

We had become best friends by necessity, Liv and I, bound together by a common unease at the hands of our less mature classmates. A Dutch transplant whose father is in the insurance business, Liv is very pretty, by 14 year-old standards. Blond and pink-cheeked, she has the kind of tall, thick, flat-chested physique that one either grows into or that ends up overtaking you. She is both conventional and outspoken, has an unquestioned confidence that doesn't fly so well down here, particularly in middle school, where bullying is an ever-present shadow. Breast-grabbing, hair-pulling, constant taunting that slowly eats away at you. Liv and I, the most beautiful girl in school and a precocious bookworm, constitute the sort of odd pairing that tends to make people suspicious and prone to attack. Sadly, the tense atmosphere does not make the kids draw together, but rather fosters an individuality born out of fear. Our female classmates, clones of their conservative and mousy mothers, resort to keeping their mouths shut and attempt to make themselves invisible. Fearing guilt by association, they avoid us at all costs.

Liv lives in a villa in Savosa, just beyond the wooded park where we spend Saturday afternoons drinking ice tea out of cardboard cartons and smoking cigarettes until our heads start spinning. They have a swimming pool, a whiny and arrogant teenage son who is always suspiciously intruding on us, a dog and a cat. The pets are ancient: the dog 15, the cat 17. The cat, Fleur, has free reign of the house and terrorizes the poor old Labrador with her hissing and clawing.

Liv's father is a piggy man who keeps things to himself, his wife being the type of person that justifies this withdrawal. Always a trifle distant, and giving off an air of efficiency that tends to make people avoid her, she is certainly not someone you would confide in, as she always ferrets out personal fault in anything you say. Nonetheless, Liv's father Bert appears to be fat and contented, trotting off to the office every morning and coming home every night to drink his flat, weak, imported beer in front of a satellite feed of Dutch variety programs and football.

At the time I didn't notice, but in retrospect I tend to think that Liv's parents took pity on me. This is probably what incited the Florida trip. Giving me the privilege to tag along to a golf resort on the Gulf Coast. I am at the age where summers are interminable. Our main activity throughout the school break is walking along the lakeside looking at older boys and acting aloof, or else hanging out in the rougher neighborhood on the outskirts of town, close to where I live, watching our classmates ride endlessly up and down the street on their souped-up mopeds. The prospect of being left behind without Liv is inconceivable. After weeks of pleading and sulking, I manage to convince my mother to let me go. I think her hesitancy doesn't stem from distrust of the Meijers' ability to take care of me for two weeks

abroad, but rather hints at a certain dislike she has of them.

The Perdido Bay Golf Club, a half hour drive from Pensacola and spitting distance from Alabama, caters to the singular-minded. The club boasts accommodation onsite, literally on the green. Their brochure, proudly propped up on the marble side table at the entrance, points out the privilege of staying where the likes of Bob Hope and Gerald Ford vacation. One can hardly blame them for hanging on to the glory of the past. We are staying in a so-called “cottage suite”, big enough so that we don’t step on each other’s toes. Our room, Liv’s and mine, has a direct view onto the golf course and a huge ceiling fan, so finely engineered that it even whirs silently.

Every morning, Liv’s parents and her older brother, Maarten—16 years old and already as square as they come—roll out the door, dressed in their preppy getups and sun visors, to go sweat in the muggy heat. Liv and I tend to get up late. She is rather a languid person, matte and effortless, sleeps like a baby. I simply want to avoid making conversation with her parents at the breakfast table, so I lie awake in bed for several hours and pretend we are here alone, two adult friends on vacation. Every day we pack lunches to take to the beach, wheat toast and cream cheese sandwiches, red grapes and lemonade. The beach is only a 10-minute walk away but our provisions are already sweaty and condensed by the time we get there, so we eat as soon as we’ve set up our lawn chairs and positioned our towels. Thinking back on it, the beach was probably part of the club package. It is always strangely empty, despite the most stereotypically perfect water I have ever seen. Calm and translucent, it is very different from the stormy and muggy Pacific coast that I am accustomed to. The degree of privacy is marred somewhat by the string of 16-story hotel developments behind us and the overly attentive lifeguards, but we happily lean back and act out our fantasy of grown-up sophistication.

On rainy days Liv’s parents drop us off at the closest strip mall which, apart from the gift shops, arts and crafts boutiques, and fishing supply shops, boasts a video arcade and a record store. Liv and I have radically different tastes in music. I think. I’m not even sure what she listens to. Her tastes are undefined rather than nonexistent; she simply strings along with the Italian singer-songwriters that dominate the radio waves back home. For me, music is a very lonely interest. Having no one to share my excitement with, I feed my obsession by ordering fanzines from the US, drawing skulls in my notebooks and renting out CDs from the local music rental place. Spotting the sign above the door that reads “The Music Box”, I grab Liv’s hand in a mixture of hope and bossiness and pull her towards it.

As we walk in, I am overtaken by a screeching, repetitive sound that transitions into drum

machines and synthesizers. The record store has one of those huge new flat screen TVs; "The Perfect Drug" by Nine Inch Nails is playing. Watching it again, years later, I don't know why I remembered the overwhelming color of the video being purple. It was green, of course. La Fée Verte. At the time it was the coolest thing I had ever seen: Trent Reznor with flowing hair caught up in a hazy breeze engineered by production assistants and set directors, green light swirling around his tortured figure.

