

The Study of Life

by Sadiqa De Meijer

The woods were a passage. It took months for Amara to find out. For a while she only ventured in and out along their thinly treed border behind the biosciences complex: a concrete tower with strips of dark windows, a newer building, its glass walls and rooftop greenhouse marked with the flight-shaped voids of hawk stickers, and a corrugated metal structure where the undergraduate labs were held. She passed their backs of dumpsters and loading docks and mute men in overalls smoking.

It was a setting like a forsaken park. She could eat her bagel away from the basement cafeteria, where the lunch crowd was hundreds of animated, half-familiar faces, whose voices galloped against the walls and returned in a relentless auditory stampede. The shouted conversations rarely drew her in. Amara was not in a panic over memorizing Krebs's cycle. She didn't care who had left together from the bar. She did watch *The X Files* with her housemates, but couldn't see the mask-faced Scully, droning out her scientific lines, as an aspirational figure.

Here was a boulder to sit on. A floor of packed earth and last year's leaves, brown and pulverized. This chipmunk who darted in and out of range for fallen crumbs. A ceiling that stirred in transmissible bursts, with gaps where the sky itself lurked.

She didn't dislike the other students. It was only that so many of them seemed to lack experience with difficulties. They were still like raw dough. Amara watched them mistake inconveniences for hardships, and it felt draining to play along. She knew her own life had been fortunate, too, but that was because her parents had fled their continent, and worked almost impossibly hard at jobs they never expected to like, and postponed their own dental care. The reverberations of adversity persisted quietly at home, in rooms that smelled of vacuum cleaner and cumin, in the bodies of her already ageing parents, in the inscrutable mutterings of their sleep.

Her oldest friend was white, but had a brother who died when she was young; Amara wondered sometimes if that loss in Julia's family placed the two of them on a closer wavelength. They were at the same university, but Julia studied English, which meant different buildings and class times and preoccupations. She lived with an aunt in the Victorian neighbourhood, and the older woman did not encourage visitors. The friends still met for coffee every week or so at a subterranean campus bar, but during their three years as students, their trajectories had slowly diverged. Though when Julia described what English was like, the dismantling of stories and poems into inert and flattened parts, Amara heard the resemblance to biology.

The woods had a pull to them, an inward draw. After the level ground, the land fell for a while, to a lower flatness through which a tea-coloured creek crept like a vein. Amara plucked and tossed some small purple flowers that seemed to have dried on their stems, and the current took them in no hurry. She found a place that could be crossed; a thick branch had fallen down half in the water, and she lowered herself towards its sunken end, then used some nearly submerged rocks as steps. A toad or frog plunged in from the bank, and a group of beetles on the surface darted away before resuming their frenetic, whirling circles.

The woods, the woods, the woods. One afternoon, Amara had impulsively mentioned her discovery to the professor for whom she once worked—data entry on glyphosate levels in lemming populations. The professor had dark, chin-length hair that sometimes appeared unbrushed and deeply curious eyes that lived behind glass, and she wore the thick-ribbed kind of corduroy that was no longer fashionable anywhere. She and Amara had, during those work afternoons, sometimes sat in her small office with its piles of books and talked for an unnecessarily long time, about collecting samples in the north, and the beauty of cells, and the professor's two young children. When the latter subject came up the professor often stopped and seemed startled by the hour and the dark window, and gathered her car keys and coat.

The wish to stay in that room without end was one that Amara couldn't allow inside herself, because then her parents would experience hardship all over again. The professor went on an early maternity leave. Now they sometimes passed in the hallway, and when the professor

knew what the woods were called—after some British man whose name was all over the city—it felt deflating to hear the place sound defined and owned.

The lemming studies had been first-year work: idealistic, largely inconsequential, field-based. Amara had moved on to one of the leading campus labs. To sterile gloves, and disposable pipette tips, and centrifuge carousels. The procedures required a deliberateness of hands and mind that felt like power. Then lines of dye appeared on electrophoretic plates, and print-outs of sequences, a four-letter language of endless, irregular patterns. The team was mapping out the genome of a fish that could rapidly regenerate its own cartilage. The repetitive work was infused with a sense of possibility; elsewhere, a sheep had been cloned, and artificial human chromosomes produced.

The class lab assignments lagged, in contrast. They were essentially a recapitulated history of science: watching wee beasties under the microscope, learning how to gram stain, winding DNA around a toothpick.

Soon a few hours between classes would mean Amara was in the woods. She could afford the time. Studying went better at the house, where she could sprawl out, make tea, memorize out loud. Also, Tyler was a steady presence among the library cubicles, and would come to look over her shoulder. He was the only student who matched her grades, which placed them in a rivalry that had no practical basis; there were enough scholarships, and they weren't pursuing the same fourth-year lab position, but the whole class compared the two's scores.

