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Orphans

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ORPHANS

A NOVEL

by

Ryan Burden

A Dissertation Submitted in
Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of

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ABSTRACT

ORPHANS

by

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This novel explores the ways in which our concepts of children and family shape our larger perceptions of reality, and vice-versa. It tells the story of a family in rural, upstate New York, using three different perspectives: Grace (the head of household), Eve (her foster child), and Bo, a recent addition to the family. Eve has lived with Grace since childhood, while Bo was taken in after attempting to escape from a rehabilitation camp for boys. Over the course of two days, the children try to manage their own internal conflicts, while Grace does her best to help them. The entire plot is covered in the first of three sections: “Grace.” The following sections: “Eve” and “Bo,” repeat this plotline from their own perspectives.

Keywords: fiction, multiple perspectives, children, nature

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INTRODUCTION

Agency, Reflective Characterization, and The Trouble with Fictional Children

In this introduction I will discuss my critical influences, and show how they have affected my narrative choices in this novel. I hope to shed some light on writing child characters in fiction, making the argument that writing effective fictional children comes down to questions of *agency* and, furthermore, that there are techniques available for writers to address the challenges these questions pose.

First, however, I will take a moment to address my novel's length. It is admittedly short. Not as short as some novels, but shorter than most. Whatever the reason, I have found myself increasingly drawn to the short novel form. If I have any explicit aspirations as a writer, they are all tied up in one day writing something like Herta Muller's *Nadirs* (1988), William Maxwell's *So Long, See You Tomorrow* (1979), or Marian Engel's *Bear* (1976), all of which are well under 200 pages. While this level of concision may seem strange to some traditional publishers, I'm confident that this is where the literary fiction genre is headed. My confidence is based on conversations with editors, who already encourage their established writers to cut down on word count. It is also based on my reading of Italo Calvino's prescient book of lectures, *Six Memos for the Next Millennium* (1988), in which he speaks of "quickness" as a necessary virtue for progressive fiction.

Since science has begun to distrust general explanations and solutions that are not sectorial and specialized, the grand challenge for literature is to be capable of weaving together the various branches of knowledge, the various ‘codes’ into a manifold and multifaceted vision of the world (112).

Calvino discusses how to accomplish this through both quickness and what he calls “multiplicity,” which, taken together, serve to condense large subjects into concise narratives. It’s clear to me that this same combination—quickness and multiplicity—is most often how we’re forced to understand the modern world. With little time to digest a truly indigestible amount of information, we are forced to consider things as they relate to other things, connecting dots as best we can in an ever-increasing matrix.

AGENCY

In his recent book *Disclosing Childhoods* (2018), Spyros Spyrou defines the trouble he sees with the question of agency as it pertains to childhood studies. As part of a much larger call for researchers to pay attention to their own presence “in the research scene”, he suggests that they quit looking for the “‘true’ and ‘authentic’ voices of children, taking into account that children’s behavior, like all human behavior, is highly contextual” (32).

Spyrou is concerned with how the field of childhood studies treats its subjects—not at all with fiction—but his points still underscore my own. Most interestingly, he devotes an entire chapter to the question: “What Kind of Agency for Children?”. To explain what he sees as researchers’ “fascination” with children’s agency, he points to “a paradigmatic shift” that had to “be accomplished through bold and strong statements which would challenge dominant and prevailing assumptions about children’s ontology while also offering a renewed agenda for research: *if children, and not just adults, are social agents and if they can act and transform their worlds, then a new world could open up for the study of children and childhood*” (118).

From a fiction writer’s standpoint, the same may be true. If our fictional children are going to be useful characters (or even interesting ones) they must have some degree of agency. The trouble is, real children seem to have so little of it. What they do have, and what many successful child characters have, is what Bordonaro and Payne call “ambiguous agency,” or acting outside of “established and normative conceptions of about childhood and moral and social ideals about the kind of behavior young people should demonstrate” (366).

In my own novel, Eve (a teenager) spends most of the story away from adults. Bo (thirteen) has a tendency to wander off—a fact that Grace seems powerless to do anything

about. Both characters' actions can be seen as falling under the umbrella of ambiguous agency. Their habits fit their characters, but they are also narratively necessary. Without them, neither Bo nor Eve would have enough space to act out.

But this approach comes with its own troubles. The concept of ambiguous agency, or acting out, limits children's opportunities for exercising agency to purely the "resistive and [the] transformational" (Spyrou 127). It ignores the possibility of what Spyrou calls "everyday agency," after Lorenzo Bordonaro's 2012 essay "Agency Does Not Mean Freedom: Cape Verdean Street Children and the Politics of Children's Agency." In short, everyday agency describes the non-resistive actions of children who, for social or familial reasons, are asked to take on what would usually be considered adult work. For example, Spyrou mentions children operating in "so-called 'crisis situations' characterized by vulnerability...from their own points of view their expressions of agency are part of everyday life rather than something extraordinary" (128).

If children are to exercise this everyday agency, they must be somehow brought into the world of adults. They must be given situations in which they can exercise responsibility. In my own novel, Eve is a good example of this type of agency. She's older than the other characters—on the cusp of adulthood, in fact—a condition that comes with increased expectations. Grace not only sees her as a child, but also as a co-caregiver. This same sense of responsibility informs Eve's thoughts about Heather, and her intuitive desire to help. But as Bordonaro notes, even this type of agency does not get to the root of the problem:

"Nonetheless, I contest that this use of the notion of children's limited agency paradoxically reconfirms normative ideas about childhood and child protection that the social sciences have struggled to deconstruct since the 1990s" (422).

Children's agency, he says, is

...not based only on a sociological analysis of its pre-conditions but also on a moral assessment of actor's actions and on assumptions about what actions the exercise of agency should result in, about what agency is. It is, in fact, a false syllogism stemming from the principles of standard morality. If children are involved in violence, sexual activities or other actions that contrast with iconic notions of childhood innocence, then their agency is assessed as constrained, because children are not supposed to engage in what is deemed as unchildlike behaviour unless under extremely restrictive circumstances (423).

In other words, putting child characters in situations where they're forced to exercise "adult" agency is no way out of the dilemma posed by children's lack of agency in general. When Eve decides to let her friend drink copiously before heading home to meet Eve's mother, her lack of action can be ascribed to her lack of confidence, or knowledge, or experience, but not to an "adult" thought process. In this moment, the narrative can't shake off Grace's presence, managing Eve's thoughts and actions from a distance.

In a 2007 essay on "posthumanist performativity," Karen Barad coins the term "agential realism" to issue "a direct challenge to the metaphysical underpinnings of representationalism, proposing an agential realist ontology as an alternative" (811). While her definition of agential realism is a little slippery, it's clear that Barad's larger goal is to redirect her readers' focus towards a more interconnected view of individual agency. In doing so she seeks to skirt the tensions that exist between "constructivism and realism, agency against structure, and

idealism against materialism...In agential realism focus is redirected from things to phenomena which are “*the ontological inseparability/entanglement of intra-acting ‘agencies.’*...Reality is composed not of things-in-themselves or things-behind phenomena but of things-in-phenomena” (812). In Spyrous’ words, agential realism “challenges liberal, humanist understandings of agency as self-possession and invites us to see agency instead as an enactment and an outcome of intra-acting” (Spyrous 134).

Unfortunately, he does not go on to provide suggestions for capturing agential realism in fiction. I’ll also note that the details of Barad’s theory likely aren’t much help to fiction writers (though they are, I think, worth paying attention to). However, the *idea* of agential realism as a narrative goal, if not a perfectly attainable one, seems to me to offer an important opportunity for realist fiction. As I wrote my novel, these ideas of “things-in-phenomena” and “intra-acting” were foremost in my mind. I would be happy if readers of this novel reached the end with questions about children’s agency related to the ways in which it shifts, by degrees, through childhood. At one end of the scale is Ernest, who is almost pure reflection, or intra-acting. I can’t say that I have envisioned any future for him. In some sense, this is a nod to the fact that, at the present moment no one knows. He is largely characterized by the ways in which his caretakers relate to him, and thus help him to build a sense of agency that, one day, will be uniquely his own.

NEMICIA

I began this project as a way of getting at the kinds of questions posed by recent critical returns to a human/nature dichotomy. Beginning roughly with Donna Haraway's "Cyborg Manifesto" (1985) critical debate over what is or isn't human has progressed far past its grounding in material feminisms, crossing over into interdisciplinary modes of inquiry. In his book *How Not to Make a Human*, medievalist Karl Steel compiles and discusses much of this research as a way of understanding how we *became* human in the first place. His answers point to the importance of the "animal" as a supporting or defining term. In short, a *human* is whatever isn't *animal*.

As a materialist, Steel is interested in deconstructing this dichotomy, which he does through reconstructing the concept of individual agency. He acknowledges that, if we agree that the experience or the illusion of free will is something unique to humans, viewing humans as ontologically the same as, say, oysters, leads to some uncomfortable conclusions about individual agency. But, Steel says,

For humans to catch a touch of oystermorphism is not to recognize that we cannot do anything, nor that agency is impossible, but to recognize that whatever our agency, we are still bodily, bounded by space and time...whatever the alliances of always shifting networks that make agency possible, identifiable agency, like identifiable existence, requires definite location (164)

This is why, when Russ Rymer concludes his definitive account of Genie, a well-known case of extreme childhood neglect, he also cannot come to any fast conclusions. “The question the scientists originally asked of her—What does it mean to be human? —is one that Genie eventually asked of them, and their answers were evident in the effect she had on their individual lives. How, then, could the answers not be as various as the lives she had entered and transformed?” (231).

From the start of my own book, I knew Bo was the character to pay attention to—the one who, for my purposes, had the most to say. Unfortunately, getting him to “speak,” to *mean* something within the wider narrative, proved difficult. Even after giving him the wild girl as an interlocutor, his words, his thoughts, his actions, and the meaning of all three appeared diffused and unimportant. In Giorgio Agamben’s *The Open*, he writes bluntly: “Either man has language, or he simply is not” (86). This is how I framed the problem then: how to get Bo to speak?

In a way, coaxing characters to “speak” comes down to helping them *mean* something—to me, and to my readers. And meaning-making is all about agency. The goal of giving fictional children meaning is made harder by the fact that their agency is almost always limited. Looking for a way around this obstacle, I became interested in reflection. In my previous work, I’d experimented with presenting multiple character perspectives, each in limited third-person, as a way of highlighting the differences between their individual experiences. In this book, I wanted to use this technique to characterize children, *despite* their lack of *meaningful* agency.

In Kirstin Valdez Quade’s “Nemecia,” this kind of character reflection is set up in the first paragraph:

Nemecia is thirteen; I am six. She is wearing a rayon dress that falls to her knees, glass beads, and real silk stockings, gifts from her mother in California. She wears a close-

fitting hat, like a helmet, and her smiling lips are pursed...Nemecia's head is tilted; she looks out from under her eyelashes at the camera. My expression is sullen, guilty...All I remember of the day is that Nemecia's shoes had heels, and she had to walk tipped forward on her toes to prevent them from sinking into the dirt (1).

From the start, Maria appears to define herself not as *herself*, but as a poor reflection of her cousin. Nemecia is clearly "troubled," though Maria doesn't find out why until much later. For now, she's left with the mystery of why Aunt Benigna left her daughter, and the more immediate curiosities surrounding Nemecia's behavior: "Nemecia had an air of tragedy about her, which she cultivated. She blackened her eyes with a kohl pencil" (1). But Nemecia's most striking feature in these early pages is her appetite. "My cousin was ravenous. She needed things, and she needed food. She took small bites, swallowed everything as neatly as a cat. She was never full and the food never showed on her figure" (2). Maria eats with her, even if she isn't hungry, and admires the older girl's "exquisite manners," and the "ladylike dip of her head as she accepted each mouthful" (2).

It isn't Maria's knowledge of Nemecia that invites readers to imagine her perspective, but her lack of knowledge—what she gets wrong. The story draws most of its tension from the irony of Maria's failure to solve the mystery. To readers, however, it is obvious from the beginning that Nemecia has troubles of her own. One night, Nemecia finally tells Maria about her past. She's lying, but Maria is too young to know.

"I killed them," Nemecia said into the darkness. She spoke as if reciting, and I didn't at first know if she was talking to me. "My mother was dead. Almost a month she

was dead, killed by me. Then she came back, like Christ, except it was a bigger miracle because she was dead longer, not just three days.” Her voice was matter-of-fact.

