Falling

I awake to warm cotton sheets, and quiet light. As my eyes drift open, early rays blush through pale, scalloped curtains. I stare at the ceiling, a shade lighter than my arms, which are dotted with freckles. My skin is in a constant battle with the summer sun; refusing to tan no matter how many hours I might spend under the sky.

 Summer is almost at its end, and I can feel it. The trees shiver, approaching sleep, while the tall grasses begin to brown and crack. The lake that laps at the foot of our lawn has grown colder, no longer permitting a late afternoon swim.

 I sit up and press a hand against my window, and when I slowly remove it, the early morning chill has left a ring of fog around the imprint, a fading memory of what once was. I stretch out each thin limb and, climbing out of the comfort of my twin bed, shake out my disorderly brown curls.

 Barreling out of my room and down the hall, I discover my Mom has left a note on the kitchen table.

*“Mel, I went out to pick berries, be back soon.*

*I love you.*

* *Lil”*

There are so many things I love about my mom; her emerald green eyes, her army of laugh-lines, her unaffected outlooks, and the way she trusts me, believing I’m stronger then I think I am. She’s older now, more patient then she once was. I would say she has a different view then most parents, letting me do things on my own from an early age, mapping out things as she goes. I see myself in Lilly Owen. She is daring, adventurous, and a tad ignorant towards new-age ideals.

Shrugging, I return to my room, and slip on my favourite light wash denim shorts. Pulling a blue tank top over my head, I hear the rip of fabric. I’ve been growing a lot this summer, and almost everything seems to not fit. My birthday’s coming up soon, I will be 13 in September, and I simply cannot wait. Wiggling into my sneakers, I race to the back door of our compact grey cottage, and out into the open air.

I’ve never been one to stay inside. I feel the most myself when I’m in the garden, or playing on the tiny stretch of shore we have out front. Our property is about 45 minutes north of Huntsville in southern Ontario, and we come up here every summer. Although we may live thousands of miles away in Vancouver, this is my home.

I saunter past our tradition tree, where my mom and I carve our names at the end of each summer. It’s my favourite climbing tree, but I resist the urge for now, I have other things on my mind. *Melanie & Lily*, I count nine inscriptions, each one more weathered then the last. It’s an elderly oak that stands straight and tall near the back of the cabin, with an old swing that’s rotted away hanging limply on one of its arms. I can’t help but remember how it used to feel, flying high above the world, a new sight to see each time I was propelled into the sky. I shake my head and trudge on.

Finally, I arrive at the edge of the forest. Each aspect of its nature seems to come alive as I run my gaze across the perimeter. Its thickness runs from the water all the way around the property, acting as a barrier to the outside world.

Lily has warned me to not go into the wood when she’s not there, but I am stubborn. I have been dying to seek out any signs of changing leaves, and this day, being our second last of the year, I want to make it count. I tentatively step into the brush, sneakers crunching on the forest’s floor.

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As I trudge through the undergrowth, I cannot help but look above me. I am inside one of my storybooks, cloaked in dappling luminescence. I can hear everything, the small noises from hidden critters, the calls of different birds, and a woodpecker from a nearby tree. I stop in my tracks and close my eyes. I cannot help but feel peace. I do not dwell on what is wrong with my life, on how my Dad left us when I was young, how I am teased by the kids at school for my imagination, how at the end of each summer, I feel my life slipping away. These thoughts are wiped clean, and I feel brand new, soaking in the majesty of my life here.

 Taking in a deep breath, I turn around and head back the way I came.

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 I know time has passed, although I can’t be sure how long. I know it didn’t take me nearly this long to get as far as I did. I squint up at the afternoon sun, trying to get a sense of time, but I wouldn’t be able to get a clear look unless I was above the tree line…

 Acting on impulse, I scale one of the nearest trees. I deftly grasp each branch, sensing which limb to grab in order to obtain the best purchase. I love to climb, although I’ve never done it alone. Adrenaline pulses through my veins as I climb higher, and I’m about to reach the top when the forest suddenly darkens.

