

Nojento

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That summer at Camp Etow Oh Koam, Sabrina kept forgetting where she was. Each morning when she opened her eyes, she thought for a panicked moment that she was still in the shared apartment, lying on a mattress pushed against a wall, with another girl's chilly feet encroaching upon the unguarded territory of her lower back. But then, when she breathed in the musty smell of her camp-issued pillow and heard the springs of the bunk bed whine beneath her, she remembered: she was at a summer camp in upstate New York, a place that smelled thickly of pine sap and bean soup and lake algae. She wasn't in the shared apartment anymore. She'd never go back there again. She recited these facts to herself each morning, a silent chant.

Months ago, after she'd fled the modeling agency, which was not a modeling agency at all, but something else, something she still couldn't bring herself to say out loud, she'd cleaned hotel rooms on Long Island for a while, then private homes. And when the owner of one of these fancy houses had offered her a job at a summer camp, she'd accepted right away, nodding enthusiastically, even though she'd had no idea what a summer camp was. Her English, everyone told her, was excellent. But certain words and concepts had no equivalent in Brazil,

at least not in Pacatuba, her sleepy town nestled under a perpetual blanket of fog. She'd had to look "summer camp" up on her phone after she'd accepted the job.

Now it was June and she'd been at Camp Etow Oh Koam for weeks. Her job as a counselor entailed herding groups of preteen girls from one activity to another, making sure no one got lost along the path from the boathouse to the archery field. She'd had to apply a bandage to one camper's elbow, and snip a wad of gum from another's hair. But mostly, she felt useless, superfluous, a bumbling outsider who was always, somehow, in the way. There were long stretches of the day in which Sabrina did very little. She sat on the dock and watched the campers swim in the lake, their white limbs flailing above the water. She knew she wouldn't be called upon to rescue anyone; there was a lifeguard on duty, a strong-shouldered, unsmiling Dutch girl.

The other female counselors were a pack of Europeans who spoke French and blew fragrant smoke from their noses like bulls. They stuck together, the Europeans, bending their burnished blonde heads together over the dinner table, complaining about the food, the campers, the hardness of their bunk mattresses. Sabrina understood enough French to get the gist. The first week, one of them, a Belgian who wore her pale hair tied back in a red bandanna, scooped over to Sabrina, who sat at the edge of the long wooden dining table, and nudged her in the ribs. Sabrina, who hadn't been touched in months, flinched, then rearranged her face into what she hoped was a friendly smile.

"Hey," the Belgian said, in English. Her breath smelled of cloves. "Some of us are going to meet up with the guys later, at the lake. Drink a little. Smoke. You know? Want to come?"

Sabrina stared at the Belgian, taking in her high white forehead, the neat fold of the bandanna against her hair, the brown pencil applied with razor-like precision over her sparse eyebrows, and tried to think of what to say. The idea of meeting up with *guys*, any guys, made Sabrina's stomach turn over with dread. She didn't want to drink with *the guys*, to smoke with *the guys*, to be anywhere near *the guys*. She didn't want to talk to them, laugh with them, pretend to be having a good time with them. She didn't want to see their big knees and hairy arms, to smell their whiskey-heavy breath, to feel their hungry eyes rest on her face, her breasts, her thighs. She tried to think how to explain all of this to the Belgian without explaining everything, without spilling her shame out onto the table like an overturned cup of bug juice, red and sticky. The Belgian raised her penciled eyebrows, waiting.

"Maybe another time," Sabrina said, after a pause she knew lasted too long. "I would like to," she added, forcing herself to look the Belgian in the eye, "but tonight, I am a little busy."

"Okay," the Belgian said, flicking her gaze away. "Well. See you." She slid down the bench, returning to the other Europeans.

That night, as Sabrina lay in her bunk, listening to the murmurs of sleeping campers, she heard the Europeans pass by, underneath the window of her cabin. She listened, holding her breath, until their voices disappeared down the soft slope of the hill that led to the lake. Only then, when they were gone, did Sabrina realize she'd been listening for the sound of her own name.

