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Cardinals

“One, two, three,” I said to the bark in front of me. I began to think about how life had been since we moved away from the city; how it was lucky that Dad found work in a locality that provided us presents of grassy meadows and rolling crests that were rife with beauty every single day. Galax, Virginia was our new home, and we embraced it with open arms.

“Four, five, six, seven,” I said to the vine that climbed the bark in front of my nose as I continued to count. I began to think about where Sarah might have been hiding. Sarah, my younger sister, was my seemingly perpetual playmate. On a spring morning in 1992, the plants weren’t the only things coming into being, Sarah was as well. Born weighing four pounds and two ounces, Sarah was just a pound lighter than I was when I was born four years before her. My sister was always a quiet girl; the lips of her small mouth folded inward and formed into a small smile at all times. Her blonde hair was always short enough so that her powder blue eyes and spherical dimples were always on full display. Never one to endeavor for the heed or attention that children most often live for, Sarah kept to herself. As I saw it, she only drew from the warm, tender well of benevolence that she kept inside of her to create the beautiful things that she created.

On the day prior to the day that I began my count, Sarah led me out among the crisp Virginia breeze to show me a masterpiece. At the bottom of the driveway that winded up the

hillside to our new home, my eyes began to focus on the garden of color that sprang up from the asphalt. There, at my feet, I saw a short, pink stick figure, drawn in chalk, with yellow hair. This figure was holding hands with another image: a tall, blue stick figure with brown hair. Under the pink figure, a name was written in chalk: Sarah. Under the blue figure, another name was written: Dylan. While all of the members of my family typically addressed me as “Dyl”, Sarah was the only one that addressed me as “Dylan.” She always said that “Dylan” was prettier, driving in her point with a smile that was accompanied by her blue eyes, which conveyed her brutal honesty. She sat down next to the driveway mural. “Do you like it?” Sarah asked. I responded to her by saying, “love it.” I crouched down next to her and gave her a kiss on the cheek.

I snapped out of this daydream when I realized that I had lost count. “Eight, nine, ten. Ready or not, here I come!” I quickly called out before I began my search in the late afternoon sun. I was twelve years old on this particular day. I found Sarah nestled in a mound of leaves that had fallen from the trees across the street earlier that week. Upon discovering her, the instructions that my mother gave me began to resound through my head. “Make sure you and your sister come in before dark,” my mother said. Suddenly, I heard another voice. “Can we play another game?” Sarah asked politely. “Alright, but just one more,” I said to her while taking note of the orange sky meeting the orange horizon in the distance.

As a way to accept and embrace our new life in the country, my sister and I would often play a game that involved us pretending to be one of the many animals found in the surrounding mountains. We would pretend to be owls by having wide-eyed staring contest and seeing which one of us could produce the loudest “*Hooo*” without throwing our voices out. We would pretend to be rabbits by hopping around the front yard, resting our behinds on the backs of our legs in

between hops. Sarah's voice suddenly infiltrated my ears once again. "Can we be cardinals again?" she asked. She was referring to the game that we modeled after the beautiful red and black birds that we would occasionally see amongst the summer's enveloping haze of dust and pollen. I nodded to her and we began our descent down to the maple tree.

The maple was the only tree on our property. Located at the bottom of our sloped backyard, it was the perfect height for me and Sarah to climb. We would climb the tree, mount ourselves on its second-lowest limb, unfurl our arms proudly out to our sides, and leap off the side of the limb to the ground below, soaking up the sound and feeling of the swift, surging air as we fell, a feeling that simulated the feeling of flying to a satisfactory extent. When our soles met the ground, we always called out, "The cardinal has landed!" We called the game "being cardinals."