 The sun has disappeared, and in my fingertips I can feel a low vibration. I’m startled to hear a loud clap of thunder, resonating from almost directly above me. I know I don’t have much time until the lightening hits, and I begin to descend down the hardwood’s rough surface.

 I’m beginning to shake, I want more then anything to be home in my bed, safe with my mom who has probably returned and is wondering where I am. I imagine being in her embrace, safe from anything and anyone.

 I’m 15 feet from the ground as another crack of thunder sounds, and I clutch my tree, shuddering. I’ve been through enough storms to know what comes next, and sure enough, as I tilt my head up, light pierces the sky, except something is wrong, its coming too close… I hear a scream before realizing it is my own, as the lightening hits right above me. The sensation jolts me from my position and for a moment I am flying - no - falling.

 As I hit the solid floor, I catch a sickening crack that doesn’t resemble thunder, and my world goes black.

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 I wake up with the light, a soft green glow. As I lift my lids, I know I am still in the forest. I sit up slowly, checking for damage. Strangely, I don’t feel a thing. Scrambling up to my feet, I survey my surroundings.

 It seems I have not moved, and yet the forest seems different. The storm seems to have passed as quickly as it came. I smell burning wood and gasp as I get a look at the tree I was hurled from- if you could call it a tree.

Gnarled wood hangs loosely off of a blackened stump, splintered shavings forming a delicate bed around what’s left. I dip to inspect it, fascinated. I’ve never experienced anything like this before… What am I saying? I’ve never been almost struck by lightening before.

 While I toy with the blackened lumber, I feel the hairs on the back of my neck stand at attention as the place goes eerily silent. I get the distinct feeling that someone is watching me.

 I whip around, and come face to face with a doe. She is peering at me from behind a thick tree about ten feet away. Slowly, impulsively, I hold out my hand. She’s a beautiful creature, an alluring pale tan, with gentle white details on her belly. Her eyes are wide, ogling me with alluring, familiar irises as green as the foliage that surrounds us.

 I take a step toward her, wanting her to trust me, eager to stroke her soft pelt. She starts, but does not move. Inch by inch I make my approach. I would think she’d have run by now, I get the feeling she’s brave…or maybe just stupid.

 I tread closer and closer until I’m about two feet away, and still, she does not flee. I lift my arm, and to my surprise, she greets my hand with a nudge from her soft crown. I gasp, caressing her skull gently in amazement.

 She begins to slowly retreat, and in some odd way, I feel as though she’s asking me to follow.

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 We arrive in a glade. I am hot, and sweat beads on my brow while it dampens the back of my thin tank. I am exhausted, and I really can’t comprehend what I’ve gone through today, and cannot wait to be home.

 I look around and cock my eyebrow at my new friend, awaiting some type of answer as to why she has brought me here. She nods in my direction, and then to the right of us, gesturing towards a small pond I hadn’t noticed before. It is the deepest shade of blue, hard to describe, looking as if there must be a layer of black velvet on its surface. I am compelled to get a drink, and to cool my hot skin. I step toward its shape, aware of the deer trailing slowly behind me.

 I kneel at the edge of its surface, leaning over to peer at my reflection. My dark curls are a tangled mess, carrying grass and small sticks that I hadn’t thought to brush away. My eyes are a bright copper, alive with mystified absorption in what I see. I dip my hand into the cold drink, making the velvet ruffle and churn. I splash the refreshing liquid in my face, cleaning the dirt from my pores.

When I open my eyes, I’m startled to notice that there is no longer a single reflection, but two. The first is my own, the second, almost an exact replica. She is older, lines caressing soft features, bow lips painted with a tender smile. I recognize the emerald eyes staring back at me, having seen them every day since I was born. They are my mom’s.

 I feel my friends’ steady heartbeat beside my head, as she has taken her place at my side. My guide, my savior, she has been with me all along. As recognition travels across my features, I lose my balance, tumbling into the pool.

Again I am falling, but this time, I know I’m going home.

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Word Count: 1800