girls in her class are asking for the dolls. Mandy knows what the girls in her class will be getting. Or at least she has an idea. And it's not dolls. Some things like sweaters, curling irons, records, the right jacket. She knows the girls would laugh at her about the doll. She even knows a doll is babyish. But she still wants to play with Barbies and baby dolls. She and Lara play every day after school, after homework. She would never tell the girls at school. She has learned the hard way to go along with them and keep certain things secret.

But she can't help but want one of the dolls.

"Renee and Sherry know which ones *exactly* they want," Lara says.

The thing about the dolls is they are all different with their own unique names.

"They showed their mothers and everything. I bet their parents went back to the store and got them," Lara says. "I don't even *care* what one I get. I'd be happy with any one of them. They're all *so* cute."

"I know," says Mandy. She wishes she could want this doll with the same abandon Lara does. The want sticks inside her, coats the inside of her chest and throat thickly. She wants to be excited and careless. But the want weighs on her.

Still, she requests the doll when their mother asks the girls what they want for Christmas.

They are in the car. The car hasn't been running long enough yet and coolish air blasts from the vents. But still it feels a lot warmer than the frigid air outside. Christmas songs play on the radio. They're on their way to the Mall to do some shopping for presents. Mandy feels happy. She loves Christmastime.

"What do you want for Christmas?" says their mother.

"Cabbage Patch!" Lara says. "Cabbage Patch, Cabbage Patch, Cabbage Patch!" She tosses her head back. Mom watches her in the rearview mirror and laughs.

"Are you sure?" Mom asks.

Lara squeezes her eyes shut and turns her head up at the ceiling of the car. "Yes, yes and yes!" She smiles broadly. They all laugh.

When Mom turns to Mandy and asks, "What about you, honey?" Mandy hesitates. "Do you like the dolls, too?"

Mandy nods. "Yeah." Some knotted thing sits in her stomach. "I do like them." In the end, her desire for the doll overtakes the worry.

It is the first day back at school after Christmas vacation. The girls in Mandy's class show off their big presents in the schoolyard. It's freezing out. Their breath puffs out in fluffy plumes around them. Nicole got a pink and navy jacket, the most popular kind. The one with the hood. The pink is deep raspberry. It's not warm enough to wear it, but she begged her mom. (This is something to which Mandy knows her own mother would never agree.)

"She said I'd have to wait til Spring to wear it again. But isn't it so cool?" Nicole says. Everyone agrees.

Tara got a real angora sweater, powder blue. "Shows off my you-know-whats. I'm totally wearing it to boys basketball on Friday night. Plus, I got some awesome *designer* jeans. I think they were really expensive." Her eyes widen at this, her voice drops.

Mandy listens, keeps her eyes slightly averted, her exclamations subdued — enough so they won't notice, enough so they will. She blends. It is one of her cultivated skills. A necessity in her arsenal. Although sometimes it doesn't work. And sometimes she forgets to use it. And sometimes it's not enough.

And then it's her turn.

"So," Nicole says, turning on Mandy. "Mandy, what did you get?"

A look passes between some of the girls, their smiles suppressed giggles.

Surprisingly, to herself, she is not prepared. This is shocking because she has been unprepared so many times before she'd think it impossible to find herself in this very position again.

"Um, some good stuff. Some clothes. A new sweater. It's pretty."
Comes out in a great rush.

The eyes.

"But what was your *big* gift?" Tara says.

"I don't know. I got lots of things." She stops, her minding
whirling. Then! "But I guess the necklace." She feels triumphant.
And relieved. And large and light.

Nicole's eyes narrow. Through Mandy's coat, she eyes the top of
Mandy's chest where a necklace would be. "What necklace? Show
us."

"Oh," Mandy touches her collarbone with her mitten-covered
hand. She is protected by her coat and scarf now, but knows she'll
have to take her winter stuff off as soon as the bell rings and they all
line up, file inside, stand in the coat closet and hang their things on
the designated hooks. The coat closet will smell of wet heated wool,
hot air from the heater, bananas and lunch boxes from now and all
the years past, the gloom and heaviness of a long new day. Mandy
can smell it now, here. She can call the scent to mind at any time.
Home in her own safe bed or any other time. She doesn't like to
recall it. Sometimes it comes on its own.

But right now she is still outside with her hand at her throat.

"Uhhh. It's too nice to wear to just school," she says quickly.

"Can you wear it to the basketball game?"

"I don't know. I'll have to ask my mom. It's *really* nice," she says.
"And *really* expensive," she adds.

"I can't wait to see it on Friday," says Tara. She sneaks a look at
Nicole. Not sneaky enough that Mandy misses it. (Of course not.)
They walk away together, arms locked, heads close. They giggle.
Mandy thinks it could be anything they're laughing at.