“Why did you kill our grandpa?” I whispered. “I don’t remember,” she said. “I must have been angry” (3)

While this story leaves Maria frightened of her cousin, there seems to be a part of her that knows it can’t be trusted. We are similarly aware of Nemecia’s motivation when she starts deliberately tormenting Maria.

My cousin was fierce with her love and with her hate, and sometimes I couldn’t tell the difference. I seemed to provoke her anger without meaning to. At her angriest, she would lash out with slaps and pinches that turned my skin red and blue. Her anger would sometimes last weeks, aggression that would fade into long silences (5)

Eventually, Nemecia’s “aggression” reaches a head. As her own face starts to show the signs of growing up, turning “red and oily and swollen with pustules,” she turns to picking at Maria’s face, until she’s left a permanent scar. Maria says: “One day she’d make a game of it, tell me that I looked like a pirate; another day she’d say it was her duty to mark me because I had sinned” (6). But when Nemecia turns sixteen, she loses interest in these “games.” At first, Maria is relieved, but she quickly misses her older cousin’s attention. By this time, Maria has become far too invested in the mystery of Nemecia’s origins to simply watch her drift away into adulthood.

Nemecia stopped seeing me, and, without her gaze, I became indistinct to myself. I'd lie in bed waiting for her, holding myself still until I could no longer feel the sheets on my skin, until I was bodiless in the dark (7)

Maria's first attempt to make herself more visible does not end well. She decides to try out for the lead role in an annual procession at her family's church. Maria practices her recitation of a psalm for weeks, imagining the costume she will wear: "beautiful, gauze and wire, and tied with white ribbon on the upper arms" (7).

Unfortunately, at the crucial moment Nemecia's jealousy reappears, and she manages to take the spot from Maria. Finally, Maria's anger boils over.

Hate flooded me. "I wish you hadn't," I said. "I wish you hadn't lived. This isn't your home. You're a killer." I turned to my mother. I was crying hard now, my words choked and furious. "She's trying to kill us all. Don't you know? Everyone around her ends up dead. Why don't you ever punish her?"

My mother's face turned gray, and suddenly I was afraid. Nemecia was still for a moment, and then her face clenched and she ran into the house (11)

This outburst is a point of climax in the narrative, but it is also the point at which Maria's point-of-view is at its most reflective. What's important here is not so much Maria's anger, but it's effect on both her mother and Nemecia. Right after this, Maria is sent to live with another aunt, apparently in an attempt to keep the two girls apart until Nemecia leaves home. This is the point at which we, as readers, start to truly understand the situation from an adult's perspective.

In the end, Maria finally discovers Nemecia's secret, when she wrings the story from her aunt Paula.

This wasn't the first time it had happened, just the first time your grandfather walked in on it. So he pushed open the door, angry, ready to kill Benigna's husband. There must have been a fight, but Benigna's husband was drunk and your grandfather wasn't young anymore. Benigna's husband must have been closer to the stove and to the iron poker. When they were discovered—" Paulita's voice remained flat. "When they were discovered, your grandfather was already dead. Benigna was unconscious on the floor. And they found Nemecia behind the woodbox. She'd seen the whole thing. She was five (13).

What I find most interesting here is that this story doesn't come as much of a surprise to readers. While we aren't given enough information to guess the details, we are fairly certain from the start that Nemecia only *feels* or *imagines* that she killed her grandfather, and that the truth is probably much different. Again, this passage opens up Maria's reflective capabilities as a character, letting readers in on how the adults, who we don't otherwise hear much about, are feeling. There are many layers to this story, but I've focused my analysis here on this technique of reflective characterization. Because Nemecia "can't" or "won't" speak, Maria must act as interpreter. The trouble is, she isn't a reliable interpreter, and in her unreliability, I think she shows us something important about the overall reliability of any individual perspective.

It is this dynamic, and this effect of meaning-making through both traditional expressions of ambiguous agency (like Maria's outburst, or Nemecia's abuse) *and* through reflective characterization, that I've tried to achieve, on a larger scale, in *Orphans*. The novel's structure, which forces comparisons between different character perspectives, works to set up this process of mirroring. I also think that most of my deliberate attempts to gain characterization through reflection work as I would like them to. Eve's misunderstanding of Bo as someone who is simply resistant to authority, alongside Bo's misunderstanding of Eve as a representation of authority, says more about the individual doing the misunderstanding than it does about the one who is misunderstood. The process of reflective characterization, as it appears on the page, is messy. But I feel it's safe to say that a great deal of *meaning* is gained from effective use of reflective character perspectives. To me, this seems especially useful when writing about characters, like children, who are poor in agency, by offering another option for establishing character depth.

WILD CHILD

Fictional works about wild children are somewhat rare. There are many examples of works that come close on their face, but in the end are more concerned with evoking affective responses to the *strangeness* of their characters. There is an atmosphere of entertainment, wonder, and of the sublime. The point, in this more widespread version of the wild child story, is to wonder at the child's oddity and hope that they can be "rehabilitated." In a more recent take on *homo ferus*, T. Coraghessan Boyle's "Wild Child" reimagines the life of Victor, the so-called "Wild Boy of Aveyron." Boyle's narrative closely follows journals published by Victor's physician, Jean Marc Gaspard Itard, which present a gripping story even without Boyle's embellishments.

The most definitive study of Victor's life is Harlan Lane's *Wild Boy of Aveyron*. Through careful quoting and analysis of Itard's journals and other primary sources, Lane traces Victor from the day that he was captured, in a forest near Saint-Sernin-sur-Rance, at the turn of the nineteenth century. Itard's work with Victor was largely supported due to its concern with primary language acquisition. In the end, Victor's inability to learn French provided evidence for a "critical period" of language learning. As Itard himself put it: "We may conclude that the articulation of sounds, indisputably the most unimaginable and useful result of imitation, must encounter innumerable obstacles at any age later than early childhood" (129).

In Boyle's story, as in Itard's, Victor is discovered by a group of hunters, who are understandably surprised to see him: "That look—the unblinking eyes, black as coffee poured straight from the pot, the tightening of the mouth around discolored canines—was the look of a thing out of Spiritus Mundi, deranged, alien, hateful." Victor walks on all fours, peering out at them from underneath the "unbarbered thatch of his hair" (239).

Victor is bound and carried from the forest to the local tavern, as the villagers are not about to let him step foot in their church. Eventually, after a second escape and second capture, the villagers send word to the government. By the time Itard, a well-known speech pathologist, begins his lessons, Victor is already something of a national celebrity. His existence seems to offer an invaluable opportunity to answer some of the important scientific and metaphysical questions of the time. The language used throughout the story to describe him seems to make it clear that, in the other character's eyes, he is not. He is called a "freak of nature...like a fox standing on its hind legs at the table" (244) He has "the hypersensitivity of a stoat or weasel" (242). "He was feral—a living, breathing atavism—and his life was no different from the life of any other creature of the forest" (241). "Stab it!" someone hisses. "Kill it!" (243) When the villagers finally decide to bring him to the priest, they see that he's upset. "What's the matter, Father? Is he not human?" (244)

For Boyle, it's this "human question" that receives the most attention. "Did he know that he was human?" the narrator asks, answering, "He must have" (245). This idea that a biological human who has never had contact with other humans *must know* that they're human raises the question of what we mean when we say "human," but it ultimately fails to bring us any closer to an answer. Itard, in his journals, never treats this question so bluntly. Instead, he focuses on his own goals, which center around making Victor speak. He subjects his patient to long days of repetitive lessons, trying to get him to understand the significance of the alphabet in front of him. Unsurprisingly, Victor finds the process of learning to read not only difficult, but unimportant. Finally, following days of exceptional resistance, Itard breaks:

I approached him with every appearance of anger and grabbing him forcibly by the hips I held him out of the window, his head facing directly toward the bottom of the chasm. After some seconds I drew him in again. He was pale, covered with a cold sweat, his eyes were wet with tears, and he still trembled a little, which I believed was the effect of his fear...This was the first time, at least to my knowledge, that he shed tears” (Lane 121).

Even as he recalls this moment, being honest with his readers about his regrets over losing his temper, Itard can’t help gaining what he can, scientifically speaking, from the incident. Alone, indented, his note: “This was the first time I saw Victor shed tears” is clearly meant to sum up this encounter.

Boyle captures the insensitivity and anger of this moment well:

Clutching him by the ankles, Itard thrust the boy through the frame of the open window and dangled him there, five long stories from the ground. Victor went rigid as a board, the convulsions dissolved in the terror of the moment. What must he have thought? That after all the kindness and blandishments, all the food, warmth and shelter, his captors—and this man, this man in particular...had finally shown their true colors...He’d been betrayed. The ground would rush to meet him (Boyle 280).

My first drafts of *Orphans* treated Bo a little like Itard treated Victor. I tried to *make him speak*, and ended with similar results: frustration, fatigue, and a good bit of bargaining. Things didn’t change until I moved from thinking about wild children to thinking about their *meaning*. Not *what* they’re like, or *what* they are, but *how* they shape our visions of ourselves. This

resulted in a kind of characterization through reflection. A child with no agency can only *reflect*: never *speak*, the way that most effective fictional characters do. Unsurprisingly, then, this is what most fictional children do. They exist, like Ernest in my novel, almost exclusively as foils; straw-men; *mirrors*.

In the end, Itard fails to make serious progress with Victor, despite getting him to speak and understand a few words, like “*lait*”. In the final review of his studies, the French Institute acknowledged that “it was impossible for the instructor [Itard] to put in his lessons, exercises, and experiments more intelligence, sagacity, patience, and courage; and that if he has not achieved greater success, it must be attributed not to any lack of zeal or talent but to the imperfection of the organs of the subject [Victor] upon whom he worked” (Lane 166).

It is clear to modern readers that the Institute’s report says volumes more about the institute than it does about Victor, or even Itard. It is difficult to find “sagacity” or “patience” in his journals. This is not to say that he was a bad doctor—his reputation as a therapist was well-earned—but it is a bold re-writing of the window scene, to say the least. Similarly, Itard himself insisted that Victor was “no idiot.” In his view, Victor had simply passed the critical stage of language formation. There wasn’t any “imperfection of the organs,” he just never got a chance to learn (Lane 212).

At this point in Victor’s story, Boyle is freed somewhat from the constraints of historical accuracy. Towards the end of his stay with Itard, Victor manages to run away for three days, and Boyle takes advantage of this opportunity to offer an entirely fictitious version of his escape.

At first, in the freedom of the night, he’d felt supercharged with excitement, and he stole away from the walls with a sense of urgency, something in the smell of the air, polluted

as it was, bringing him back to his old life when everything was untainted and equally divided between the kingdoms of pleasure and pain. He kept to the shadows instinctively, the noise of the carriages like thunder, people everywhere, emerging from the mist like specters, shouting, crying, their clogs beating at the stones... (Boyle 284).

Even at the end of “Wild Child,” after Victor has been living “civilized” life for quite a while, Boyle can’t seem to stray far from his original impressions of a half man/half beast. It’s the smell of nature and of animality that brings Victor back to his “old life” immediately, just as soon as he has passed the doors onto the street. It’s clear here that whatever Boyle’s Itard was attempting, Victor’s animal instincts were never even mildly suppressed. This version fits with Lane’s description of historical events, and with the Institute’s final report. But it leaves little room for agency, and therefore little room for making meaning.

What if, as I think Spyrou suggests, we were to focus on the ways that characters *reflect* each other, building upon one another, in the reader’s mind, through non-narrative interaction? When Boyle’s Itard thinks of Victor, he thinks of the “Victor” Boyle has created—a non-thinking, instinct-driven animal. In fiction, this is not a bad thing, nor is it unusual. But it does close off certain avenues for deeper characterization through reflection—avenues which may be useful when it comes to writing characters with “low agency,” like children.

In the end, I quit trying to make Bo speak, and focused my attention more on what the other characters say and think about him. What the world thinks about him. What *we* think about him. Practically, this led me to the story’s current format: three sections, each narrating the same series of events from different perspectives. By the end of Section 1 (Grace), readers know how things will end. The question isn't *what* will happen, but the mystery of *how* it happens. In the

novel's hierarchy of adulthood, or experience, or civilization, everyone has someone to compare themselves to, except Bo. As far as he's concerned, he only has the wild girl who, like all iterations of *homo ferus*, represents the point after which these kinds of hierarchies breakdown. Confronting the human animal at once reminds us that we weren't always human and raises the important question of whether or not anything has truly changed, apart from our perspective.