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The campers switched out every week, interchangeable groups of nattering kids in baseball caps and tie-dye T-shirts. The boys and girls were separated, corralled on opposite sides of the camp as if quarantined, except for during meals in the mess hall, a large outbuilding that smelled of cooked broccoli. When the boys trooped into the mess hall for meals, flanked by their male counselors, Sabrina studied her hands, the tops of her knees, her feet. She hoped that by hardening her face and lowering her eyes, she would become repellant to them, or at least invisible.

After her first week at camp, the camp director, Mrs. Michaelis, took Sabrina aside and told her that she had to "make more of an effort" with the campers.

"You're here to make sure they have a great summer," Mrs. Michaelis said, peering at Sabrina through red-framed glasses. "You set the tone! If you're mopey, they'll be mopey. Smile! Make conversation!"

But when she was among the swarms of girls, their sharp eyes pinned to her face, Sabrina went mute. The Europeans made it look easy, talking to these girls. They would tease the campers about boys, lend them forbidden tubes of lipstick and vials of perfume, braid their hair, and tell them ghost stories, their chins flood-lit by flashlights. Sabrina sat apart, watching, her lips sewn shut as if cursed by a witch. She had nothing to say to these girls, with their tanned, newly shaven legs, their gum-snapping mouths, their soft freckled faces. She wanted to tell them to be careful, to watch out, to think twice before trusting anyone. Men, women, didn't matter. Often, Sabrina wanted to tell them, women were the most treacherous. Women would hold you close before pushing you off a cliff.

One day Sabrina was leading a group of campers on a hike, tramping through the soft woods, tiny twigs crackling under their heels. One of the campers, a loud popular girl with a red ponytail, asked Sabrina why she'd left Brazil.

"My cousins went to Rio for the World Cup," the girl said, "and they said the beaches were, like, amazing. Why would you ever leave?"

Sabrina's chest tightened. She wanted to say that she knew nothing about the beaches in Rio, that she'd learned to swim in a reservoir, that she'd only seen the ocean a handful of times, that Brazil wasn't all white sand and samba and Carnaval floats. But she bit down the words.

"It's very beautiful," Sabrina said. "But I wanted better opportunities."

The redhead wrinkled her nose. "Okaaaay."

Sabrina marched ahead, up the trail, before the redheaded girl could question her further. "This way," she called, over her shoulder. "Watch your feet."

That night, lying in her bunk, Sabrina fantasized about telling the redheaded girl the truth. That she'd left Brazil because she'd been promised a modeling career in New York by a beautiful woman from São Paulo who smelled like Chanel perfume and breath mints. The woman had approached Sabrina while she waited at a bus stop, told her she had beautiful cheekbones. Sabrina had put a hand to her cheek, never before having considered the bones underlying her face. The woman had promised Sabrina she could be the next Gisele, the next Adriana, the next Alessandra. All Sabrina had to do was sign a contract and the woman would take care of the rest. At home, Sabrina had waved the contract in her mother's face like a signal flag: altering course, stand clear.

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The woman from São Paulo had promised to meet Sabrina in the airport in New York, to drive her to her new apartment, a model's apartment. Sabrina had pictured a sleek studio with lots of windows, high in a skyscraper. But when she'd gotten off the plane in New York, dry-mouthed and disoriented from turbulent sleep, the woman from São Paulo was not there to greet her. Instead, a gruff man in a plasticky-looking jacket had shepherded Sabrina into a white van and driven her into the city, to a squat yellow-brick building laced with graffiti. The apartment was on the second floor, up a set of concrete stairs. When Sabrina walked in the door, six other girls were draped listlessly over the furniture like cats. There was no view, only a barred window looking out onto the side of another brick building.