"What kind of necklace is it, Mandy?" Sara asks. She is one of the
only girls who is nice. But she's fringe, like Mandy. Even more than
Mandy is.

Mandy thinks. She remembers the one Dad gave Mom for their
anniversary. It is a circle of diamonds the size of a quarter.

"It's diamonds," she says. "In a circle."

"It sounds pretty."

"Thanks." She feels a little bad lying to Sara who is so nice. "What did you get?"

She shrugs. "A few things. Nothing like the other girls got. Or you," she says.

"Yeah, well, it's nice and everything, but I'll bet your stuff is nice, too," says Mandy.

The bell rings.

It is Monday.

All week she thinks about the necklace. When she lies in bed before falling asleep, she imagines wearing it to the game and what the girls would say and how surprised they'd be. And jealous. She crafts spectacular scenarios in which she wears the necklace. In class, at basketball games and the ice cream parlor after, on field trips to places the school would never actually go. Places that have no educational or Catholic value, but lend themselves perfectly to daydreams.

The days pass. She thinks of the necklace day after day. She is afraid to ask her mother if she can wear it. Not because she is afraid of her mother, because she is afraid of the answer, has an idea what it will be, and as long as she doesn't ask, she can maintain the hope for it. When she finally musters the courage, of course the answer is no.

"But, Mom!"

"To a *basketball game*? Mandy." Mom is ironing her dress for work tomorrow.

"But I need to look extra nice."

"You always look nice." Why do parents say things like this? It is not even true. Mandy vows to never say things like this to her own kids someday.

"Mom, please!" There is a frantic quality to her voice.

Her mother places the iron down and looks at Mandy. "Mandy, I don't know when I'd ever let you, or anyone else for that matter, borrow it. But certainly not for a CYO basketball game." She returns to her ironing. "It's special to me. And it's expensive."

This is Thursday.

Mandy goes to her room, flops down onto her belly on her bed.

After a minute, Lara flops down beside her.

"She said no?" Lara asks.

"Yeah." Mandy's hands are under her chin. Lara lies there with her in silence until their Mom calls down the hall, "Girls, supper!"

At the game, neck bare, glaring, feeling as if she sits in a spotlight highlighting her embarrassment and her stupidity at her lie which she will now have to lie over thickly with more lies, she hopes the evening goes by quickly.

All of the girls she does not want to talk to are part of the cheering squad. They are lined up facing the court, navy kick-pleat skirts, black and white saddle shoes, snowy white sweaters, large *SMS* embroidered over their budding breasts. They jump around in synch, they bark out matching words goading their boys to victory. Mandy thinks cheering itself is stupid, but still feels she is missing something sitting way up in the chipped bleachers with the other girls who are not on the squad and the boys who are not athletic, the smart boys.

The game is over and they all board the bus to go to Dot's, the ice cream place. There she will eat ice cream from a paper cup and not enjoy it as it sticks thickly inside her mouth and throat and she will wait for 9:30 when her Mom picks her up. She needs only to get through his.

(It will not occur to her for a few more years that she didn't have to be there in the first place. *No* is not yet included in her vocabulary. Neither is the knowledge that she does not have to talk to these girls in the first place.)

The lights in Dot's are bright white. Mandy stands in line and talks with the kids near her. The cheerleaders burst through the door, cheering for the basketball players who follow. They won the game. The girls break into one of their cheers. They laugh uproariously as if no one else in the place matters more than they do. (Which is exactly what they think. Mandy knows how they tick.) The cheerleader girls are loud, they smile largely, they seem, to

Mandy, carefree and they fit in their bodies so well. The basketball players amble behind them, some sheepish, some with arms upraised. The girls chant each boy's name. It is easy to tell which like it and which are embarrassed.

Mandy gets her ice cream and sits with some sixth-graders she knows and some of the less popular girls in her class. They are nice. She avoids the popular girls, but they sit at a table close by. She shrinks and thinks herself very small, but she is still there, still solid. They can see her. Of course. They sit with their big dishes of ice cream, sundaes, frappes. One or two drink diet soda. They don't make a big deal of it; they pretend it's normal, an everyday thing, for them to drink diet soda instead of eating ice cream. "I have to watch my figure.. I'll get so fat." As if they're not making a big deal, Mandy thinks. As if no one knows they're making a big deal of something like that. Mandy sees right through it and suspects some others do as well. Of course everyone just plays along and some of the girls really believe. Mandy plays along, too. What else can she do? But inside she thinks, *you don't fool me*. None of them do. Nothing they do. But all she can do is think these things. At least she has that. It even puffs her up a bit. Then one of them swoops in.

"Mandy." It is Nicole. She truly is the worst of all of them. She eyes the other girls, a brief darting motion. Dart dart one girl two three girls four girls five back to Mandy.