WENDY

Benh Zeitlin's 2020 film *Wendy* retells J.M. Barrie's *Peter Pan*, updating it with a hefty dose of realism. Zeitlin's Wendy isn't well-off, like her namesake. She and her two brothers, Jack and John, are anything but coddled in a nursery. They're outside, chucking bottles in the creek and waiting for a chance to escape. They don't leave their home because they don't want to grow up, but because they're truly worried about what their grown-up lives will look like. Living in a room above their mother's rail-side diner, Wendy has a hazy memory of a third brother, who we see following Peter onto the train, proclaiming loudly, "I ain't gonna be no mop boy!" If *Peter Pan* is a serious story, wrapped in innocence to make it decent for young readers, *Wendy* is the product of a modern, and less innocent, world.

In *Wendy*, Peter acts more like a charismatic kidnapper than a friend. He entices children from his perch atop a moving freight train just outside their windows. When Wendy and her brothers jump aboard, he switches instantly to barking orders, playing at the game of scaring them, until they reach a boat and row out to the island which, in this film, serves as Neverland. With everyone ashore, Peter immediately runs after another child, brandishing an old machete, screaming, "I'm gonna cut off your foot and shove it up your butt!"

Despite these joking taunts, which run throughout, the film is serious. When the children on the island play, they only do it because Peter wants them to, insisting that they can't stop, or they'll risk beginning to grow old. In Barrie's book, the same is true, but it's presented in a different light.

In his [Peter's] absence things are usually quiet on the island. The fairies take an hour longer in the morning, the beasts attend to their young...and when pirates and lost boys meet they merely bite their thumbs at each other. But with the coming of Peter, who hates lethargy, they are all under way again: if you put your ear to the ground now, you would hear the whole island coming to life (Barrie 49).

This is a good example of how Zeitlin sharpens up the edges of the story, making it feel personal and dangerous, without straying far from the original. The film stays true to all the central themes of *Peter Pan*, including its concern with the uncomfortable fact that “All children, except one, grow up” (Barrie 7).

The children on Zeitlin's island live in a dense jungle, full of natural resources. On the other side of the island, this jungle turns to desert—forming a physical and strikingly visual line between the children and the “Olds.” When Wendy asks why one of them “got old,” one boy responds, “he lost his best friend, and his number just kept going up and up.” In Zeitlin's Neverland, the primary danger is sadness caused by knowledge of hardship. This is why Peter is so aggressively upbeat and seems to double down on play whenever there is trouble. He's frightened they will stop *believing*, specifically in “Mother,” a magical, fish-like creature that lives in caves beneath the island. If this happens, he will start to grow old.

Eventually, Wendy grows suspicious about Peter's motives. Her brother Jack is trapped inside a shipwreck, and when Peter calls on Mother to save him, she never comes. Jack begins to show the signs of growing old, in the form of black marks on his hand. He asks Peter to cut it off for him, which Peter does despite the cries of protest from the other children. Fed up, Wendy takes her brother to the Olds, who help her bandage her brother's wrist to stop the bleeding.

As she walks away to let her brother rest, Wendy thinks (in voiceover): “When you’re a child, they don’t tell you. Everyone you love can disappear. And you never get them back.” (1:10:00)

Soon after, Jack decides to lead the Olds on an expedition to kill Mother, who he blames for his misfortune. In the final act, Jack succeeds in driving a harpoon in Mother, and she dies despite Wendy and Peter’s best efforts. For a moment, everyone—the children and the Olds alike—are quiet. With their Mother gone, there’s nothing left to fight about. Wendy has completed her journey to maturity that started with acceptance of the inevitable, that “everyone you love can disappear.”

There are many forms of mothering in *Wendy*, just as there are in *Peter Pan*. But here, that mothering is more dispersed. When Peter asks Wendy, “How do you know someone is a real mother?” she responds, “Because they love you more than anyone else.”

Peter: I think you’re my mother and I’m your father.

Wendy: That’s not how it works.

Peter: Then we’ll both be each other’s mother.

Wendy: I already have a mother.

Peter: One day she’ll be gone, though.

This call-and-response between Peter and Wendy is a fixture in the film, whenever the two of them talk. Bouncing these two characters, neither of which is able to articulate their thoughts in “grown-up” language, manages to reveal some sense of their meaning—giving them a voice they wouldn’t otherwise have had.

After Mother's death (which isn't really death, but something like a dissipation), Wendy leaves with all the other children, to continue growing up. But before they leave, she tells them all a "story," in an attempt to explain why they need to go.

Wendy: Once there was a mother. She lived in a restaurant. And one day, her children, who she loved the most in the world, ran away and left her alone.

Buzzo: Did any of them ever come home?

Wendy: Yes, they did. And they grew up all together at Darling's Diner, where it's always egg o'clock.

...

Peter: That's not a story!

Wendy: It is a story! Our lives are gonna be the greatest story ever told! And the bigger we get, the more huger our stories will be. We'll explore the earth, and mend the planet! We'll fall in love, and someday, we get our own kids. A great army of them! (1:30:00)

Following this speech, the children see the glowing pieces of Mother rising out of the sea, and they begin to scream "I love my mother!" In the final scenes of *Wendy*, it is this reflection—this call-and-response characteristic of Wendy and Peter's dialogue, that allows them all to play the role of Mother ("Then we'll be each other's mother") and to accept the mothering of others ("I love my mother!"). And yet it also undermines it, by suggesting that the nature of a mother isn't biological, but simply one of many available attitudes that one might take. In other words, being a mother isn't innate—it's a way or relating to the world, and as such, it can be taken up by anyone.

This fits with Karl Steel's point that

...by identifying, at least strategically, the dynamic relation between mothering person and child...as the primary social relation, we can give better attention to abandoned children, who live only if their dependencies are met, and to their caregivers, who act not out of free, rational choice or calculation, but out of an instinct that is, crucially, not typically disdained for its instinctuality (61)

And if mothering is not innate, then neither, necessarily, is childhood. This is already suggested by the fact that "childhood" itself has no strictly-determined end point. In their own ways, all coming-of-age tales must deal with the shifty line between the child and the grown-up. In *Wendy*, Peter makes his choice to stay behind, but does so with a brand-new understanding of the value of adulthood. Similarly, Wendy leaves with a lifelong appreciation for the gifts of childhood. They still have no idea where the boundary lies, or what, exactly, causes one to grow old. But they have some sense of what's happening on both sides.

CONCLUSION

The process of writing reflective characters on larger scales results, I think, in unintended consequences. As the goal is to create a kind of distributed network of meaning, in which each character's individual meaning is explicitly dependent on the others, it is difficult if not impossible to track each one of these dependencies, or these connections between different points of view. This isn't necessarily a drawback, as it has the benefit, perhaps, of better representing an increasingly complex and interconnected world. But once the mirrors are set up, changing one makes changes in another. In my own case, revising Grace's version of events revises Bo's version, and Eve's. This kind of interconnection is important in all narratives—not just those told from multiple perspectives—but it becomes more difficult to manage once it has been made explicit. Put another way, the structure of my novel invites readers to look closely for moments of reflective characterization—to the point, I think, that they are likely to find moments which were not intentional.

In this introduction, I have not discussed all aspects of my novel. I have only tried to give some explanation of the thought and research that went into it. Along the way, I've tried to show that, from a craft perspective, writers working with child characters may want to pay attention to two aspects of the story's structure. First, does it provide room for the characters to exercise some agency? Writers often answer this question with "resistive" or ambiguous agency. In short, their characters "act out." The trouble with this answer is it far too often ends up characterizing the child as *simply* resistant. If we take Nemecia and Boyle's "Wild Child" as examples of this, it seems clear that, in this case, order will have to be restored. Whether through simple discipline,

or else by other means, the child must return to recognition of adult authority. If not, the story quickly turns to tragedy.

It is this forced return to obedience that slams the door shut, once again, on agency. But I don't think that this is necessarily an obstacle to deeper exploration of a child character. At this point, writers still have reflective characterization at their disposal. In *Wendy*, Zeitlin doesn't shift between narrative perspectives, as I've done in *Orphans*. We're with Wendy the whole time. Having barred himself from some of the techniques I've used, like dramatic irony, forced comparison between different perspectives, and shared symbolism, Zeitlin accomplishes a similar task in the dialogue, as Peter, Wendy, and the other children openly debate the meaning of the word "mother."

In both cases, I think, the characters are rounder for these efforts. More importantly, however, they *mean* more.

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“You can’t come back to something that is gone.”

— Richard Powers, *The Overstory*

Grace: Day 1

The first thing you should know about Grace is that she is generally happy, in the way that people who have found contentment are. On mornings like this, when Bo and Evie have gone off to school and baby Ernest is asleep, she has time to put the minor problems of her life in order. On ordinary days this isn't hard. Even with the children, life is relatively simple. Most mornings, she can take her cup of tea and muffin to a chair beside the window (or outside, depending on the weather) and simply sit, enjoying the knowledge that everyone and everything has been accounted for.

Today, of course, she won't have time for that. It's the final school day before summer, a day when she always feels rushed. It's not that there is much to do, apart from the usual small chores, but that the change from all the long, slow afternoons of fall and winter to the short, quick, hectic days of summer always makes her feel like preparations are in order. The clock behind the stove says it is nearly ten o'clock. She opens the narrow cupboard beside the sink, takes a tin of tea bags off the shelf, and lights the stove. While the water rises to a boil, she goes into the living room, where Ernest's whole morning is spread out in disarray. She starts with books, flipping the chunky block-boards into a wide birch basket in the corner, and shuffling the larger paperbacks into a pile on the coffee table, where their covers stick against the lacquer.

When she wasn't looking—likely while she washed the breakfast dishes—Ernest managed to spring the drawer lock in the bathroom. He has left a trail of cotton swabs, thin tubes of eyeliner, and bottles of forgotten nail polish from the hallway to the foot of the stairs. She gathers these and dumps them all haphazardly into the drawer. These are Evie's things, which are (she notices) becoming less the things of childhood and more those of a young woman. For a

moment, Grace must fight a sudden urge to paint her nails—something she was never good at and has not done in years. There is one color in particular that catches her eye, a deep maroon which makes her think of dried blood. She wonders what her parents would think if they could see her here, admiring her very adult daughter’s very adult makeup in her bathroom, in their home. Grace’s parents moved to Garrett the year after she was born. Harry says they came up from *the city*, though if Grace had any family there, he never heard her parents speak of them. When Grace was thirteen, Iliss made some inquiries and found a cousin of Grace’s father living in Connecticut. They met her at a highway restaurant, halfway between Albany and Hartford. She remembered Grace’s father as a child, barely walking, and at that time she was still a child herself. All she really knew was that her cousin’s head was covered in dark curls.

“As he grew,” she said, “they straightened out, but that is still how I remember him—those curls bouncing as my mother and I helped him look for shells.”

“You lived near the ocean?” Grace asked.

“Oh, no. Both our families would go down to Cape May in the summer. But that didn’t last long. They stopped coming when he must have been, oh, four or five.”

Of course, Grace asked her why, but she did not know.

“I don’t think it was a fight or anything like that. We just heard less and less of them.”

Grace remembers how she smiled when she said, *sometimes you just lose touch*.

Grace thought then (and thinks now) of the weeks just after her parents’ deaths. She remembers only bits and pieces—strangers coming and going, all of them wanting to talk to her. It was a fearful time, when all she really understood was that the whole town was discussing what to do with her.

She does not know much about her parents' final days. In the beginning, she was told that they were lost. They had gone hiking, leaving Grace with Harry and Iliss. Everybody says that this was not out of the ordinary.

Your parents just loved climbing mountains, Harry said. It's why they moved up here, I think—all these beautiful summits.

It was late fall in a year when everybody thought the winter would be mild.

Of course, Harry said, even mild winters here are dangerous. They weren't prepared.

Which wasn't their fault, Iliss was quick to add. The truth is, they were not the first to get caught in a cold snap, and they won't be the last.

You might make it sound less hopeless, Harry said.

Not hopeless, Harry—just—realistic. Grace (she put her hands on Grace's shoulders, in the way she has of studying a child physically to make sure that they are paying close attention) it was terrible, what happened, but it wasn't their fault. It's a risk we all take, living here.

That's true, said Harry.

But it's worth it!

