

## The Creek

My bike skids to a stop at the corner by The Black Fence. I quickly scramble over it and set foot on the spongy ground. The reeds sway and bend, bathed in golden sunlight. I breathe deeply. The air tastes like leaves and sun and summer and water. My foot brushes against a fuzzy dandelion head, sending seeds flying over the plain, promising more life. Crawdad rock juts out of the water like a chipped camel hump. Birdsong fills the air- a free symphony only for the most careful listeners. I kick a piece of gravel into the Stone Pool. It bounces off the metal pipe- a cold, empty sound, before landing into the lazy, sleepy water. The ripples frighten away the water skippers darting across the creek.

I get out of the Stone Pool and head for the Beaver Dam. My toe dives in. The sharp, fast flowing, cold water comes like an electric shock, fire and ice both at once. My friend gets off her bike and stares at the water, then at me, her gray eyes puzzled.

“What are you doing there? Get in the water!”

“Crawdad.” I reply.

We explore the marsh- looking under every rock, log, and leaf for any signs of life. Bittersweet Nightshade berries grow near the water’s edge, bright and red and round, smiling at the sun. We set up a fort digging holes, making rooms, whacking blackberry vines. Now we climb up a big leaf maple to see if we can see The Cave. The entrance log is clothed in moss and lichen. My foot dislodges a piece of bark. Many potato bugs scramble wildly up the trunk. Many fall down into the creek below.

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We are hungry- very hungry. A dark-leaved shrub sprouts behind us. The blackberries sit there, hanging delicately from the tendrils, calling us for lunch. We pick a few of them and let the juice seep into our mouth. Spicy and Sweet and Sour and Delicious all at once. We sit around the brilliant fronds of fern and let our feet dangle in the water.

Reeds rustle in the corner of my eye. I turn around and see a long black band with yellow stripes. It flicks its red forked tongue out to taste the air. I creep up behind it, making sure my shadow doesn't fall on the snake's head. There is a flash of hands and black and yellow and dust and water and it slithers into my hands. My friend looks at it, her hazel eyes wide with fear.

"It's only a Garter Snake, Jess." I say, annoyed.

I release it in the water, watching it glide across the creek, almost blending in with the ripples in the pool, and shifting into the reeds. As soon as it's gone, we splash into the creek, as the golden sun beat down on us- warm and bright and relaxing. The reeds and frogs and birds and minnows all seem to whisper together-

"Welcome Home!"