The apartment had only one bathroom, a tiled closet littered with hair and streaked with makeup. In the mornings, the wait was interminable. Once, one of the girls couldn't wait any longer and peed in a jar. After a while, Sabrina took to leaving in the morning to use the bathroom in the Burger King three blocks down. She liked the warm, bready smell of the Burger King, the cheerful blue awning out front, the faint floral scent of the pink hand soap from the dispenser in the bathroom. One morning, she was washing her hands when a woman came out of one of the stalls, letting the door bang behind her. She caught Sabrina's eye in the mirror.

"This place is nasty, huh?" said the woman.

"Yes," agreed Sabrina. "Nasty."

"All these homeless people coming in here, messing the place up." The woman sucked her teeth. "I don't even know why I come here anymore."

Later, Sabrina googled the word "nasty." "Highly unpleasant, especially to the senses; physically nauseating." There was a word for this in Portuguese, *nojento*. But Sabrina liked "nasty" better, the sharpness of it on her tongue. She made a note to remember this word.

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Her first morning in the shared apartment, Sabrina got ready, selecting an outfit from her suitcase, applying mascara and eyeliner, straightening her hair. She perched on the edge of the couch and waited to be taken to her first modeling job. Soon, a mean-faced woman came to the apartment, a cellphone pressed to her ear. She pointed at a few girls, then herded them out like cattle, prodding them to move faster, to stand straighter, to wear something sexier, for Christ's sake. Sabrina was not chosen. The woman hardly looked at her. Sabrina had to bite the inside of her cheeks so she wouldn't cry.

The chosen girls were gone all day. Sabrina heard them come back late that night, listened as their bodies settled onto the mattresses that were scattered around the living room. She heard one of them crying and thought that this poor girl would never make it as a model. You had to be tough to succeed. Gisele Bündchen said that you had to be the hardest-working model to rise to the top. Pretty wasn't enough. Sabrina felt sorry for the weak girl across the room, weeping into a bare mattress.

The next morning, the mean-faced woman returned.

“You,” she said, pointing at Sabrina, who’d spent extra time on her makeup, hunched over her tiny compact mirror, feathering on layer after layer of mascara. “How tall are you?”

“Five foot nine,” Sabrina said, scrambling to her feet.

“Is that all you have to wear?”

Sabrina was wearing jeans and a pink spaghetti-strap top. The top was one of her favorites, but she would have ripped the fabric from her body and burned it in a fire if the woman had asked her to. But the woman shrugged.

“All right, come on. Chop-chop.”

Sabrina made a note to look up “chop-chop” later. But when later came, she found she no longer cared.

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The first job was the worst, because what happened was such a shock, like placing your palm on a hot iron. Sabrina, stupid and naïve and trusting, had thought, even as she was being led down the whisper-quiet, carpeted hallway of a fancy hotel, that she was going to a modeling shoot. She’d thought, even after she stepped into the room and saw the portly man sitting on the edge of the bed, wearing a white bathrobe, that the scene was a setup for a commercial, an ad campaign in which a long-legged young woman poses with a toad-like man. Maybe to sell cologne, or watches, or leather shoes: a product to make an ugly man believe himself worthy of a beautiful girl.

It was only when the mean-faced woman shut the door and left Sabrina alone with the man in the bathrobe, and Sabrina looked around and realized that there was no photographer, no director, no one else there at all, that her stomach plummeted and she knew she’d been tricked. The man stood and walked toward her. He placed his hand on her breast and squeezed, as if assessing the value of a piece of livestock. As soon as his fingers closed around her flesh, Sabrina felt a light turn off inside her. For the next hour, as the man pulled and prodded and pushed and huffed, as he breathed his stale toothpaste breath in her face, as he crushed her body with his, Sabrina was somewhere else, somewhere dark and quiet as a grave. When the job was over and Sabrina was shuffling back down the quiet hallway, her pink top mussed, her body aching, she remained in musty darkness, unseeing, unfeeling. And now, months and months later, Sabrina still hadn’t figured out how to switch her light back on.