Yes, it is.

You'll think so too, soon.

And so Iliss turned the conversation gently with a smile and a promise, and (it occurs to Grace now) never said much more about the subject. Maybe, she thinks, she is coming to an age at which it is impossible to keep oneself from reimagining the past. Or maybe there is something else about this summer—this day—that explains this sudden wash of insecurity—this nagging notion that she isn't quite prepared.

Grace still thinks about her parents lovingly from time to time, but mostly she has learned to leave their memory alone, like a balloon she is afraid of popping.

She slides the drawer shut. At first it won't go. She's forgotten to press on the latch. For the hundredth time this week, she thinks about tearing it out. Ernest has already figured out the trick. There doesn't seem to be much point in carrying on with the charade, but then Bo's social worker, Candace, comes next week, and she will want to check her boxes.

Grace hears the kettle whining. She passes through the living room, sweeping up a handful of cut grapes from the armchair by the television. In the kitchen, she dumps these in the sink, shuts off the stove, and puts the kettle to one side to settle down. On the fridge there is a sheaf of papers held up with a magnetic clip. The clip is large and ugly—rust-red, with black holes where the paint has flaked or worn away. There is a small engraving of a pine tree at one end, as though its maker is offering an apology.

It makes Grace think of Iliss, who gave it to her when she left the island. That was back when it was only Grace and Evie—an arrangement which seemed perfect at the time. When anyone in this town thinks of Harry and Iliss Crane, the first thing they imagine isn't Harry's oddly charming fondness for his walking sticks, or Iliss's obsession with her hair. It isn't their commitments to the town and all the lives within it—mostly volunteering at the theatre and Rotary. Like three generations of Crane's before them, Harry and Iliss are hopelessly defined by Harbor Island, and it's always "the island" that springs most easily to people's minds.

It isn't an island in the proper sense. Harry calls it *the anomaly*—an isthmus that has only recently become a small peninsula and is now beginning the long process of becoming an island. In three seasons (summer, winter, and most of fall) the land remains connected to the shore by a wide strip of rocks and mud. In August, when this bridge is very dry, it is still possible to find the

crumbled remnants of the old road from the village, which now cuts off abruptly at the water's edge.

The papers are for Bo—a record of his time in foster care. She wants to make sure everything is orderly before Candace shows up. She takes them from the clip, pours water over her tea, and takes them both to the hard-oak table. It is one of her favorite places, because it is hers and because it is comforting to feel that she is just exactly where she should be, and that this place—all of it, from the heavy, polished table, to the sunlight passing gently through the sliding doors—is (in all respects) a good one. She is still remembering what she will privately refer to as the *early days*, when she was thrust from her familiar and comfortable life on the island into (as Iliss called it) the world of adults.

Looking back, it seems to her that she was always well-aware of the plan. When she was young, Harry and Iliss would talk often about what would happen after they were gone. They intended to pass the island on to Grace and enjoyed discussing all the changes she could make. In time, this talk became a kind of game. Grace asked for things she knew were either too expensive or impossible (a petting zoo, a submarine...) and Harry would respond, *after we're gone*. They did this, she knew, to assure her that she had a place—a hideaway, where she would be both cared for and protected, even after they had passed. For Grace, the conversations meant that when she went to bed at night, she had a ready-made future to look forward to—to think about; to fondle carefully, the way a child turns an egg.

She can smell the resins in the table and the new grass rising in the yard. These scents—this time of year, when life is once again released from the indignities of winter—always make her think of home. When she was young, each spring gave rise to flurries of activity. Just after ice-out, Harry would unlock the summer shed, which had been closed up and neglected since the

fall. Grace was always present for this moment. Just before she moved out to the island, her temporary foster family took her to the Museum of Natural History in New York. It was a family trip, planned long before Grace arrived, and they weren't allowed to leave her behind. The museum had a small wing dedicated to what they called Egyptology. In one room, there were cases of the usual artifacts. She had seen similar things before, on a trip with her parents to New York, but in a side room, she found something new: photographs of excavations, filled with men in dirty, rolled-up sleeves displaying objects filmed with dust. These same objects were carefully preserved and polished in another room of the museum, but she preferred remembering them this way—at the moment they were resurrected from the earth.

To Grace, the summer shed when it was first unlocked had something of this same allure. The kayaks and the rowboat, citronella torches for mosquitoes—all looked more mysterious beneath their winter wrappers—abiding in a silence so unbroken that it had grown thick with possibilities. Harry went about the work of opening, assessing, and reorganizing these packages with the care he showed in all things, pulling up a stool to the dust-covered canoe to run his hands along the gunwales, looking for cracks in the ash.

By this time, she had come to see the island as her home and took great interest in the way that her adoptive parents loved and cared for it. She had thought—or perhaps it was Iliss' suggestion—that she'd make the island a safe place for people like her; adrift, with very little to hold on to. She had visions of an Orphan Island—orphans taking care of orphans, coalescing over nights and years into a whole, expansive family. In bed, at night, she'd dream about it—dreaming herself into dreaming—building castles that she hoped would stand the tests of time.

For now, though, she is comfortable and relatively happy. Doing what she'd like to with the island will take money that she doesn't have and, most likely, never will. Besides, Harry and

Iliss always talk about this dream as something to be wondered at, but never treated seriously. It's a game—and she supposes that's what it will stay.

She flips through the papers, looking for the schedule of home visits. She was wrong—she has two weeks before the social worker comes—plenty of time to prepare. She sticks the papers on the fridge, planning to take them back up to the safe in her bedroom. The circular window above the freezer has a layer of black dust around its edge—remnants of last winter. She takes a towel from the roll beside the sink and wipes it clean, then undoes the latch and cracks the window open.

Outside, every passing moment is measured carefully in birdsong. They are talking to each other—loudly, in the way birds do when they are far apart from one another. Their talk is sometimes happy, others angry or upset. She can't understand them but, if she listens long enough—not very long at all—it is as if the meaning of their sounds comes through in feelings. She can hear their wavering; the constant balance of desire and contentment. For the most part, they are talking about themselves.

Grace's house is far back from the road and screened by trees. It is a large A-frame, built, she assumes, by trappers. It is simple, but strong. For as long as anyone can remember, it was painted red, and was often used as a landmark for the highway turnoff nearby. That is until Grace bought it and painted it green (a shade she chose carefully, to match the surrounding pines). If she cut some down, she would be able to see the lake, and mountains rising high behind it. Some days she thinks seriously about doing it—opening things up a little—but she has grown much too accustomed to privacy.

At the back of the house, there is a small patch of blackberries. Blackberries aren't her favorite—she only likes them in early June, long before they are ripe, when the living green of

the stems still latches tightly to the base of the fruit. This makes her happy, because it means that she can have her pick before the animals are interested. It won't be long, now. She looks at the battered strainer on the counter. It was once pale blue but has been pocked in places by the chipped enamel.

She will make a pie of early berries. It will be sour. The children won't like it, but they'll just have to wait a few more weeks. She can bake this pie and freeze it, so that she can eat it slowly, in thin slices, over the course of the entire summer.

Before she goes out picking, she turns on the stove and sets tonight's dinner on the stove. She wanted to do something nice for Bo, who's finally made it through a whole school year without issue. The problem is that Bo says he likes everything. He is, Eve says, maliciously polite. Harry compares him to a dog they had when Grace was little: a huge golden retriever that was perfectly obedient as long as anyone was watching, but would slink away as soon as possible to disappear into the woods, or paw through the neighbors' trash. He'd never tell them what he likes, but she has noticed that he seems to perk up when there's meat on the table. He's told her that he used to eat venison, back in whatever state he lived in, but she hardly knows how he'll react to seeing it again.

Ernest is still sleeping, but the berry bushes are not far away. They grow just off the entrance to the path that leads down to the creek. The weather is mild for this time of year. Lately, it has seemed to Grace that summer arrives earlier and earlier each year. Yesterday she saw a family swimming on the other side of the lake—a pleasure she does not remember from her childhood, when the lake in May was still too cold to enter without a wetsuit.

The path is wet with early runoff from the mountains, and her boots make sucking noises as she crosses the yard and drops behind the hill.

The patch is old enough to hide its most mature stems in the center, away from prying hands. Grace usually contents herself with easy picking from the edge, but is surprised to find that this year something got there first. A few berries have simply broken off and lie scattered in the mud, but many more are missing. She has to reach far back to find enough large berries for her pie.

She works carefully, and before long she begins to enjoy the challenge of guiding her thin fingers around the thorns. She seems to remember a time when this—the plant’s aggressive but ultimately unsuccessful effort to keep the world at bay—seemed awfully important. Now, her days are mostly filled with caring for the children and it is more difficult to think of things beyond their needs. Today, however, whether she is taken by the change in weather, or the knowledge that this is her last full day alone before school lets out, she feels her mind inclined to wander.

And it *is* important. She is working deeper into the bush now, using both hands to push back the branches. She wonders, in a pleasant way, if we don’t all have thorns of one kind or another. Eve—she is a thorny one. Covered in spines, though this isn’t unusual at her age. A teenage girl should have all the armor she can get.

Grace feels her sleeve catch on the thorns and tries to twist herself free, cutting her hand in the process.

“Ow!”

Her voice is louder in the morning air than she expected. As she holds her finger to her lips, she hears the frightened flapping of a grouse, followed by the angry chatter of the squirrels. Then she hears another sound, one she that she doesn’t recognize. It is short, lasting no more than a second, and rises quickly in pitch like the call of a large bird. It sounds (she spins around

to face the trees, trying to locate its origin) almost like a coyote, mildly amused by her outburst. She holds still, listening, until the birds begin to sing and the forest, emboldened, regains its natural air of passivity.

Her bowl is full of half-ripe berries and the sun is almost overhead. She decides to start back toward the house. As she goes, she listens. A turkey shouts from somewhere over the ridge, and Grace starts. She would swear that she had heard it again—that odd coyote yelp, which generates no answer in return. As she crests the hill and crosses back into the yard, she feels the monitor in her pocket vibrate. Ernest is awake.

The porch boards groan as she makes her way into the house. She puts the berries on the counter and goes upstairs, only to find Ernest waiting for her quietly in his crib. He is getting big enough for a low bed, but the bedroom door latch is broken, and she worries he'll get out and hurt himself.

“Ma, mah, ma,” says Ernest, standing up and bouncing on his mattress. She supposes Ernest will be like Eve—he will call her *mother*, if only because he can't remember any other. It was Iliss' suggestion that she make Bo call her mother too, because he's never had one and the practice can't do any harm, but might foster a respectful attitude and keep him out of trouble.

She picks Ernest up and sets him down on the rug. He looks down, curls his toes in the dusty fibers, and squeals.

“Well, you're awake now,” Grace says. “Time to get changed.”

He smiles at her conspiratorially and stands still while she switches out his diaper for a fresh one. His curled black hair has fallen down over his eyes. She brushes it back, thinking she will have to cut it before Candace comes to visit, though she'll wait until the day before because he is still frightened by the scissors.

He insists on going down the staircase on his own, holding tightly to the railing even though it makes things much more difficult. Grace wonders—she has never taken Illiss’s advice, not simply because she can’t bear to enforce it, but also because she has never thought of herself as motherly. She believes a mother’s love is like the love she has for her forgotten parents (a love which is, in death, now safe from all threats) and it acts at times like an escape. It is not, she believes, the kind of love that can be given, but a kind that only grows from growing with each other, as one body, and from the abandonment of separation. She doesn’t want this kind of love. she is content—for now—with all the satisfactions that her foster children can provide and does not want to face whatever bleak emotions lurk amongst her thoughts of motherhood.

Downstairs, Ernest runs haltingly to the fridge and tugs hard at the handle. It is a heavy, old-fashioned door, and sometimes even Bo has trouble getting it to open.

She hands him a spouted cup from the table, sniffing to make sure the milk is still fresh. Then she opens up the freezer and digs out a pie crust, which she sets down on the counter to thaw. She thinks of Illiss as a mother but supposes this is partly because Illiss acts like one, selflessly, it seems, and Grace supposes this grows out of pity for her children. But Grace can’t pity her *lost children*, as Illiss sometimes calls them. They are not any more lost than she is.

Ernest drinks, then sighs, puts his cup down on a nearby chair, and wanders off into the living room. Grace cuts some apples and some cheese, knowing he will be back soon, once he has said hello to all his toys and taken a quick look out the window. She mixes the blackberries with sugar and cornstarch and pours this into the crust. As she lights the oven, Ernest returns, looking for his snack.

