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The man to the right of my place in the line, the tattoo on the back of his neck says *and*. The man on the other side of me, his tattoo says *girl*. The morning sun is bright, and the line of people is long.

"You're 1,203, right?" I ask *and*. "I'm 1,204."

"Yes. Are you? You're awfully young," *and* says.

"Let her alone," a woman on the other side of him says, "It's not just the '09 babies that were born with tattoos."

"Just mostly us," *and* says.

"I remember my mother said she was so afraid that there was something wrong with me, with this tattoo on the back of my neck." The woman laughs. She reminds me of my own mother, dark hair and soft, capable arms.

"Like it was the end of the world or something," *girl* says softly. He's a big guy, gruff-looking, but with a deep, calm voice. He must have been teased with that tat, growing up.

The woman nods. "Exactly. And every baby in the ward. Well, you know, the words were different. They tested mine and told my mom it was a birthmark—that there was no actual ink there." The wind picks up, and I can smell her perfume: cinnamon and warm earth.

"My best friend, Carrie, she just had a baby, Sera," I say. "The baby was born with a tattoo. To replace someone who died, Carrie said. So she had to hire a sitter for today to stand in line and say Sera's word because all of our friends are here and none of us are close to Sera's space in the line."

"Most of my friends are tattooed, too," the woman says, looking up the line. Her hair covers her neck. "Is the story going right to left again this time, does anyone know?"

"Right to left, yes," says *girl*. "They think they got it right this time."

and yawns, then runs his fingers over the stubble on his chin. "What are you, hon?" he asks me.

"*the.*" I slap at a mosquito. "Anyone got bug spray?"

"Here," *and* says. He hands me a can and I spray it on my bare arms, on my shorts and my legs. My new white shoes have grass stains on the toes. *and* takes the can and sprays the back of my legs. He rubs it into my neck, though it doesn't need to be rubbed in.

I nod thanks and move away from him.

"You remember the last time—you wouldn't, child—the story made no sense," *and* says. "Do they really have it right this time?"

"Does it matter?" *girl* says. His voice is thoughtful. "No one knows why or how we have the tattoos, to be honest, or what the larger meaning is, if there is one."

"Do you know, am I supposed to say the whole story or just my word?" I ask. I wonder if I'll be able to remember the story well enough to tell it.

"You've heard the one that says that if the story is told in the right order, the aliens that gave us the tattoos will come back and take us away," a man near us says. He smiles like it's a joke.

"Oh, please," the woman says. "Aliens. The doctors that delivered all of us did it as a game, and are giving tattoos to babies like your friend's in order to keep it up."

"If it looks like a conspiracy, it's probably just incompetence," *and* says.

I smile at the joke, but turn away so he can't see.

We're quiet for a while, looking up and down the line.

I squat on the grass, placing my palms down on it, as if I could absorb the whole story through my hands. The grass moves; there is an ant colony. I move my hands away and watch their tiny comings and goings, hoping I haven't ruined their chemical trails. They move surely, unaware that they are about to be trampled.

The chatter gets louder all at once. I look up, ask: "Has it started?"

"Everyone's talking," the woman says. "I can't hear."

"Look," *girl* points. I squint, following the gesture. The people to the right are walking toward us, following the story. They move slowly, listening, conferring over the story so far. Each person in turn adds his or her word, shouting with ownership. The story draws closer.

I reach for *girl's* arm. We stop breathing, straining to hear.