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On Sabrina's fifth week at the camp, a new group of campers arrived: a sea of girls, clumping together and breaking apart, giggling, their voices high as birds'. One girl, though, trailed behind the group. She was lean as a grasshopper, with a mop of dark hair that hung in her face. She had a strange way of moving, as if avoiding touching too much of the air around her. Sabrina wondered if she looked like this girl, signaling her discomfort with the bent angle of her body, loud and clear.

When the campers were rounded up the first evening and brought to the mess hall, the grasshopper girl sat by herself. Sabrina, who was sitting alone at another table, watched the girl as she methodically cut up a gelatinous chunk of lasagna. After a few minutes, Sabrina picked up her tray and approached the girl's table. As she walked across the mess hall, Sabrina felt like a finger puppet, being danced across a tiny stage, not in charge of her own destiny. She didn't know why she felt compelled to approach the girl, but here she was, standing in front of her, the tray trembling in her hands.

"May I sit here?" Sabrina asked.

The girl looked up, blinking as if Sabrina had shaken her out of a deep sleep. "Yes," she said. "But please don't talk to me while I'm eating, because that won't work out well for either of us."

Sabrina couldn't tell if the girl was joking or not, but she chuckled anyway, just in case, and sat down.

A long silence unfolded. Sabrina remembered Mrs. Michaelis saying she needed to smile, to make conversation. "The campers are more scared than you are," Mrs. Michaelis had said. "Don't be scared of them! They won't bite."

"I'm Sabrina," she said, finally. "What's your name?"

"Alissa," said the girl, eyes on her plate. Then: "I'm not done eating yet."

"Sorry."

"It's okay, but I really don't want to talk until I'm done."

Sabrina nodded and ate a forkful of her own lasagna. She was relieved at the silence, the lack of pressure to speak. The two of them ate quietly, side by side. When Alissa finished her food, she crossed her knife and fork in the shape of an X over her plate.

"This is how you signal that you're done eating in Europe," said Alissa.

“American convention dictates that you should put your fork and knife together, like this.” She moved the utensils to touch. “But I prefer continental convention.” She looked at Sabrina. “Are you European? You have an accent.”

Sabrina blushed. “I’m from Brazil.”

“Do you like Crioulo horses?”

“Sorry?”

“They’re some of the best endurance horses in the world. Mostly because they have a low basal metabolism. They’re from Brazil; I’m surprised you don’t know about them. Well, Brazil and Argentina and, I guess, Uruguay. I like them a lot. They’re not my favorite breed—my favorite is the Lipizzaner—but I like them.”

“You know a lot about horses.”

Alissa blinked. She had gray eyes, framed by dark lashes. She could be a model, Sabrina thought, if she learned to stand up straight.

“I know everything about horses,” Alissa said.

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The nice thing about being with Alissa, Sabrina found, was that Alissa did most of the talking. Sabrina enjoyed listening to Alissa talk about horses, cats, dogs, birds, insects, the American Civil War, the piccolo. Some people, Sabrina imagined, would find Alissa’s chatter exhausting, but Sabrina found the flow of words soothing. She let her mind drift to other things while Alissa kept up a ceaseless monologue, never pausing to check whether or not Sabrina was interested. This was why it came as a shock when, midway through the week, Alissa began to ask Sabrina questions about herself.

“Why did you come to America?” Alissa asked. They were in the arts and crafts cabin, stringing beads onto embroidery floss.

“For a job.”

“To work here at Camp EOK?”

Sabrina threaded a fat purple bead onto her piece of string. “No. I came to be a model. But that didn’t work out. So now I’m here.”

“Why didn’t it work out?”

“It wasn’t—it wasn’t what I thought.”

Alissa stared at her for a long moment. Sabrina’s heart sped up. What would happen, she wondered, if she kept talking, if she unspooled the whole story of what had happened to her? In elementary school, her teacher, Senhora Mello,

had read the class a fairy tale about a sweet princess who was tricked by her evil maid. The maid made the princess switch clothes with her, and stole her enchanted horse, and threatened to kill the princess if she breathed a word to anyone. *The Goose Girl*, that's what the story was called. *A pastorinha de gansos*. Sabrina remembered feeling sorry for the poor goose girl princess, left alone in a field. How unfair that she had to be quiet, that she couldn't shout to the world what had happened to her. Sabrina hadn't understood, then, that sometimes, speaking cost more than remaining silent.