“Did you get hungry?” she asks.

He nods. His mouth is open and his eyes, though wide, appear blank. When he sees Grace lift the plate he calls out “here!” and points behind him at the hall.

“No,” Grace shakes her head. “You’ll eat here today. You know I have to clean up after you.”

She hands him a berry—the ripest one that she can find—hoping it will keep him busy for a minute. He rolls it on his tongue, bites down, and shudders at the sour taste. He reaches out for more, but she knows he will only spit them out and end up covered in dark juice. Bored, his little hand starts creeping towards the flame.

Grace takes it firmly in her own, saying “wait, wait, wait. It’s hot!”

He tries to pull away and she lets him go, watching as he struggles to regain his balance.

“Remember what we said? You can’t touch fire, Ernest. It will hurt!”

She moves her hand towards the flame and jerks it back.

“Ow! Hot!”

Ernest sticks his thumb in his mouth, considering the burner and the water bubbling furiously in the pot. His thumb comes out of his mouth with a pop.

He says, “but I want do it.”

“Well, you can’t.” Grace says.

“But I want it!”

Grace says, “Ernest, the answer is no.”

“No!” he screams, throwing his head back like a bird.

“It’s. Yes.”

She shuts off the stove and looks at him, watching as his chest heaves with frustration.

“Do you want to sing a song while we wait?” She asks, but distraction doesn't work as well on him as it once did.

“On!” he screams, pointing at the burner.

His voice is loud enough to make her want to cover her ears. But she doesn't. *You've been through this once with Eve already*, she reminds herself, and keeps her hands set calmly on the counter.

“Ernest,” she says, “I can't explain if you don't listen.”

He looks around for something he can throw, but she's already swept the counter clean.

“Ernest,” she says.

Now he's climbing off his stool, working himself carefully down to the ground despite his anger. Grace expects him to sit down and cry, as he's done lately when he can't have what he wants. But this time he surprises her. Without a word, he runs into the living room. She waits to hear him crying for her but can only hear his heavy breathing.

“Ernest?” she calls out. “Are you okay?”

She stirs the berries in the pot and waits. It's quiet for another minute before she goes to check.

He is standing at the big front window, which is low enough for him to press his hands against the glass. This winter he was captivated by the sight of his own footprints in the snow, and how the glass was so cold it would make his fingers red.

“Hey,” she says.

“Oh!” he flicks his head at her and taps the glass.

“There's man. Out there.”

“Really?”

She's happy he has calmed down, but he's never walked away from her before. She can't remember Eve ever doing that, either, so she makes a mental note. There's a police car parked down in the long grass by the road. She wonders why he didn't say *peace car*, the way he does when he plays with his toy cars, and realizes that he's likely never seen a real one.

Grace herself has only interacted twice with Garrett's small Police Department. Once when she was too young to remember, and again more recently, when Bo ran off. She'd hoped then that it wouldn't prove to be the start of an unnerving pattern.

Two officers are coming up the drive. They don't look especially concerned, but not like they are looking forward to the visit, either.

“Can you wait here?” she asks. “You can watch through the window.”

“Okay,” Ernest says, pressing his face closer to the glass.

She goes out onto the front porch and waves at the officers. One of them is a young woman Grace does not recognize. The other one, the man, she recognizes. He used to work for Harry, clearing brush over the summer. That was back when they were young.

Mark, she thinks.

She hopes he isn't interested in small talk. Then again, she hopes this isn't serious enough to entirely forbid it.

“Hi, Mark,” she says.

“Hey, Grace! It's good to see you.”

He turns away from her to look out at the calm lake, and the rising shadow of the island breaking through the morning mist.

“God, I missed that view,” he says, turning back to her with a grin.

She remembers him as a tall, awkward teenager, but he has put on weight since then, and lost his anxious way of moving.

Grace smiles.

“What's going on?” she asks.

“Oh, well ...”

Mark pauses, staring at the ground, and Grace is thinking that the only thing he's missing is a hat to wring nervously between his hands. The other officer decides to take a look out at the lake.

“It's nothing too bad, but it concerns Bo.”

He pauses, looking at her, and she waits patiently for him to continue. She's just hoping he won't say that Bo has disappeared again. After the first time—not that long ago—Harry and Iliss did a good job keeping it out of his record. Grace didn't like the idea, knowing it will make things even worse if CPS finds out.

After a moment, Mark finds his voice.

“There was an incident at school today. His teacher says he had another episode.”

Grace says, “You mean a panic attack?”

Mark nods. “He left the classroom early...”

“On his own?”

“It looks like he ran fast enough, they couldn't catch him.”

Grace is caught off guard despite her premonitions. *Of course, he'll try to run again*, Iliss had said. *But we'll be watching this time, won't we?*

“Bo!”

It's the other officer, her hands cupped loosely around her mouth. Her shout carries across the lake and echoes from the cliff face on the island. Grace follows her gaze to the edge of the trees, down by the road. The trees have not filled out yet, and she sees the black checks on Bo's hunting jacket moving through them, following the path beside the creek. With a deep sigh of relief, Grace checks to see that Ernest is still at the window, then starts around the side of the house.

“Should we go after him?” Mark asks.

“He'll come out back here,” she says. “It looks like he decided to come home.”

She's still angry that they let him leave alone, but seeing him come through the tall pines at the end of the path, she's only happy that he listened: heard her when she told him that his safe place was with her, and not alone.

Right away she sees that he's been playing in the woods. His boots are wet and pasted with leaves, and his knees are covered in mud. She slows down as she approaches him, crouching down a bit to show she isn't mad.

He doesn't look good. He comes toward her at his usual pace, shoulders slumped—his whole body at ease. As he comes closer, she sees that his face has turned to stone.

“The police are here,” she says.

Starting out this way gives rise to memories of Iliss as a parent. Kind, but always careful not to get pushed over.

He nods, stopping a few feet away from her—a couple feet too far, in fact, compared to other children, *but that's Bo*, especially in situations like this.

“Are you okay?” she says.

He jerks his head to look at the police car parked down at the bottom of the hill, and she can't tell what he is thinking. This is what it's like, when he locks down. He's still in there (she knows he is) but he has put a veil of blankness over his face and she still hasn't found a way to penetrate it. In a way it is impressive, the expression she imagines people wear when they are sitting quietly, alone. He will still respond, but it feels automatic, like he isn't really thinking about what he hears.

"I hope he's okay," Dennis says quietly.

He's come over to wrap things up, leaving his partner sitting idly on porch steps.

"He'll be fine."

Grace sighs and gathers all of her attention for the more important question.

"How much trouble is he in?"

"That's the thing," says Dennis, seemingly apologetic. "We don't really know yet. At this point, it's up to how far the Clarkes want to push it."

Now she hears it—the sharp cough followed by a low, trembling roar. Three ducks take off from behind the island, rising slowly up into formation.

"What's the worst case?"

Dennis shakes his head. "I really can't say, but his teachers told us they're against expelling him, so that should help."

"And what about his record?"

"Oh," says Dennis, obviously surprised. "You mean his foster record?"

"I don't want to ask for anything I shouldn't," she starts.

"No, no. It's fine. It makes sense to worry about that."

"If there's anything that we can do..."

“I guess it will depend on whether the Clarkes file a report. They haven’t yet.”

The big, wood-sided motorboat slides into view beyond the island, and they both watch as it swings around to point at them.

“Man,” Dennis says. “He still has that?”

“What’s your feeling?” Grace asks. “Have you talked to them?”

“You know they’re talking about banning them,” says Dennis. “Those big engines tend to leak.”

The boat is out in open water now, trailing a swath of white wake on its way across the lake.

“To answer your question, though, I think they’ll let it be. The kid says Bo was way up on a hill, so he probably didn’t think he’d hit him.”

“That’s what he says.”

“That’s good. Wouldn’t help much if he said he just has wicked aim.”

Dennis laughs softly, waving at his partner to join them.

“I’m glad you came out here to tell me,” Grace says. “It’s a good thing school is over, though.”

“Yep! Made it through another year,” says Dennis, grinning as he turns to get his radio, which is squawking at him from his hip.

Grace says, “You can go. I think I understand things well enough.”

He twists a knob to silence the static.

“Okay. I’ll let you know how things go.”

She is silent as they both stroll down the hill, hoping that they’ll get away before the boat comes close enough to wave. When they reach the parked car, Dennis looks out at the lake, then

quickly back at Grace. He seems to read the situation well enough, and pulls off just as Harry taps the throttle, sending a white plume of water up into the sky.

Bo has gone around the house to the front door, and she can hear him arguing with Ernest.

“Get back, you can't go out.”

“But I want go out.”

The door slams. Ernest starts to wail, mostly out of anger. Bo doesn't know how to talk to children. It isn't his fault. Sometimes Grace thinks of the way life must have seemed to him, back in whatever desert that man had him in, back in the long gray dorms she saw when they went to pick him up from Aveyon. It must have been all barking—all authority and punishment.

“Okay, okay,” she says, reopening the door.

“Bo! Harry and Iliss are here! Please change!”

She hears no response, but Bo is naturally obedient, at least when anyone is watching.

Ernest pushes past her, and she lets herself be moved, shutting the door behind them. He waits for her out on the lawn.

“Boat!” he says, pointing.

Harry cuts the motor and coasts into the dock. Iliss leans precariously from the bow, reaching for a cleat.

“Should we go to see Nana and Pop Pop?” Grace asks.

Ernest shakes his head defiantly.

“I want throw rocks.”

“Okay, we can do that, too.”

He runs ahead of her, taking a short, quick steps on his short legs. Grace already dreads the day she won't be able to keep up with him. The lake is fairly calm today, so Ernest feels fine going close up to the water, where the winter waves have exposed piles of smooth, round pebbles.

“Hi Ernest!” Harry calls, leaning forward on the wheel.

“I throw rocks,” Ernest says seriously.

Harry laughs. “You’re so big now. I remember when we picked you up, you weren't even as big as my arm!”

He holds up one thick forearm to illustrate.

“That one agent,” Iliss says, “the one with short hair. She called him a runt.”

Grace takes the wet rope from her hands and wraps it around the cleat. She shakes the excess water from her hands, making tiny ripples on the surface of the lake.

“Look!” Ernest says, “I throw three.”

He lets a handful of small pebbles scatter in the shallows.

“So,” says Iliss, “we heard our little Bo has got himself in trouble.”

Harry stays comfortably seated in the boat, his weight tipping it slightly towards the dock. Grace takes a moment to collect her thoughts. She focuses on Ernest, standing quietly, definitely tired now, on a patch of gray sand.

“I thought he'd run away again, when Harry and I saw the car. But then we saw him come around the front.”

“Something happened at school,” Grace says, taking Iliss’ hand. “He had another attack and hit the Clarke boy with a rock.”

Iliss pulls away and hugs herself.

“That's unlike him.”

“I don't think he meant it,” Grace assures her. “They were teasing him. Even Mark thinks he was just trying to scare them off.”

Harry chuckles.

“I thought that was Mark. How is he?”

“We were mostly talking about Bo.”

“Well, that makes sense. Hope he's doing well.”

“Let's go inside,” Grace suggests. “I need to get Ernest down for a quick nap.”

As they help Harry out onto the dock, Grace suddenly begins to wonder why she hasn't seen Eve. It's almost three o'clock, and school let out at noon.

Ernest lets her take his hand.

“I little sleepy,” he says.

“I know.”

Back inside the house, she goes immediately to her phone. There are no messages from Eve, but soon she hears the kitchen ceiling creak above her head.

“Eve!”

Voices carry well inside this house, with its hardwood floors and oak paneling.

“Yeah, just a minute!”

“It's okay, I didn't know you were home,” Grace says.

“I'll be down in a few.”

Iliss hates it when they talk like this—room to room—but gave up trying to eliminate it outside of her own home.

“Mommy mommy mommy.”

Ernest runs in from the living room. He looks scared.

“What, what, what,” Grace says.

He wraps both arms around her legs, then backs away as though he is embarrassed.

“It's my fault,” Harry says. “Grandpa was making faces again.”

Grace kneels and tries to catch Ernest's wandering eyes.

“He's just trying to be funny, Ernie. You don't have to be so scared.”

Ernest says, “It's. Fine.”

“Yes, it's fine! Let's go back in and do your puzzle.”