There was an art to their position: the discipline of studying to the foolproof stage, and then the steely appearance of effortlessness. Amara had noticed, though, when they wrote exams, a signal of his tension; a tremble in his hand as he filled in the Scantron sheet, as if the pencil had grown very slightly blurred.

She told Julia this, but had to explain what Scantrons were. Julia said they sounded dystopian. They had run into each other on a campus sidewalk in the rush between classes, and lined up at the Tim Horton's because it was roll-up-the-rim time, which made them both nostalgic. Julia's eyesight made it harder to see the faces in crowds, and so when they passed each other, Amara had to step in close and say, *Julia, it's me!* Amara imagined what it would be

like to see the hundreds and hundreds of students as a blurred stream, without the relentless distinctions of identities and friends and acquaintances—it seemed peaceful. Perhaps it was the overwhelming, infinite, simultaneous details that led scientists to study with such narrowed focus.

In the woods, Amara was mapping something out with all her senses. She needed intelligent feet. The process had a familiarity from childhood summers, in the commons behind their townhouse. Behind a flat, triangular rock, the point of which led in a few steps to a shrub of burrs, there was a patch of plants with small, strawberry-like fruits that tasted of water. Then a lone and wiry crab-apple tree. But that place was only a massive corridor of grass, unmowed except for the distant strip where electric towers stood in a twinned and humming march. She was not allowed to roam outside her house's line of sight.

Here, after the creek bed, were tree trunks slanted and straight and curved, and later a wall of pale, gray stone, pieces of which broke off in flat slivers. The slope could be circumvented, and then the land rose altogether, a steep climb to a stand of evergreens, from which rivulets of water trickled down stone routes. Their sound like shy bells.

On the high ground, after a long ridge of precarious footing, a sudden absence of trees occurred on the right. Sand cliffs, dropping off in what looked like bodily contours to another creek, almost a river. Descent was possible where cedars rooted into the slope. The sand sunk under Amara's feet and she let herself slide down.

Every day the woods grew more beautiful. The leaves were ochre, orange, scarlet. She found the remains of small fires, with crushed beer cans, but never saw another person. The place felt safe; in any case, even a squirrel was entirely audible in its approach. Once, the rock wall's face had held the smooth curved outline of a deer's back. Then it ran, a white cotton flame bouncing away between the trunks.

The wider creek could be followed to the gravel shallows of a turn, then crossed as well. A slow climb, and at its end the trees were fewer again. There was an actual trail, dog walkers, discarded cups, the sound of traffic. Amara followed the path and was astonished to emerge at the arterial road on which her own building was located. That circuitous, softly nauseating route

that the bus took from campus—she had covered some inner arc of it without realizing. Amara surveyed the corner gas station, the Sticky Fingers donut shop, the First Choice Haircutters, and felt exhilarated.

Of course, people thought that she and Tyler should get together. During a biochemistry lecture, she considered the back of his head, its choir boy virtue. He could equal what she did, and this had a flint edge to it, a possibility of sparks. Was that desire? They had talked some, over the years. In a way they were alike; they didn't come from doctorates. Their parents worked for bosses not directors, and went to K-Mart, and voted for people who took advantage of them. Hers might even find Tyler alright—not ideal, obviously, but acceptable for his strong and ethical mind; even they were drifting without real intention from their original expectations.

The ribboned depiction of an enzyme was on the classroom screen, but the idea of fieldwork was kindling again in Amara. It seemed to overlay a burst of images: the deer's sudden outline, and green corduroy, and the data entry screen, and the vibrating blue sky behind the electrical towers. At the end of class, she sought Tyler out, and told him of the woods, and felt immediate regret. But he said he'd like to see them.

It was an overcast day, and the colours seemed diminished. To be there with someone, talking, made for an altogether different choreography, more mechanical and contained. Amara was newly aware of the cold, and of some background traffic noises even here. At the bank of the first creek, Tyler seemed irritable; thick rims of clay clung to his shoes. He crossed with apparent reluctance, reaching the stones in a leap that resembled falling, but recovering fine. *This place will be gone soon*, he said as they went on, *prime land right in the city*.

At the sand cliffs, he shook his head. *I don't think so*, he said, and added with a shrug, *but I like the view*.

They only kissed a little while because they had to. Amara felt nothing greater than the sum of parts—warm, mollusc mouth, click of stone teeth—until she imagined the professor in Tyler's place, and a delicious shock surged between her vulva and her tongue.

Well, Tyler said, and his cheeks seemed coloured with pink highlighter, *should we go back?*

I'm okay, she answered, steadying herself. Her voice was suddenly hoarse. *I'll head home*, and she gestured in the approximate direction of that eroding place.