She waited, her breath held.

But then Alissa said, "To be a model, you have to be so thin. I think a lot of companies promote unhealthy body image by hiring models who are too thin. I mean, I'm thin, but that's just my natural body type. I'm an ectomorph. So are both my parents. It's genetics."

Sabrina breathed out.

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That night, in the mess hall, Sabrina and Alissa sat side by side, eating goulash, a food Sabrina had never heard of before Camp Etow Oh Koam, but which featured prominently in the mess hall rotation. When Alissa finished her meal, she lowered her spoon to her bowl and looked at Sabrina in the unblinking way that Sabrina knew usually preceded a question.

"Why was modeling not what you thought it would be?"

Sabrina stirred her goulash. The pale elbow macaroni floating in a dark sea of beans reminded her of animal innards, bone and blood. *Nasty*. She considered not answering, closing her mouth and refusing to utter another word for the rest of the week. But something about Alissa's unrelenting gray gaze made Sabrina feel safe, as if she were talking to a machine, a black box that would swallow up her words forever, store them away, make them disappear. She'd longed to tell the truth to her mother, to her friends at home, to her sister. But when she'd heard their voices over the crackling line to Brazil, she couldn't bring herself to say the words, to set herself free. She didn't want to disappoint them, to let her shame spill out onto them. She hadn't wanted them to see that she was shipwrecked in her own life, washed ashore, bedraggled, far from where she thought she'd be. But Alissa was different. Alissa, Sabrina felt sure, wouldn't judge her. She put her spoon down and looked into Alissa's unblinking eyes.

“The truth is,” Sabrina said, “the place that gave me the job wasn’t really a modeling agency. It was—something else.”

Alissa leaned in, her body held in that strange, quivering way, like a greyhound waiting to spring after a lure. “What was it?”

“It was—a service. For men.”

“What kind of men?”

Bad men, Sabrina wanted to say. Terrible, ugly, bad men. “Lonely men,” she said.

Alissa stared back, her expression slack, uncomprehending. “Lonely men hired you? To do what? Keep them company?”

“Yes,” said Sabrina. “But I didn’t like it. So I left.”

Alissa nodded. “I wouldn’t like to keep people company, either, because sometimes I just want to be by myself and not talk to anyone.”

“Me too,” said Sabrina.

“The dessert looks like pudding,” said Alissa, swiveling away. “But I can’t tell what flavor. I like banana pudding but basically despise every other flavor. Have you ever had butterscotch pudding? My grandmother always makes it and she gets offended when I don’t eat it, even though I’ve told her that I think it’s nauseating.”

Sabrina swallowed. Her mouth had gone dry.

“I’ve never had that,” she managed to say.

Later, she googled “butterscotch.” This dessert existed in Brazil, apparently, but, like so many things, she had never experienced it.

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Each Saturday evening, the last night of the campers’ week, everyone at Camp Etow Oh Koam gathered around the fire pit for Campfire Night. Each person was expected to share a special memory from the week: an uplifting story, a funny anecdote, an important life lesson. And every week, when it was her turn to speak, Sabrina couldn’t come up with a memory to share, since she’d spent her time mutely watching others making memories. So, she lied, inventing special moments that never happened. Everyone around the fire dutifully applauded after she shared, and she wondered if they could all see through her, like an empty glass.