He nods in vigorous agreement.

Iliss has already settled down into the wide, soft lounger in the corner, where she'll likely stay until it's time for dinner. She is calm by nature, and at seventy-three, she's happy to let people wait on her. Grace likes this, seeing Iliss take her place as the most senior member of two families, still as sharp and confident as ever.

Harry has taken up his usual place, standing in the corner by the window. He likes to keep an eye on the lake.

“I'm sorry, Ernie,” he says, smiling. “Your big sister used to like it.”

Ernest stares at him from underneath a lowered brow. He gives Grace the impression of a baby bull about to charge.

“Look,” Grace says, sitting on the couch next to Iliss. “Let's finish this!”

He gives in and starts to work on the bottom half of his fire truck. This part is the hardest (he hasn't managed to complete it yet) but he seems to enjoy moving the pieces. When she tries to help, he pushes her away.

“No. Self.”

“Okay,” she says, happy to leave him alone.

Iliss only lets a moment pass before pushing for more information about Bo.

“It must have been a serious fight to get the police out here,” she says.

“Mark says the other boy might need some minor surgery to fix his nose. He doesn't think it's Bo's fault, either, but we don't know how his parents will see things.”

“I don't mind talking to Mark,” Harry sniffs.

“You know better than that,” says Iliss. “Things don't work that way anymore.”

Grace agrees. “I wonder if I should call them?”

“Who?” asks Iliss.

“The Clarkes. It will seem strange if I don't.”

“No,” says Harry from the corner. “Wait until they've had some time to make sure he's okay.”

Iliss shakes her head and knowingly.

“The last thing we should want to do is make things worse.”

Ernest is tired of his puzzle. He leans over Grace's knee and pops his thumb inside his mouth.

“I know,” she says, “we let it get too late today.”

“Let him sleep,” says Iliss. “He'll be up again in half an hour.”

She is probably right, but she won't be here later, when he stays up past nine.

Iliss sighs.

“It's too bad for Bo... He's been so stable lately.”

She sips her coffee slowly, sinking deeper in her chair, preparing for a long talk.

“Even when the water's calm, you can't know what is happening beneath the surface.”

Grace says, "Even Evie had some trouble, but she found her way."

"That's true, but I think she's different. She was always ambitious. She has goals to work toward."

"I'm sure Bo has goals," Grace says.

Iliss nods doubtfully.

"I'm sure he does, but right now his main goal should be staying out of trouble."

"I don't know," says Harry, "He's been through a lot."

Iliss is quiet for a moment, waiting.

"Say what you mean, Harry."

Harry shrugs. He is holding his coffee cup on top of his stick like a totem.

"He's got catching up to do. Maybe all these local kids are just too much for him to handle."

Grace says, "I just wish they'd give him half a chance."

"Oh, it's not their fault." Iliss waves a dismissive hand in the air. "That man Bo lived with filled him with rotten ideas."

"He's past that," Grace says.

"Is he? Children are impressionable, Grace. You know that. I think it's still all simmering in there somewhere. Why else would he knock another boy toothless?"

"Self-defense?" says Harry.

"It's excessive," Iliss says.

Grace waits, knowing they expect her to chime in, but still unsure how to react. She lets her thoughts form naturally, along with her words.

"It sounds like Evan made him angry. I don't think Bo meant to hurt him."

“Probably just trying to scare him off,” Harry agrees.

Grace says, “If he gets kicked out, all because of one boy...”

“But it isn’t one boy,” Iliss pleads. Grace sees Harry slowly shake his head. “He’s *afraid*, Grace. He’s spent too much time with men who just want to control him, and while I’m glad he doesn’t take it lying down, I think it’s far too much for him to handle right now.”

“What about the other boys?” Grace asks. “I can’t believe that this was all Bo’s fault.”

“No one is saying that,” says Harry.

“Well, the Clarkes might be,” Iliss corrects. “But I don’t think so. A teacher must know things like this are bound to happen now and then.”

“Is it that serious?” Grace asks.

“Not on its own,” says Iliss slowly. “I believe they’ll let it go, but they’ll be watching him more carefully from now on.”

“As they should,” says Harry.

“Of course,” Iliss echoes. “But that’s not the point.”

She turns to Grace deliberately, holding her with her eyes. “It puts more stress on him, and he’s already struggling.”

Grace feels an urge to come to Bo’s defense.

“But it wasn’t his fault!”

“Of course not!” Iliss says. “But it does mean he isn’t ready.”

Grace looks at Harry, who sighs and turns to rinse his cup out in the sink.

“You said homeschooling him didn’t make sense. Especially because the public school has been so good for Eve.”

“She’d go stir-crazy staying here with you,” says Harry, as he refills his mug.

“Yes, but Grace hated school. Remember? Kindergarten and college both. It isn’t too farfetched to think that Bo’s the same way.”

“I don’t know,” says Harry. “Might be good for him to take a break from all that nastiness.”

“It’s just an idea,” Iliss presses. “He needs time to find himself. But anyway, we have all summer to discuss it.”

Grace only has time to register these points before she hears footsteps on the back porch.

“Is that Bo?” she calls.

He doesn’t answer, but Grace can hear him kicking off his shoes. He always hates his shoes—at least until they’re so worn in that she is embarrassed to let him wear them.

“Bo,” says Iliss, “You’re all muddy.”

Bo looks down at himself, at his spattered knees and ankles.

“I came through the woods,” he says.

“I can see that.” Iliss nods.

“I saw a girl there. That’s why I ran.”

“You saw a girl in the woods?”

His eyes keep trying to roll up at her—to hold her fast—but he keeps pulling them away.

“She was all dirty and naked. I think it’s an emergency.”

At the word *emergency* his face goes red. He blinks hard, as though the word itself frightens him.

“She was naked?” Harry says.

“She couldn’t have been...”

“Was she in trouble?” Grace asks. She has found that Bo is hurt when he believes he isn’t being taken seriously.

Bo thinks. Harry squints at him, obviously trying to tell whether he’s remembering or making things up.

“I don’t know,” Bo says. “She was with a dog. It looked like a coyote, but I think it was a dog.”

“Was she upset?” Grace asks. “You didn’t talk to her?”

“Naked girls in the woods,” says Harry. “Best to leave those alone.”

“It isn’t funny, Harry,” Iliss says, beginning a new tack. “I know it’s probably all a rush right now,” she says, motioning for Bo to come to her and gripping his shoulder gently when he does.

“We just need to know if we should do anything,” she says.

Bo looks at her and nods.

“Yes? You understand?”

She lowers her gaze, reading Bo’s face.

“You think we need to?”

He is hesitating, looking from one expectant face to another.

“I think she needs help,” he says, finally.

“Okay.”

Iliss sits back in her chair, obviously unalarmed.

“I’m not implying anything here, Bo, but I need to know if this has anything to do with what happened today after school.”

Bo’s eyes go wide. He tries to gently pull away from Iliss, who keeps her hand firm.

“Bo, we know you hit Evan Clarke with a rock. We aren’t upset, we just want to know what happened.”

Bo looks to Grace, and she can see that he is panicked—frozen up, the way he nearly always was, back when they took him in.

“Did he do something to you?” she asks.

Bo breathes in suddenly. His jaw clamps shut in an expression of frustration.

“I didn’t mean to hit him.”

“All right,” says Harry, leaning forward. “It’s gonna be alright. You just didn’t have much time to think things through.”

Bo nods slightly.

“He was really far away.”

Harry tilts his head and grins.

“You didn’t know you had that kind of aim.”

“Look,” Iliss says, turning Bo back toward her. “Why don’t you go get washed up, and we’ll talk about it later. But before Harry and I leave.”

“Where’s Evie?” Iliss asks.

They wait, and soon they hear footsteps on the stairs. Ernest raises up his arms and shouts “Eee! Eee!”

“Oh!” Iliss gushes, reaching for his hand. “*You* know, don’t you!”

Eve is wearing sweatpants and a sweatshirt, black and gray. She has her school backpack slung over one shoulder.

“Hiding from us?” Iliss asks.

“How are things?” asks Harry.

“Hmm, okay.”

“You’re headed out, I see,” says Iliss.

“Yeah. There’s a bonfire at Mike’s house.”

“Sounds fun,” Harry says.

“I wish that you could stay,” says Iliss, with a smile, “but it does sound like more fun.

Grace, you never went to parties like that.”

“It's a little harder when you're home schooled,” Grace says.

“Oh, they all knew you,” says Iliss.

The oven rings in the kitchen, but it is drowned out by Ernest's imitation of it: “Ding, Ding, Ding, Ding, Ding...”

She’s happy to go check on dinner if it gives her a few moments to collect her thoughts. She hears Iliss and Ernest start to talk, then muddled voices as Eve says something to Bo.

“Harry,” Grace calls, “will you come look at this?”

The floor creaks as he enters and rests his hands on her shoulders, peering over her head at the roast. When he shakes his head, she feels his beard brush up against the back of her neck.

“I don't know, Grace. It looks as good as I remember it, but that's not saying much.”

“You think he'll be too disappointed? Should I throw together something else?”

She feels him thinking, taking this small problem seriously, as he always does when it comes to the children. When they went to see Bo at the hospital a few weeks after he was found, Harry was against taking him on. He said, *you've got Ernest to think about*, and at that point Ernie was a baby. She had only had him for a few months and she was already nervous about taking on more. Bo had looked alright. He'd spent almost a month out in the forests between Albany and Garrett, making his way slowly south. The nurses told her that they found him in

surprisingly good shape, or, one said, what would have been good shape a hundred years ago. When Grace first saw him, he looked healthy. Normal, she would have to say, except for his unusual leanness and a few premature wrinkles around his eyes and nose. He was careful and polite, though almost nonverbal, and the therapist said, *with this one, it's all on the inside*, so she went into the meeting wondering how much could fit inside a thirteen-year-old boy and realizing with a certainty that felt like horror that it probably was more than she imagined. Since then, her mind has been intent on making things safe and orderly—as though if she could only find the perfect set of habits, rules, and household equipment, she would be able to quit worrying about things altogether.

“Let's give it a shot,” says Harry, finally. “If he doesn't like it, he won't eat it.”

“That's true. But will we like it?”

Harry laughs, going over to the glass doors that look out into the backyard.

“I promise, we will all have eaten worse.”

From the living room, Iliss breaks in.

“Do you remember when that man who fixed the boathouse brought us ducks?”

“I do,” says Harry.

“Just... ducks! Like three or four dead ones.”

“He was trying to be nice,” says Harry. “Though I guess he could have cleaned them.”

“You like duck,” says Grace.

Iliss snorts.

“Not when it's full of little bits of metal. I mean, I know people hunt, but why does he think I know what to do with a whole bird?”

“So, what did you do with them?” Grace asks.

“I tossed them in the woods. I'm sure a fox got them.”

“More likely a coyote,” Harry puts in.

“Either one. They're welcome to it.”

As they've been talking, the light has changed. Grace glances out the window at the gathering clouds, rolling over from the lake in long gray billows. The rain comes, thick and cold this time of year. It taps aggressively against the shingled roof, each drop landing heavily, as though exhausted from its fall. It's streaming from the porch roof, down into the yellowed grass below.

“Well,” Harry mutters to himself, and lets the rest disperse into the air.

“Well,” Iliss echoes.

She reaches for her purse, pulls out her phone and squints down at the screen.

Bo comes into the kitchen with his head hung low.

“It's not a joke,” he says.

He sounds defeated. Grace doesn't like to see him this way. It seems too much of a backslide.

Harry walks to the window, looking out over the porch at the rain, which appears to be slacking.

“If this is supposed to get worse, we'd better get back to the island while we still can.”

“You can't stay for dinner?” Grace asks.

“Maybe,” Harry says. “If Bo can help me with the cover.”

“Of course. Eve can help, too, can't you, Eve?”

“Can I leave after?”

“Yes.”

“Be careful,” Iliss says. “Don’t let him try to do it all. His balance isn’t what it used to be.”

“Nothing’s like it used to be,” grunts Harry.

“Bo,” Grace says, “are you alright? We’ll talk later, but I promise, everything will be okay.”

Since the day he came to live with her, it has been apparent that Bo has some difficulty feeling safe. She tries to reassure him whenever possible.

He glances at the other faces in the room, settling for a moment on Ernest, who is trying to stand, pushing hard against the straps of his highchair. Grace gets up and unbuckles the straps. She lifts Ernest out of the chair and sets him carefully down on the floor, where he stands uncertainly, finding his footing.

