

A Little Fresh Air Never Hurt Anybody

A dozen kids in matching T-shirts smiled up at Naomi from the front of the brochure she held. They were stacked on top of one another like Legos, balancing to form a pyramid that didn't quite look like it could have a peak without an extra person.

Join us, the kids said with their smiles, as if flashing teeth and the promise of pyramid building would be enough to convince her if the information inside couldn't.

Naomi frowned down at them. She did very few things without researching them first, but this time her dad had done the research for her. Supposedly.

"It'll be great, Nomi!" he said, apparently in league with the pyramid-building kids.

He was waving his own brochure around in that excitable, wiggly way he got that always reminded her of the twins, and flipped through the laminated pages, obviously not reading so

much as remembering. “It’s quiet out there and they have all kinds of new things for you to try: swimming, archery, even pottery, I think. And the hikes are supposed to be pretty good! The group leaders tell you all about the ecosystem up there, the trees and insects you’re seeing, all of it. Besides, a little fresh air never hurt anybody.”

“Have you been there?”

He blinked. “What?”

“Have you been there?” She held up her brochure, watching the way *CAMP TWISTED PINE*, raised to the touch and written in bright yellow, reflected her overhead light. The camp name didn’t inspire much confidence or excitement.

“Well, no, but—”

“So how do you know it will be great?”

Naomi—not Nomi, thank you very much, though no one in her house listened to her about that, her dad least of all—liked facts. Things that were real and true and provable. Liking something was not a fact. It was an opinion. Worse, in her dad’s case it was a guess.

Dad sighed, reining himself in. He placed the brochure neatly in his lap before twisting to face her from his seat on the edge of her bed. “It’s called being optimistic. It sounds like it will be great, so I’m assuming it will be. Go ’head, take a peek.”

She squinted at the booklet in front of her before flipping it open. “Camp Twisted Pine, named after our favorite three-hundred-year-old tree nearby, offers you the chance to get out of the city, take in some fresh air, and explore someplace much

greener than the concrete jungle,” she read aloud. “Come experience bonfires, sunsets, and more at our sleepaway camp tucked into the heart of the Pine Barrens.”

Inside there were more pictures and more smiling kids. Kids playing volleyball. Kids swimming in a lake too blue to actually be in New Jersey. Kids in a line, surrounded by trees on all sides as they crested the top of a hill. They all had matching temporary tattoos, a half circle with lines coming out of it that looked like a sunrise. Did the smiling mean they were actually having fun? Or were they all just being optimistic too?

Naomi shut the brochure. “No, thank you.”

Her dad sighed again. He did that a lot lately. Heavy, shoulder-melting exhales that always made her feel a little guilty somehow. “What don’t you like about it?”

What did she like about it?

Staying in a cramped cabin, swimming in a probably polluted lake, and eating burnt marshmallows off of sticks they’d found on the ground didn’t sound like fun. It sounded like the opposite of fun. If there was a monster, assuming that monsters were real in some world or another, that devoured everything fun, it would probably skip right over this camp.

“I just want to stay here,” she said instead, “like we always do.”

It was finally summertime, which meant it was time for Adventures where Naomi, her dad, and the twins, Aman and Omar, wrote down all the places they wanted to go and the things they wanted to do and threw all the suggestions into an old Phillies hat. Every Monday, someone picked two things and those were their

activities for the week. Sometimes it meant eating ice cream until their stomachs hurt, like Aman loved putting in. Other times it was trips to the library or the butterfly garden or lunch on top of one of the skyscrapers in the city that were so high up, Naomi had to keep her eyes shut as she ate, feeling around on her plate for the roundness of blueberries or the ridges of potato chips.

“This summer’s different, kiddo,” her dad said softly.

Naomi knew that. And she hated it.

She looked around her room that was half normal mess, half organized one. Dad had come to help her clear it of the last bits of elementary school but so far all he’d done was tell her about camp and all she’d done was conjure up memories for everything she touched, like the first science quiz she’d ever gotten extra credit on or the mushroom-shaped eraser she’d gotten from a book fair back in first grade.

Dad was wrong. This summer wasn’t just different—it was the start of a different life, one where she didn’t see her dad every day. How could she explain to him that if everything else had to change, she needed this summer to stay the same as it had always been?