As we flip through the CDs, which make that satisfyingly smacking noise of evenly distributed plastic shells slapping up against each other, a rather grotesque little girl wanders into the store. She is about 5 years old, chubby but not exceedingly so, with ratty light blond hair hanging around her shoulders and sparkly jelly sandals. Her toenails, peeping out from underneath the braided structure of the shoes, are sloppily covered in red nail polish that spreads out onto the skin beyond her nails. She pads in, one hand hidden in a large bag of candy corn, and walks over to the gangsta rap section.

Her face is oddly un-childlike, even with the missing teeth. There is nothing fresh or innocent about her, she rather looks like a manipulative young woman who spends too much time eating junk food and talking on the phone. As fascinatingly revolting as she is, I can't help but find it cute how she stands on tiptoe to try to reach the CD display. Knowing full well I shouldn't, I wander over and ask if she needs help. She looks up at me and holds out her arms, smiling at me with all the gaps in her teeth alight. I pick her up by the armpits; her dead weight feels like a sack of potatoes. I have never had a way with children, and can never manage to hold onto their rib cage without my hands slipping up and my thumbs locking under their arms. I wonder how it doesn't hurt her but she doesn't complain. She sticks her short little fingers into the wooden container and fingers through the CDs. As far as album covers go, 90s gangsta rap is pretty tame. A bunch of men sitting around posing and looking tough. I don't know why people are so sensitive about this stuff. No nudity, no satanic symbols, nothing a child shouldn't look at.

"TAMMY!!!!" The shrill, high-pitched cry of a woman in bleached short shorts and sandals that match those of whom I assume to be her daughter startles me so much that I almost drop the child. Tammy wriggles in my hands, jumps down and runs away, in the direction of the store counter. Luckily, Tammy's mother fails to notice exactly what her daughter was perusing and seems grateful to me for having kept an eye on her. Thanking me profusely, she yanks her daughter by the hand and pulls her out the door. Liv has watched the whole episode with an expression of distant amusement. I get the impression sometimes that she finds me a bit weird.

It's stopped raining outside, just as suddenly as it had started. We go out to the parking lot and wait for Liv's parents to come pick us up. It is in these moments, when we are together outside of the resort, that I feel slightly embarrassed by Liv and her entire family. In my mind, I blend in better than they do down here and being around them draws unnecessary attention to any foreignness I might display. A group of teenage boys, 17 or 18, are sitting in front of the arcade drinking sodas. I can tell that Liv, just like me, has adopted the self-aware attitude that she puts on in front of boys. Even though we both know, deep down, that they are completely indifferent to us. As that uncomfortable realization rises to the surface, Bert and Margeet pull up in their rental Saab and honk the horn. Heading back to the resort, Liv and I sit in silence in the back of the car, longing for autonomy, danger, unpredictability...

In the evenings we all go out to dinner, along with the Meijers' newly minted golfing friends, mostly childless middle-aged couples. We are on the Mexican Gulf and I don't eat seafood, so my choices are rather limited. I single in on the only item that doesn't contain any and doesn't cost a fortune, a portobello mushroom sandwich. My mother paid for my flight but the Meijers pay for my accommodation, which includes feeding me. I should probably take their generosity at face value, but they make me nervous, and I imagine Bert and Margreet whispering about me at night, dissecting my table manners, my self-conscious silences, and eventual extravagant food choices. The mushroom sandwich arrives, not quite what I had expected. Under a toasted bun far too small to contain it spills out a giant black monster, like a muffin top that suddenly becomes too big to ignore. Struggling to hold the sandwich together, I bite into it. The chewy, wrinkly mushroom slides halfway out the bun just as I manage to get a corner of it in my mouth. Under-seasoned and overcooked, no sauce to mask the dryness, no vegetables on it save for some watery and flavorless spinach leaves, it has the consistency of old flip flops and probably close to the same taste. As I set the thing down, I realize the whole table is staring at me, pitying the ignorance of the poor child who orders the only vegetarian dish at a seafood restaurant brimming with live lobsters and giant shrimp.

On the way home we stop for dessert. There is a shop in town that specializes in rolled ice cream. A very brisk yet not unfriendly Asian woman, clearly the person in charge, is taking orders at the counter. As we wait in line, I watch how a young man pours a milky liquid onto a huge frozen metal pan and rapidly spreads it out into an even sheet with a metal spatula. He then cuts the sheet into smaller strips and scrapes each one off the pan, rolling them up into curls as he goes along. 6 curled cylinders of ice cream are then carefully placed in a cardboard cup, one in the center and five evenly spaced around it, forming a pentagon. I have never been a fan of ice cream cones, so this concept does not put me off completely. Nonetheless, I am not sure I like the way in which the distinctly separated sheets of ice

cream interact with my tongue. I would prefer a mound-like spoonful that melts evenly as I insert it, multiple times, into my mouth. I am a creature of habit and always order the same flavor, mint chocolate chip. I don't believe that crap about people's personalities somehow being intertwined with their preferred ice cream flavors. If that were true, Liv would be a strawberry and her mother a pistachio, or something bland yet sophisticated, like yogurt or fior di latte. Yet they order, respectively, chocolate and banana, the latter a whimsical and wholly unserious flavor that is strikingly at odds with Margreet's whole way of being.

As the adults linger by the counter, Liv, Maarten and I go sit at a table by the window. It is unbearably hot outside, even at 9 pm, and we have grown accustomed to the air conditioning that very rapidly changes your body's expectations of what is normal. As I look out the window at the people passing by, a familiar blonde head approaches. Tammy spies me through the window and stops. She smiles her gap-toothed smile at me and waves mightily. As she does so, I am hit by a sudden pang of loneliness. A sense of being out of place, or rather of not really having a place, washes over me as I look longingly out the window at Tammy and wave back.