“Well,” says Harry. “Let’s get going.”

Ernest watches carefully as Harry herds the children toward the front door. As they pass him, he starts to follow, stomping along behind Harry’s walking stick. Grace scoops him up into her arms, and he cries out angrily.

“Oh Ernest, that’s not nice,” says Iliss. “Come here, sweetheart.”

Grace is happy to hand him over. Iliss tries to hug him on her knee, but soon gives up and lets him slip to the floor, where he goes running off into the main room. Soon Grace hears him pulling toys out of the basket.

“So,” says Iliss, her eyes widening. “What do you think of all this?”

Grace has not had time to think. It seems to her that Bo has merely gotten mixed up in a schoolboy fight—the kind of thing that will be long forgotten by the fall.

“I’m not too worried,” she says, trying to sound carefree. “He’s a boy. These things blow over.”

Iliss clicks her teeth.

“I expect you’re right. But what about the next time? It isn’t just this one fight, Grace. You have to see the bigger picture.”

Grace has trouble hiding her discomfort with the conversation. Iliss always comes to her conclusions quickly. Though her judgments can’t be called too hasty, she appears to know the paths their conversation is about to take and to go down them confidently, sure of every bump and turn and looking forward (always) to their destination. Often, Grace feels like a child hurrying to catch up.

“He’s had some time to figure things out, and he has,” she says. “He might need more...”

Iliss sips deliberately from her mug.

“I think this incident just shows he does.”

Grace nods, thinking of the time Bo ran away. Three days, hiding somewhere in the woods while everyone kept wondering if he was dead.

She can’t deny it. *He is not there yet.*

“I just keep wondering if sending him to school puts too much pressure on him.”

“Candace thought it would be good for him. I mean, he was already so far behind.”

“Oh, he’s caught up now, though,” Iliss reassures her. “His problem was never intelligence.”

Grace starts to see the cracks in her defenses as they are illuminated, one by one, by the light of Iliss’ reason.

Still...

“I don’t think we could convince CPS to take him out. Especially since he wouldn’t like it.”

Iliss looks surprised.

“I don’t know. I think I can convince them.”

When Grace is silent, she goes over to the window to look for Harry and the kids.

“I don’t know about letting Bo go out there again,” she says.

When Grace doesn’t respond, she says, “I heard from Mrs. Clarke. She thinks it was an accident, so I don’t think we’ll have to worry about anybody finding out.”

“Don’t be so sure. It’s a small town.”

Inwardly, she is glad to know she will not have to talk to Mrs. Clarke. But there is still the school to deal with, and worse, Bo will have another incident to add to his expanding record.

“Did they report it to the school?” she asks.

Iliss shakes her head. “I didn’t get the feeling I should ask.”

“If it goes in his report, they’ll want to do another visit.”

“I know, Grace.”

Ernest is still rummaging amongst the toys. He’ll toss them all onto the floor before he picks one.

“I hate to say it Grace,” says Iliss.

“Taking him away from school won’t help.”

“How can you be so sure? It’s not a punishment, Grace. It will give him some relief, so he can focus on himself for a change.”

“That’s not the issue, though. He focuses too much on himself as it is.”

“Well, then.” Iliss tosses up her hands. “He’ll have the time to learn to do it right.”

They all suddenly become aware of Ernest, who is standing in the doorway with a metal skewer in his hand.

“Where did he get that?” Grace asks.

“Come here, Ernest,” Iliss says, “and let me have that.”

Ernest brings it over with a grin, and Iliss puts it on the counter. It seems that Ernest thought the whole thing was a game, and isn’t happy. He makes a sound like a low *oof* and stomps his feet.

“That’s right. We don’t need you popping sockets again,” Grace says.

“It’s okay, Ernest,” Iliss says gently, but Grace sees his mouth already turning down. He looks at her and points up at the shelf, eyes wide and offended. He is breathing fast and shallow, working himself up to tears. She cocks her head and makes a funny face, holding it until he giggles. She tries to draw him to her, but he won’t come.

“And Grace, you know that it will help. I mean, if this thing with the Clarkes does end up on his record, they’ll start asking what we’re doing. I know it seems too soon to decide, but it would help to have a plan.”

She stares pointedly at Grace, who can’t seem to raise any adequate response. Her instincts tell her to back off. She has always avoided trouble if possible, especially when it comes to the children.

Ernest races by the kitchen doorway as Grace hears the back door open, followed by the sound of stomping boots.

“Sounds like it’s time to go,” says Iliss, rising from her chair.

Bo and Harry step into the hallway, dimly lit with gray light from the window. Ernest is standing by the mudroom door, leaning forward the way he does when he is trying to be funny, with his arms out straight behind him.

“Boogie boogie boo,” says Harry.

Ernest laughs, turns around and comes back down the hallway, barreling past Grace on his way back to the kitchen.

“Well,” says Iliss. “Do you think we’ll make it?”

Harry pokes his head around the doorjamb. His brown beard looks black in the heavy shadows of the clouds.

“We got the cover on. We’ll be alright.”

“Oh, that’s good.”

Grace feels a thump against her leg and little fingers squeeze.

“Come on,” she says, taking Ernest’s hand.

She sets the venison down on the table and begins to cut it into slices, making plates for herself and Bo, who quietly accepts his share. She tries to catch his eye, but he is in no mood for talking. She lets him go, unwilling to risk pushing him too far away.

She is disappointed with the way things look. The overcooked potatoes are beginning to dry out and fall apart. The roast, which she had hoped to make the centerpiece, has turned a disconcerting shade of gray. Still, as she helps Ernest into his chair, she hopes Bo will appreciate the thought. After dinner, if he’s calm enough, she’ll try to have him take the pills they gave him at the hospital. She doesn’t like to give him medication any more than he likes taking it, but sometimes he needs help keeping his own anxiety in check.

“It’s dinner,” Ernest says, as though reminding everyone.

Harry and Bo take their places. She watches Bo's face carefully, waiting impatiently for some reaction.

"Yeah, I know," says Harry, reacting to Bo's pleading look. "I promised we would talk about the girl again."

Iliss says, "I'm sure we'll hear something."

As they've been talking, the light has changed. Grace glances out the window at the gathering clouds, rolling over from the lake in long gray billows. The rain comes, thick and cold this time of year. It taps aggressively against the shingled roof, each drop landing heavily, as though exhausted from its fall. It is streaming from the porch roof, down into the yellowed grass below.

"Well," Harry mutters to himself, "we might as well call someone."

"Who? The police?"

Harry shrugs.

"Well," Iliss echoes. She reaches for her purse, pulls out her phone and squints down at the screen.

"I'm not sure who to call..."

Bo looks afraid. Grace doesn't like to see him this way. It feels like too much of a backslide.

"That sounds fine," says Iliss. She is speaking into her phone.

She's telling them about the girl—or as much as she is willing to say, given that she can't believe a word of it. Bo doesn't lie, and she is sure he saw something, but the rest of it is his anxieties resurfacing.

“I think the children would say *very* wild,” Iliss says. “But yes. Yes, you can see why we were worried.”

Suddenly she laughs. “Well, that’s true. Yes, yes that’s fine. We’ll be here. It was in the forest, between here and the school. Yes, we’ll be here.”

She puts the phone down on the table.

“They’ll come out tomorrow.”

Bo is silent. Disappointed.

Harry says, “It’s probably a girl in a bathing suit. It’s only May, but people get excited for the summer. Clearing his plate, he goes over to the window, looking out over the porch at the rain, which appears to be slacking.

Bo is quiet, looking at the meat left on his plate as though his thoughts are somewhere else. Harry notices the rain has stopped and starts to guess how low the lake will sink this summer. Before long, he will want to drink a cup of coffee on the dock and watch the geese fly home over the island. Grace stretches out her legs and kicks Bo’s feet beneath the table. When he looks at her, she smiles, but he doesn’t smile back.

“You can go watch TV if you want,” she says.

He nods once, quickly. She knows that he’ll go straight up to his room and hide behind his door, but maybe that’s all for the best. They’ll have plenty of time to talk tomorrow, with a new perspective.

Bo goes to rinse his plate off in the sink and place it neatly in the rack above the dishwasher.

“Is Evie coming home tonight?” asks Iliss.

“No,” Grace says, but she’s distracted.

“Do you think I should have been harder on him?”

“No. He’s has way too much of that. I mean, just look at him, he’s obviously hard enough on himself already.”

Harry stands and starts to clean their dishes. He probably wants to make sure Iliss doesn't keep him here too long.

“I done,” says Ernest, and Grace realizes he's been finished for some time.

“Okay,” she says, “do you want to go play?”

He thinks a moment, rolling his eyes back towards his head.

“Um ... It's yes,” he says.

“Should we have some coffee?” Harry asks.

He is standing by the pot. When she lets Ernest out of his highchair, he runs away from her immediately, before she can clean his mouth. He's had an affinity for Bo since Bo arrived. She thinks that it has something to do with his quietness.

Grace says, “You’ll have to drink it here. I don't think anyone will want to go outside.” Harry shrugs understandingly and pours himself a cup. Iliss has stayed seated at the table, with her arms folded pensively across her chest.

“I'm not sure it will be that bad if they report it,” she says. “Boys get in fights. Even normal boys.”

“I never got in any fights,” says Harry.

Iliss shakes her head. “Only because they all knew you would win.”

“Are you calling me big again?”

“No, I'm serious. What happened last summer is one thing...”

“Iliss, no one knows a thing except...”

“I know, I know.”

She rocks a little in her chair, just her upper body swaying back and forth.

“It's good we found him. I'm just saying they might not take this as seriously.”

Grace rinses off the final plate and starts to load the washer.

“I don't think we have to hide it, if that's what you mean,” she says.

In general, she's grateful for their help, but sometimes she wonders.

Outside, the sun must have just dropped below the mountains. Suddenly the yellowed lights above the table seem much brighter and more artificial.

Iliss says, “The thing is, they might want to do a visit.”

“I'm not worried about that,” Grace says honestly. “I always do well on those.”

Then again, she's never had to lie before. She has been dreading Candace's next visit for exactly this reason.

“Well, you'll be more nervous this time,” Iliss points out. “But it might not be so bad. This fight will give you something to focus on.”

“I wish you'd stop calling it a fight,” says Harry. “Sounds to me like it was self-defense.”

“They were bullying him,” Grace adds.

“It was an accident,” says Iliss confidently. “Two boys playing, throwing rocks... It happens.”

Grace finishes the dishes and peeks into the living room to check on Ernest. He is sitting on the floor with his toy cars, idly rolling them across the floor as he watches television.

“It all depends on the Clarkes,” she says. “I'm still wondering if I should call them.”

Iliss shakes her head.

“It's not a good time. What if they're still at the hospital?”

“You think Bo put him in the hospital?” says Harry.

“I don't know, but best not to find out.”

Grace has to agree that it is probably too late. She'll call tomorrow, in the morning, after she has had her coffee.

“It will work out,” Iliss assures them. “No one wants him to go back to that place.”

It is obvious she means the camp. Aveyon—a highbrow name for a reformatory. Bo would have been forced back there if they had been able to contact the man he calls his father. Judging by what the social workers told her, keeping Bo in custody was quite a battle.

Iliss must be thinking similar thoughts, as she stands and puts her clothes in order.

“We should probably be off before the bay gets too choppy,” she says.

Harry doesn't argue, and Grace is happy enough to let them go. As she sees them out the door, she asks if they'll come back tomorrow.

“Why don't you come out our way?” Iliss suggests.

She struggles with her raincoat until Harry steps behind to help.

“Sounds good to me,” he puts in. “We can light the grill. Get it warmed up for summer.”

Grace agrees and, when they're gone, she goes into the living room and sits down on the sofa. Ernest leaves his cars and climbs into her lap.

He yawns.

“Are you sleepy?” she asks.

“No, I not,” he says quickly, then adds, “At all.”

She wraps her arms around him, but he pushes her away.

“It's almost bedtime,” she says.

“Okay.”

He stands up and lifts his arms for her to pick him up. She carries him upstairs, and after he is changed and dressed, he wanders all around the room in circles, talking nonsense to himself. She sorts through the pile of books beside the crib, looking for the one that Ernest loves best. She would like to make tonight as easy as possible.

Her phone dings, which gets Ernest up again, exclaiming, “Ding! Ding!”, pointing at the screen.