This Campfire Night, though, was different, because Sabrina had spent the whole week with Alissa. For the first time since coming to Camp Etow Oh Koam, Sabrina had stories to share that involved another person. She decided she would

talk about how she and Alissa had identified a pipevine swallowtail butterfly on their hike yesterday. The butterfly, midnight black with startling blue-edged wings, had hovered on a wildflower bush for several long breaths before flitting away. Alissa had looked up the butterfly in her Audubon field guide as soon as they'd returned to camp and had proceeded to rattle off all available data about the butterfly to Sabrina, who later could not recall a single fact but remembered with clarity how the animal had seemed to take her in, to debate whether or not to be afraid, before darting off. The butterfly, Sabrina thought, knew what was good for her. She knew not to take chances on strangers.

At Campfire Night, Alissa perched next to Sabrina on an overturned log. The fire was crackling and spitting, sending wafts of woody smoke into their faces. When everyone was seated, the ritual began: one banal story after another, followed by polite applause. Sabrina was surprised to find that she was looking forward to her turn, to describing the butterfly: its electric blue wingtips, its velvety black head. When it was Alissa's turn to speak, though, Sabrina had a moment of panic: what if Alissa talked about the butterfly? Then Sabrina would have to come up with some other memory, but what? Her mind had gone blank, the entire week fluttering away from her. When she tried to think of a story, she could only think of *The Goose Girl*: the tricked princess plaiting her beautiful hair as she stood alone in a field, sworn to silence.

Alissa began to speak and the group hushed. Sabrina knitted her hands in her lap.

"This week has been very interesting," Alissa said. "I spent a lot of time with Sabrina, who is a counselor from Brazil. By the way, in Brazil, they speak Portuguese, not Spanish." Here, Alissa paused, as if waiting for the assembled campers to gasp in amazement. When no one reacted, she continued. "Sabrina came to the United States to be a model, but that didn't work out. Not because she's not thin enough, because she actually has a below-average BMI, which is body mass index. Sabrina's BMI is, like, twenty. Average BMI in the United States is 26.5 for women, which is overweight. But anyway, it turns out that the modeling agency tricked Sabrina and made her keep lonely men company. She didn't like doing that, so she left. And I'm glad she did because she came here and I got to know her, and she's nice. She's probably the nicest person I've met here, and I'll miss her when I go back to Connecticut tomorrow. But we have exchanged addresses so we are going to be pen pals." Alissa looked around the fire pit at the assembled faces, their mouths open like fish, then shrugged. "Well, that's it."

When she was a child, Sabrina was sometimes overcome by the urge to laugh at inappropriate times: during the consecration at Mass, for example, or while listening to her teacher deliver a grammar lesson. Now, looking at the pale, shocked faces of the people around the campfire, Sabrina's chest spasmed in a familiar way, and she clapped her hands to her mouth to hold in a giggle. She remembered a quote that her gym teacher used to repeat: the best way forward is through. He used to shout this while making the class run endless laps around the packed dirt soccer pitch. Sabrina had despised that teacher. Now she missed him. She bit the palm of her hand and the urge to laugh passed. She got to her feet. Everyone stared up at her, silent.

"I learned a lot from Alissa this week," Sabrina said, her voice quivering. "I will miss her too. Alissa knows a lot about many different animals. My favorite memory from the week was when we saw a pipevine swallowtail butterfly on a bush. It is a black butterfly with bright blue wings. It reminded me of a kind of butterfly we have in Brazil. There is a lot of beautiful nature at Camp EOK. Thank you."

Sabrina had practiced this speech in her cabin earlier, mouthing the words in front of the crusty mirror on the door. She'd been worried about her pronunciation, especially the tongue-twisty "swallowtail." But once she'd started speaking, the words had rolled out of her mouth easily, one after the other, like marbles.

When she was done, there was a long moment of squirming quiet. Then the next person stood and began to speak. Sabrina didn't hear a word. Her heart was as light as a butterfly wing. She fought a new urge to jump up, to throw her head back and laugh, or scream until she was hoarse. She looked at Alissa, who blinked at her through the smoke, her thin face unreadable. And then the wind shifted; the smoke moved away. Alissa gave Sabrina a smile, pressing her lips together in a way that seemed unnatural to her face. Sabrina smiled back. Hope rose in her chest, stretching its wings like a great bird about to take flight.