Nicole eyes Mandy's collarbone showily. "Thought you were going to wear your new necklace."

Nicole sits at the corner of the overcrowded table. The table full all around with the girls. The right girls. She sits at the corner, one leg crossed over the other, and wags her saddle shoe up and down, her folded-down white socks, her kick pleats fanned over her thigh almost touch her knee. She sips her diet soda and watches Mandy's face. The other girls look, too.

"Um. My mom said it's too nice to wear out to just a basketball game."

"Oh," says Nicole. She turns to the other girls, ghost of a smirk on her mouth. Heads come together. One of them laughs loudly.

"Shhh," Nicole says, glances at Mandy quickly.
Mandy can't finish her ice cream.
Then it's 9:30 and her Mom is waiting outside.
Mandy pulls her coat close around her. It's absolutely freezing out. She gets into the warm car.
Her mother kisses her. "Did you have fun, honey?"
Mandy nods. "Uh-huh," she says.

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She never has to see any of the girls during the summer. It has always been like this - Mandy, Lara and Mom in the summer. Mandy knows the other girls get together during the summer. Just like during the school year, they have sleepovers and go places together. Funny thing is, Mandy is never upset that they don't include her during the summer even though she would be during the school year.

She's never upset because there is nothing better than summer at the beach as it has always been, her and Lara and Mom. Nothing is missing. All is as it needs to be.

It is Friday. Cleaning day. Summertime.

Mom is out running errands and by the time she returns, Lara and Mandy have the house cleaned.

"Girls! I'm home!" Mom calls into the house.

Mandy and Lara are down in Mandy's bedroom. They change into their beach clothes. Bathing suits, shorts, t-shirts. Mom has the back-up clothes packed — she takes care of that. Knit pants, long-sleeve shirts. This is for when the sun begins to weaken and the air off the ocean cools. Or for covering up when shoulders or backs of legs have seen too much sun.

Their Mom always thinks of things like this.

And boo-boos, rainstorms, blackouts, hunger and thirst, headaches, stomachaches, boredom of long car rides.

On this they can count.

Mom appears in the doorway to Mandy's bedroom. "Ready to go?"

They say *yes* and follow her to the car.

It is very hot. Humidity presses into Mandy's skin, a feverish hand. It is heavy and spongy and she hates it. The air streaming into the car doesn't cool Mandy off one bit - it is hot breath too close. She sweats into the back of her t-shirt where her back meets the seat of the car. Any skin on skin becomes slick and salty. She shifts around but it doesn't help much. The sky is hazy like milky soup.

Mom drives the country back roads out to the beach. Dense tree growth, green on green, cut-out puzzle slices of the sky peering through. The different shades of green make one big green, but truly are many shades of green layer over layer. It is there when looked upon closely. Mandy looks and sees these things. Stone walls meander along property lines; ramble along the edges of the road. They are not perfectly straight or of uniform height. The stones are mostly light in color. Some shades warm, some cool. Variations of pieces of the earth. All round, but not perfect spheres. Spheres that have been molded, a thumb pressed into soft clay. Divots and dips, fat bubble ends, flat sides.

Then the air begins to cool. A little at first. More noticeably at the four-way stop before the big farms start rolling past. Mandy feels a relaxing, a relief settle into her body, more than she registers the cooled air. It is always cooler down by the beach.

Thank God.

Mandy thinks it is ok to think this, but the nuns at school would say otherwise. You don't use God's name like that.

But it is summer and the nuns cook in their hot black clothes at their house where they all live together. And Mandy need not think of them or any of that. Mandy doesn't really think God minds this kind of thing anyhow no matter what the nuns say.

So thank God it is cooler at the beach.

They climb the boardwalk through the dunes. The boardwalk is old and weathered. It is held together with rusting cables running in long strands up each side. It is like an old zipper, teeth askew, separated, more here, less there. The wood is gray and splintering. Pale tan sand bulges between, through the slats, but it is still easier

to walk on this than the sand alone. They wear their flip-flops on the boardwalk to avoid getting splinters, even though they will kick them off as soon as they reach the long wide expanse of sand leading to the shore.

Dune grass and beach roses grow up impossibly from the sand. They lean with the wind. The sand smells dry and warm, earthy and salty at once. They follow the boardwalk over the rise of the dunes and as they descend, the ocean comes into view. The mournful sound of gulls, the breakers crashing, whistles of lifeguards, low tinniness of teenagers' radios. They pick a good spot and settle their stuff.

Mandy sinks her toes, soles of feet, into the sand. She twists her ankles back and forth, spiraling her feet deeper until she reaches sand that is firm and cool, and she can't go further.

This is a good moment - the first minute of a day on the beach.

Many good moments follow and the best thing is that she is unaware of time at all. She is unaware of herself in a way that frees her.

