

# Paul

*A story by*

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**O**ne street over from Paul lives another Paul. They grew up together and are good friends. People sometimes describe them as inseparable, refer to them as "The Pauls" or just "Pauls" if they think they're clever. Paul who lives on Werther Street works at a paper mill, and Paul who lives on Spruce Trail Crescent became an academic. When the two Pauls were ten, exchanging stories about bike rides and dirty jokes and secrets at the back of the playground, a third Paul was born to a family on the outskirts of town.

Paul was a name that ran in his family—his father’s middle name was Paul, and his grandfather’s first name was Paul, and his great-grandfather’s middle name was Paul, and his great-great-grandfather’s first name was Paul, and so on. A new Paul was born to the family, and the lights in the hospital hurt his eyes, and the air in the world hurt his lungs, and he wailed and wailed and that hurt his throat.

The two Pauls are twenty-five when this story takes place. One Paul has a stack of books in front of him, and the other Paul brushes fragments of wood from his clothes. New Paul is not so new anymore. He’s fifteen. Paul goes to school, and he doesn’t say much. Perhaps part of him remembers how wailing hurt his throat. He comes home, and he goes outside, and he listens to the birds. And he walks into the forest, and he thinks about how every day is a new day, a good day, a strange day, and what a world it is that he lives in. He touches bark on trees. He touches the waxy surface of maple leaves and then touches elm leaves and tries to think about the difference. Sometimes he collects hickory nuts that have fallen onto the moss at the edge of the forest. He pretends to be a gatherer in a hunter/gatherer society, but he feels too old for games sometimes. Those times he goes deeper into the forest where his cat emerges from bushes, and he follows her through the forest, mostly just to see where she’ll go.

Paper mill Paul has decided to get married. There’s money in the bank, and there’s a girl that loves him, and he’s not sure what else to do since every day he drives to work and then he works and then he gets paid when two weeks go by and then he puts the money in the bank and takes the girl that loves him on dates and then he goes over to PhD Paul’s house after he’s drunk from dinner wine. And they stay up all night talking about the things they talk about and doing what they do. So

Paul proposes and the girl that loves him accepts and starts picking out dresses. Paul sits in front of his computer reading literary theory, and he is alone, and his eyes hurt.

There's a girl in Paul's math class that has a crush on him, and she writes his name in the margins of her notebook, *Paulpaulpaulpaul*, and she tries really hard not to think about his last name. The way it would look after her first name. Besides, her older sister told her the other day on the phone from university that not all girls want to get married, and not all guys do either. Sometimes it's ok to not want those things and to be a Strong Independent Woman instead. And the girl thought that maybe that's how she should be.

"But are we still able to love someone and be independent?"

"Of course. It's loving the right way. Still being your own person. That's what I have with Rebecca. Don't tell Mom."

So the girl writes Paul over and over and walks home behind him with wistful eyes. Paul never looks back. When the girl gets home from school, she writes different things about him, a boy named Paul. She remembers a Paul her mother once mentioned, and her sister once had a friend named Paul.

### ***A Comprehensive List of Pauls***

**Paul—15.** Boy in my class. I like him. He sits across the classroom, and he's really good at math. He's always far away in his head. It's impossible for me to know where he goes.

**Paul—19.** One of my sister's best friends in high school. They kissed once at the back of the soccer field, but then he moved away.

**Paul—Deceased.** Would be age 50. Man my mother knew in university. He got very sick after he graduated with ALS. My mother gets really sad when she talks about it, and then she has too many glasses of wine and goes to bed early.

**Paul—Fictional. 20.** Main character in my favourite movie. The movie is beautiful—the colours all have a blue tint. It's about a young man, and he falls in love with a girl even though he only ever sees glimpses of her (the side of her face, her hand brushing back her hair, her back walking in front of him) and follows her through the city, and eventually they meet on a bridge, and the sky is blue, the water is blue, the bridge is blue, even their skin looks blue. Blue, blue, blue. But then he walks away.

**Paul—Fictional. 22.** Character in a story I wrote. The story is too much like the movie. I don't want to talk about the story.

**Paul—35.** First name of one of my teachers. My favourite teacher. I was in grade five, and he gave me my first adult book to read. *To Kill A Mockingbird*. It didn't make much sense to me, but I liked the fact that he thought I was smart enough to read it, even though I probably wasn't.

After making this list, the girl isn't anywhere closer to understanding Paul, who he is, his motivations. The next day in class, she sends him a letter asking him to hang out after school. She chews on the end of her pen and watches as the boy next to Paul passes him the letter and points to her. She waves. Paul reads the note and searches out her eyes. His are a faded sort of blue (blue, blue, blue) that don't quite make contact with hers. He nods. She smiles, but he's already gone back to his work.

This time after school, she walks beside Paul instead of behind him. "I don't have very long," he says. "I have a lot to do tonight."

"Ok." With limited time to get to really know Paul, she starts asking him questions.

"What's your favourite subject at school?"

"I don't have one really."

"Do you have any brothers and sisters?"

"No."

"I have an older sister. And my mom's going to have another baby soon. She says it's a girl, but Dad didn't want her to get it checked at the doctor. He wants it to be a surprise."

"Oh."

"Where do you go after school?"

"The forest. I like being alone."

"OK. Well, do you want to grab ice cream or something?"