She couldn’t.

Science was her thing. Explaining herself to her parents? Not so much.

So, she did what she always did when it felt like things were overwhelming for everyone around her. She shoved her own worry deep down inside and reached for the soft smile that almost always got her one in return.

“You’re so easy compared to the boys, baby,” Mom had told her once, a long time ago. “It’s such a relief.”

It had made her feel good then. Proud. And she’d settled into the role as best she could since. Easy Naomi. Quiet Naomi. Responsible Naomi. After a little while, it just became part of who she was. She liked making things easier for other people. Especially if it meant focusing on her own feelings a little less.

“I’ll think about it,” she promised.

Her dad perked up. “Good. Good! Your brothers are on board, so it’s just up to you, Nomi.” He stood, the bed squeaking as he did so. “It’s a good place, baby girl. You’ll see.”

He kissed the top of her head and strode out of the room. Naomi turned her attention back to the brochure. Kids still smiled up at her. The forest stood tall and proud in the background, behind a handful of colorful buildings and log cabins. She didn’t see a twisted pine tree anywhere.

She flipped the page.

““The Pinelands,”” she read aloud.

She reached for her backpack, digging out the observation journal safely tucked inside. This was her second one. The first was on her bookshelf, full of sketches of plants and small creatures she’d seen on previous field trips or in the nature books she checked out from the library. She could learn so much more about things online or in books than she could by just staring at them, she was sure, but she still liked seeing things, she supposed. And the brochure was right about something—there was probably more to see up there than in her city. Here, there wasn’t

even a park close enough to walk to, and she knew how much the twins liked being outside.

Naomi sighed, tucking the brochure into her journal. She'd do what she promised her dad she would.

She'd think about it.

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To Camp or Not to Camp

“Have you ever been to summer camp?” Naomi asked Cindy and Navi from beneath the scattered shade of a huge oak tree.

It was the last meeting of the school year for their Nature Club, which was a library-based club and *not* an outdoors one like their teacher Ms. Maldonado had assumed when she became their club’s sponsor. As a result, which really felt more like a punishment sometimes, depending on the weather, their club had to meet outside once a week. Today was an outside day.

Navi shook her head but Cindy made a face. “Yes, and it was horrible. They made us sing songs before dinner and I got so many bug bites I couldn’t stop scratching.” She scratched a freckled arm, like phantom bug bites had popped up again. “It was the worst day ever.”

Navi laughed. “Wait, you were only there for a *day*? It couldn’t have been so bad, then!”

Cindy huffed. “Try telling that to my sunburn. It was a family day and my parents made all of us go to support Amy in her first year as a counselor.”

Amy was the oldest of Cindy’s five sisters, all of them redheads. Naomi liked Amy. She was nicer than she had expected a high schooler to be and had even let the girls use her laptop once to look up a type of dragonfly they’d seen when Naomi’s phone wouldn’t work.

“Did Amy like it?” she asked. Cindy, admittedly, liked complaining more than she liked anything else, something Naomi usually didn’t mind. Now, though, she wanted an actual review.

The redhead rolled her eyes. “She loved it. Goes back every year, even wants to do it when she’s in college, she said.” She frowned. “I think being a counselor’s way different than being a camper, though. When you’re a counselor you can do whatever you want.”

“I don’t think that’s true,” Navi said. “They still have rules.”

“They’re the ones who *make* the rules. That means they don’t have to listen to them if they don’t wanna.”

The girls fell into their usual bickering for a while and Naomi tuned them out as she glanced over the school’s field. It was midway between the elementary school and the middle school and used by both. The oak tree they sat beneath was on the field’s outskirts, the only tree around for ages. The rest of the field was grass, perfect for surprise baseball and soccer games during gym. She wasn’t sure why no one had cut it down, or planted any other trees nearby, but she liked it. It felt like a guardian for both

schools, older than everything else around and keeping a careful eye on the kids underneath it.

“Hey,” Navi called, drawing Naomi’s attention. “Why’d you ask anyway? Are you going to camp?”

Naomi turned back to her friends. Their argument had died out and Cindy was in the middle of braiding Navi’s thick black hair, her face drawn into an expression of deep concentration.