Then the best part of the day arrives - the time when the light begins to slant.

The sun is mostly over the ocean and drips of it ride on top of the waves to the shore. The sand has cooled. It does not hold the heat of the sun as the ocean does, even though it heats up sooner in the season than the water. It gets white hot by day and lets go quickly. The ocean stores the heat up little by little, holds on tight all summer.

Mandy slips a lightweight shirt on over her bathing suit. The air feels cool but the shirt is perfect. It is white, soft knit cotton, with a hood. It makes her tan skin look a deeper shade of olive. Her hair is stringy and damp from salt water, pulled back in a loose messy ponytail. Her fingers, dry now, taste of salt.

She has a towel wrapped around her waist. She stands and looks at the water. The tide is low, flows lazily in and out. The breakers are spaced well apart. Mandy knows this kind of water, this space of water, and she knows this bit of water. So she knows these are the perfect riding waves.

"Lara, want to go for one more swim?" She turns to their Mom.
"Can we?"

"A short one," their Mom says. She reads her book and keeps her eyes on the pages when she says this. She smiles slightly.

"Wanna?" Mandy says to Lara.

They weigh it out.

One more swim.

They weigh it out: they are dry now (mostly), and warm, and if they get wet they will have to wear wet bathing suits in the car, sit on folded dry towels so their wet butts don't ruin the car upholstery which isn't really *that* bad and the water, as they gaze out at it, looks so *perfect*. Exactly how they like it best. But if they don't swim, they could instead go for a walk down the shore with Mom. They know without asking her, know from the angle of the sun, they know what she will say, they know they can't do both.

The water, rolling towards them, the low tide frothy slow breakers, will feel warm like a bath against the coolness of the afternoon breeze. And not every day is this perfect. Has this exact feel to it. This unnamable presence — the water, stones, broken shells, air, the sand she digs her toes into, the particular slant of the light, and gulls overhead looking for what's left behind, and the lifeguards relaxing now as the beach slowly clears of people. All of it. Just now.

And one more swim.

One more swim.

Mandy and Lara peel their shirts over their heads, toss towels onto beach chairs. When they return after their swim, Mom will have folded them neat and square. They trot down to the shore, lightly over the small rocks scattered near the shore on the wet sand. Small like acorns, walnut shells, marbles, and hard, like all those things. They know exactly how to tread on the hardness without hurting their feet. When they reach the water, their strides become big and high and once it gets too deep to run through, they laugh as they fall in.

It is like the other times - so many other times every summer. And better, because it is this time.

Under the surface, Mandy feels the pressure of the water pushing down on her, flowing over her, under her, around her. She feels so small so large so dissolved so complete so at peace. She doesn't think these words, only feels their meaning, their weight, at their purest. She is these things. She thinks none of it. Couldn't speak it. But she is at peace. She is herself and she is good.

And when she surfaces, Lara is there, doing the same things. She is there and they swim towards each other. Now they ride waves to shore on their bellies, see who gets farther. Mandy catches a really good one and finds herself in the shallows, inches of water that lap gently over her. She has flipped onto her butt. She sits up, looks over, all around for Lara. Lara is in a heap a few feet from her. Lara lifts her head and rolls to sitting. "Good one!" she smiles.

This water is so good. And this time, this moment is so good. It is the kind of feeling to which other moments are compared. Even if she doesn't realize it clearly now. Even if she never does. But it is good to have this. It is how she knows home in her own heart.

It is summer.

The summer after seventh grade. In two weeks, Mandy will be back in school. In three, she will be thirteen.

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It is winter.

During winter, they go out for supper every Friday night. Mandy, Lara, Mom and Dad. To Friendly's or pizza at one of the Italian places - there are many of those. Sometimes for Chinese. In summer, you clean on Friday morning. In winter, Mandy, Lara and Mom clean the house when they get home from school on Friday afternoon. That's Mom's thing. Fridays.

"This way we can all just relax for the weekend," Mom says.

This has never entirely made sense to Mandy. For one thing, she would herself relax just fine if the house is dirty or not. And for the other thing, Mom never really seems to relax all that much ever.

Every Friday, the girls have a snack right after school, then they dawdle as much as possible to avoid cleaning. They poke around the idea of cleaning until Mom begins to lose her patience.

“Let's get going, girls. The sooner we do it, the sooner it'll be done. As soon as Dad gets home, we can go out to eat.”

First, they each clean their own room. Tidy up, dust, dust mop the hardwood floor. Then they're each supposed to clean either the kitchen or the bathroom, alternating weeks. But instead, they do them together. Mom says it's ok; she doesn't care as long as it gets done.

As they clean, the winter sun disappears and the sky darkens. They finish just before Dad's headlights turn into the driveway. Then they bundle up and go out to eat.