They are walking by the local ice cream parlor. Paul studies her again, looks her up and down, wonders what she wants. They order ice cream, and Paul pays for hers because his dad once told him to do things like that when you're out with a girl, especially in this town. It's the way things work. The girl almost doesn't want to eat her ice cream, studded with pecans and melting in the warm September sun, because it's special that Paul bought it for her. But she catches the drips with her lips, and suddenly has the feeling this might be the last time she ever eats ice cream in this uninhibited way. She imagines herself a year from now, six months from now, even a month from now, and that girl is different. She is nervous about getting dirty and dripping ice cream down her chin. She wants to be delicate and poised. The presence of the future girl makes the ice cream taste strange, and she licks it up. Paul crunches his ice cream cone sloppily with his teeth, and he tells her about a song he listened to the night before and how the guitars kind

of sounded like light and there was a violin and it kind of whined like something sad in the background. He tells her because he wants her to listen to the song for some reason, but can't think of the song's name.

"Anyway, I've got to go. It was cool hanging out."

"Yeah," she says, still thinking of the song that she'll never actually hear. And she knows that every time she hears a song with quiet guitars and violins that she'll think that maybe this was the song, and she'll think of the ice cream, and being fifteen, and this moment with Paul.

"Thanks for the ice cream."

And he waves at her and walks down the street, towards home. She thinks about going home herself, where her desk is waiting for her. Instead she waits for Paul to get far enough ahead, and then she follows him.

Paul rubs his eyes in front of his computer. He looks at his watch. It's only four in the afternoon, but he pours himself some whiskey. He's not sure he can handle reading any more words, thinking about any more ideas. He has a feeling that his friend, who he will see soon enough, his friend who is also named Paul, has been hiding something. He drinks the whiskey and closes his eyes. He tries not to imagine finishing the PhD. He tries not to imagine teaching. Tries not to imagine fitting himself into academia, into finally settling down at a university far away from this little town that he keeps trying to leave and then coming back, broke and sad, to live in his parents' basement. Tries not to be jealous of his friend who is able to support his mother and pay the mortgage on the house one street over with the money he has made at the paper mill. Tries not to think about the process paper goes through before it is made into the books that he studies and reads and how many libraries and houses the books have passed through before this

Paul, who is not even the one and only Paul, just another Paul, one more Paul, gets to read them. And he rubs his eyes again. And drinks more whiskey and listens to a song that he stumbled across on the internet with sad, quiet guitars and a violin that whines in the background.

Paul goes into the forest behind his house and licks ice cream residue from his lips. Sun leaks through the roof created by the tree branches, and he calls his cat. "Cally! Cally!" His calico comes out of bushes with a meow. She waits for him to walk to her, and then she ducks under a low-lying branch. He follows her. He's always been small for his age.

There's a place Paul likes to go when he's finished reading and working for the day, a special place deep in the middle of the forest on the edge of town. There's a clearing there. It's where he goes for a type of thought-clearing, a clearing for clearing. And after his thoughts are cleared, his friend comes to see him, and they talk about the paths their lives have taken, share their mutual pity. Paul is glad the clearing exists, hidden, in the middle of the forest, because sometimes Pauls need to find their own place to go and explore their connection, sometimes Pauls need to go somewhere that words and other people can't go. Some things are beyond words in a small conservative town. How much better it would be if Pauls were able to escape, make a new life. But Paper mill Paul has to work, and PhD Paul will never really leave, never, not as long as Paul needs him.

She follows Paul, who follows his cat under brambles and vines crested with thorns that pull at her clothes and hair, but she needs to keep following, even as she skins her knees and elbows on the rough bark and branches.

The forest has hidden a system of tunnels that rabbits, cats,



small coyotes use to stay stealthy and secret. Paul feels contained, safe. They pass sumac trees, starting to blaze red with autumn. They creep under pine boughs. Finally, Cally runs out of the network of branches and undergrowth into a clearing of tall grass. She runs across the clearing, along a path carved out by the hooves of herds of deer, but Paul stops. On the other side of the clearing, two men are standing underneath a grove of tall elms, and Paul thinks about the leaves on the trees. His cat runs to the men and, only for a second, glances back at where she's left Paul, where he crouches, concealed by shrubbery.

The girl stops where she's been crawling along, and Paul can hear her and gestures for her to come sit beside him. She stays slightly behind him, and she listens to his breath and the way it catches, unsure, as if it's his first day breathing and it hurts his lungs and he's getting ready to wail, except he sits very still. His beautiful cat has disappeared into the other side of the forest. The girl sits cross-legged and watches the side of Paul's cheek. Where it moves as he breathes. Where his stubble is going to start coming in next year. She can see the day he is going to start considering himself a man, can see it in his cheek. She can see herself leaving the town, but she can't see what will become of Paul, it's a total blank, and Paul's faded blue eyes are steady, watching two men across the clearing.

One has his arm around the other one. The one being held removes his glasses and presses one hand to the bridge of his nose and the man with his arm around this man rubs his back gently. The man is saying something into the man's ear. Their cheeks are touching as one holds the other. Paul watches, and he imagines that the two men across the clearing, both their names are Paul, they've been named for the Pauls in their families that came before them, two more in two long strings of Pauls, and Paul is watching, the girl is watching Paul, as the two men embrace.