“I don’t know.” She sighed. “I’m thinking about it.”

“Like you’re actually allowed to think about it or your parents are sending you anyway?”

Normally, the answer would have been easy and come quick. Naomi’s parents didn’t really force her or the twins to do much. They asked, and sometimes they convinced, but a lot of things were left up to them when they could be, at least things like fun places to go or activities. Not so much bedtimes or what to have for dinner, but only Aman and Omar complained about those things anyway. Now, though, she just wasn’t sure. Her parents had changed so much in the past few months. Nothing at home really felt the same anymore, no matter how hard Naomi tried to make sure she was the same her she’d always been, in the hopes that they’d remember who they were too. Dad still slept in the guest room. Mom still never made it home in time for dinner.

“I think,” she said finally, “they might just send us anyway.”

“Is it nearby, at least? Amy’s camp was all the way over in Pennsylvania, way far from the city. Maybe you’re going to the same one. I could tell Amy and she could give you some tips.”

“I doubt it’s the same,” Naomi said, thinking back to the brochure. “It’s in the Pine Barrens.”

Navi gasped, leaning forward suddenly. She gasped again, this time from pain as Amy tugged on the end of her braid. “You’re going there?”

“Yes? I mean, maybe?” Naomi frowned at the wide-eyed look on her friend’s face. “Why, what’s wrong with the camp?”

“I don’t know about the camp,” Navi said, leaning back until her head and Amy’s hands were no longer uncomfortably spaced apart. “I just know about the Pine Barrens.”

Naomi relaxed a little. “What about it?”

She knew a little about the area, mostly that it covered almost the entire bottom half of the state and was the biggest example of an Atlantic coastal pine barrens ecosystem left in the country, but she’d never been there before.

“You know, that it’s protected and stuff.”

“By what?” Amy asked.

Navi grinned. “By the Jersey Devil.”

Naomi laughed, rolling her eyes. “By *laws*,” she corrected. “The Jersey Devil is just a story.” She paused, then added, “And a hockey team.”

“I guess you’ll find out. You’re the one going to its house.”

“*Maybe* going. To a camp where monsters *definitely* don’t live.”

“Well,” Cindy muttered, eyes still on the crooked French braid she was plaiting, “wherever you’re going, bring lots of bug spray.”



Naomi made a list of places they could go instead of Camp Twisted Pine.

1. *Grandma's house*
2. *(Other) Grandma's house*
3. *Absolutely nowhere*

She was prepared to deliver it to her parents right before bedtime, one of the few times they were both home, but she paused on the landing of the stairs when she heard whispers coming from below.

“We’ve been over this, David. You need to move out and it needs to be soon. I can’t keep doing this—avoiding the house, never seeing the kids. It’s not fair to me or to them.”

“And me leaving is?”

“Yes.” Her mom’s voice was a hiss, sharper than Naomi had ever heard it. She flinched back into the shadows, pressing herself against the wall that hugged the stair’s railing. “The sooner we can establish a new normal for everyone that isn’t this . . . limbo, the better it will be.”

“For who?”

“How selfish do you have to be to ask me that? Our *children*. Or are you so . . .”

Naomi tiptoed quickly away from the stairs and back to her room, leaving the angry whispers behind, though they threatened to swirl around in her head like song lyrics she only half

knew. She looked down at the list in her hands. It seemed silly now. Her parents didn't just want them to go—they needed them to. Besides her dad leaving—and she tried to ignore the stinging of tears that thought brought with it—she didn't know what they needed an empty house for but it was clear that they did. Maybe either grandma's house wasn't far enough away when her parents needed space to figure out how to rearrange all of their lives like pieces on a chessboard.

She crumpled the list in her hands and tossed it in her trash can. Then she reached for her observation journal, pulling free the pamphlet she'd only skimmed before. She buried her head beneath her comforter, using the lowest setting for the flashlight on her phone to start reading it through. When the door to her bedroom creaked open, she was on a paragraph about archery.

Naomi didn't answer the whispered question of her name.

She just kept her head under the covers and her eyes on the laminated pages until the door clicked shut again.

Spend the summer in nature in the Pine Barrens, she read through bleary eyes as she turned the page. Learn respect for the living creatures we share our planet with and bask in the beauty of protected pineland.