She calms him down by showing him the screen. Bo’s teacher wants to meet with her tomorrow afternoon. The worst thing is, she knows this means there’s no way Candace won’t find out.

She sits down on the floor with her back held straight against the wall and waits for Ernest to settle down between her legs. He taps the book with both hands and says, “Mouse. Mouse.”

“Shhh,” she comforts him, adjusts her legs, and then they read together, Ernest turning each page carefully with practiced hands.

There is a house (a quiet house)
and in the house (the quiet house)
there is a mouse (a quiet mouse).
And on the mouse (the quiet mouse)
there is a flea (a quiet flea)
who has just fallen fast asleep.

There is a boy, asleep in bed,

with quiet dreams inside his head
of mice, and fleas, and clocks
(all ticking quietly).

He does not hear the quiet mouse.

He does not hear the quiet flea.

He's snug and tucked in tight.

The only sound, his mother's voice,

Whispering goodnight.

As she tucks him in, she hears a long howl coming from outside the window. Ernest picks his head up and looks around expectantly.

“Shh,” Grace says, and goes over to the window.

Looking between the curtains, she can clearly see a lone coyote, sitting in a patch of moonlight in the corner of the yard. When it sees the flicker of the curtain, it crouches, staring up at her through the branching shadows.

She slides the curtain back in place and bends to rub Ernest's back. She hums a few bars of a song that Harry used to sing, when he was trying to get her off to sleep. Ernest doesn't seem to like it, so she lets the room fall silent. This silence and the silent night outside allow her mind to settle, slowing down and spreading out, congealing into one smooth, polished surface.

In her head, she counts the months that they have left before Eve graduates. The school advisor said that she should only have to complete one semester next year—she has worked so fast, so carefully, as though her education is a long trek up a mountain, and the act of turning

eighteen is its conquest—a summit from which she can finally take in the world she imagines spreading far and bright before her. So far, Grace has kept herself from saying anything to trouble these illusions. It is true that Evie is perhaps too optimistic (it is dangerous, Grace thinks, to be so hopeful), and it's true that Evie's life will likely not rise to the lofty heights that she imagines. Grace has often thought that this is something Eve will find out for herself, one day. Besides, Grace knows her own experience is limited. She is made of different stuff, and she has never seen much point in climbing mountains. On the other hand, Eve seems to think that she is capable of anything, with enough effort. Harry calls her a starling, because she can make do anywhere. Another implication is that Evie may not fare well on her own. She may not understand the risks involved, or that excessive courage can be fatal.

Of course, Iliss will never understand the kind of pride that Eve has. Grace supposes Evie's mother was a hard and energetic woman—the kind who felt capable of meeting challenges that others naturally shy from. This is probably what led her to amphetamines in the first place. But Grace is not worried about drugs. She knows that Evie spends her time with kids who use them, but she is confident that Evie's mother's death accomplished one thing: it put an everlasting wall around whatever interest she might otherwise have had in inebriation.

Grace is torn. On one hand, she wants desperately for Eve to stay. It isn't something she has thought about much before now, but she supposes that Eve's going has been on her mind, floating freely in the background. Everyone has told her she would feel this way (all mothers do) but she did not expect the grim uneasiness she has been feeling to erupt so suddenly, or with such force. On the other hand, Grace remembers what it's like to be almost eighteen years old in a town as small as Garrett. There was a time when she herself wanted out, and Evie is a different person. Strong.

Shutting Ernest's door, she crosses the hall to her own room and falls down into bed. Long ago, before the children came, she asked Harry to cut a window in the roof above her head. It was the one true luxury she had allowed herself. He told her to keep it clean, and she has, partly so he won't regret the effort, but mostly for herself. This window has comforted her through many nights awake. This far north, and this high up, clear skies are the rule. At night the stars press back the darkness, blinking in complex and unintelligible patterns, as though signaling—perhaps not to each other, but still signaling, in language even they can't understand. This makes her feel less lonely.

As she has many times before on nights like this, she imagines how nice it would be to fall asleep among the leaves.

night

The Garrett County ambulance looks new, as though it has never been used. Grace has never been inside an ambulance. She is momentarily surprised by how much it looks like the pictures she has seen on TV.

She sits on the metal seat by Eve's head and watches as a boy in scrubs cuts up her jeans with a pair of scissors, parting the thick denim around the wound. The woman asks Eve how she's feeling. She is softly stroking Eve's hair in the way that Grace would like to—in the way she knows she will, as soon as she feels able. Her hands keep reaching out, hovering, and pulling back. She is afraid to hurt her daughter with her touch.

"It hurts," Eve says.

"Mmm Hmm."

The woman nods. "And on a scale of one to ten?" She is laying out sanitary wipes, which she uses to clean dirt from Evie's hands.

"I don't know," Eve says. "Seven?"

"Mmm Hmm. Are we ready?"

She is speaking to the boy, who is cleaning Evie's leg, working a little too tentatively. Grace can't see around his busy hands.

"I think so," he says.

"It doesn't have to be perfect," says the woman gently.

"Okay, we're good."

She taps the window and they start to move, swaying as they make the turn onto the main road.

“You’re a tough one,” says the woman. She is leaning forward, looking at a screen above Eve’s head. She looks at Grace with seriousness.

“This is when I tell you everything will be fine,” she says. “And it will be, okay?”

Grace nods, not because she entirely believes her but because it feels good to have someone else describe her fear.

“You’re going to get in there and they’ll give you something so it doesn’t hurt so much,” the woman says to Eve. “They’ll fix you up and I’ll bet you’ll be out of there in time to sleep in your own bed.”

Eve nods politely, but her thoughts are obviously elsewhere. Her eyes are still and glassy.

The woman starts to ask Grace questions about Eve, entering each answer into the computer. Grace knows all this information by heart, and repeats it without thinking.

“Alright,” says the woman, and turns to face the boy. She shuts the laptop, and Grace realizes that they are already near the hospital. The ambulance stops just outside the E.R., and they open the back doors to unload Eve. Grace brushes back her hair and tells her it will be okay. Her eyes are open but she still seems focused on something interior, as though the world right around her has begun to fade.

In the hospital, the doctors meet them and rush Eve into a side room with a narrow curtain. There are people in the room with them—moving all around with tubes and instruments—but Grace can’t concentrate on anything they say. She only thinks of Eve, and cannot speak because what she would say to Eve, she cannot say. It would hurt her, or make her uncomfortable. In any case it is too much to put on her right now. She thinks about this as she concentrates on squeezing Evie’s hand.

You set a thing in motion when you have a child—something complicated—too complicated to completely understand or to predict. For what feels like the first time it occurs to her that Eve could die, *could really die*—that any one of them could. She feels the shadow of the hole that this would leave, and it expands the more she dwells on it, until it seems to have no end.

Suddenly the rush of footsteps calms, and there are only two of them—a doctor and a nurse.

“Okay,” says the doctor. She is pulling on gloves and a mask. “What happened?”

“She fell,” Grace says, unsure.

“Is that right?”

Eve, who nods vacantly.

The doctor reaches for a pair of tweezers and pulls back the bandage on Eve’s leg.

“Wow,” she says. “That’s painful.”

Grace leans over. There is what looks like a thick branch stuck through Eve’s leg. It must have entered through the back, because the broken tip still pokes above her thigh. The nurse makes a quick sound through his teeth, and the doctor gives him a warning look.

“Okay,” she says. “You’re going to be fine, but this will not be fun. You think that you can handle it?”

Eve looks at her with little recognition.

“Okay. Eve?”

Grace nods.

“Eve, I have to pull this out, now. But it’s gonna hurt, okay? I need you to be brave.”

This time Eve nods.

“If you want to stay, you’ll want to turn away now,” says the surgeon.

For a moment she looks up at Grace. She has lovely, dark eyes that do not show any trace of worry. She has prepped Eve’s leg and is now standing ready with a tray of tools in hand. Evie is concerningly relaxed upon the table. She has always been this way with doctors—accepting their assurances with ease.

Grace wants to watch: she feels some sense of duty, but quickly convinces herself that it might make the doctor uncomfortable. She tries looking into Evie’s eyes, thinking she will hold them steady with her own, but they are glassy; wandering.

The doctor says, “Alright, Hon. One big tug,” and Evie’s eyes shut tight.

Grace wishes she could be there with her, in the space behind them.

Grace: Day 2

Birdsong. Different, now, from the errant squawking of a crow on winter mornings. For the first time in months, she wakes up slowly, following the swelling sunlight out of sleep and into a new day.

She can remember the sound of the rain as it fell on the window. *Maybe*, she thinks, *I woke up, once, thinking Ernest must be crying*. Maybe, she went down the hall and opened his door just a crack, and saw him sleeping peacefully.

There was a dream, too.

She blinks up at the window, where the squirrels are already passing back and forth. With the steepness of the roof, there can't be much up there to draw them. She suspects that they are treating it like some kind of a bridge, or obstacle, or game.

She can't remember much.

Eve was hurt, she thinks, and this makes sense. She remembers worrying about Eve in the moments just before she fell asleep.

She checks her phone, but finds no messages from Eve. This is when Iliss would say: *No news is good news*, and leave it at that. But Grace knows this is only because she regrets not giving Grace more freedom.

And she's right about that, Grace thinks, as she sets her phone back on the bedside table, pushing it away from her, out of reach. She should be focusing on Bo. He's always up early, though he usually stays inside his room until she calls him down for breakfast.

Today, she tells herself, she'll make him something special, to make up for last night's roast. Steeling herself, preparing to throw off the quilt despite the chill, she thinks of pancakes, eggs, and bacon. He'll be hungry, which is one thing she knows how to fix.

She hears a sound from downstairs: the distinctive slapping of the screen door. She rubs her eyes and rises, pulling on a pair of jeans before she goes to check.

It's Bo, sneaking back into the kitchen from wherever he has been.

"Where have you been?" she says, unable to hide the heat in her voice.

He sits down at the table, calmly, as though nothing is wrong.

"Just down to the creek. I couldn't sleep."

She frowns.

"You were looking for that girl."

He doesn't answer. She is patient, knowing that it takes him time to form what he would like to say.

"I saw her," he says finally.

"I know you did, Bo. I believe you."

He is quiet, and Grace sits beside him, waiting.

After a minute, he says, "I just want to find her."

She does not know what he means by this, and she is growing worried she will lose the opportunity to tell him how frustrating he's become.

"What is it with her, anyway? Is there something you're not telling me?"

He shakes his head immediately.

"No, I just want to know she's okay."

“Listen to me. I’m sure that the police can handle it. And after yesterday, I need you to lie low, okay?”

He nods slowly, and she reaches out to take his hand, shaking it gently.

“Just try to stay here and relax. It’s the first day of summer!”

His smile isn’t forced. She knows he hates going to school—he has since they first sent him there, the summer he arrived. He didn’t seem to mind the weeks of playing catch-up with Grace and his social workers, but as soon as other children were involved, he shut down.

“I want it to be a good one, okay? The best. But you have to start taking responsibility for yourself.”

“Yes, ma’am,” he says.

She knows that he can’t help it—that it’s simply one last holdover from living at the camp—but it has an effect on her like stepping through thin ice. She sighs, showing her frustration.

“Bo, I’m not your jailer, or your captain, or whatever. I’m just here to help.”

He’s silent, staring at the table, at his hands—at anything but her—retreating again.

“Bo, we want you to be part of this family.”

She waits, long enough to see that he does not intend to answer.

“Do you want that too?”

Somewhat to her surprise, he nods.

“I like it here.”

“Well, that’s good.”

She speaks instinctively, but he has made her feel much better.

“That’s the thing, Bo. We want you to stay because you like it, not because there’s nowhere else to go.”

He nods again and they are quiet while Grace hesitates. She wants to go and hug him, but she isn’t sure how he’ll respond.

“If I’m going to help you, I need to know what happened,” she says instead.

His eyes shut and his lower lip shakes.

“I didn’t mean to hurt him,” he says.

“I know. What were they doing to you?”

He shakes his head. “Just yelling things.”

She doesn’t want to say it, but she can’t hold back.

“Bo, you do know they could transfer you. Or check you back into the hospital in Franklin. I don’t know...they could even send you back to Aveyon. I know that’s something you don’t want...”

“You can’t understand it if you haven’t been there,” he says.

She is disappointed in herself for only managing another understanding nod. She’s gone too far, and tries to pull back.

“They showed me pictures,” she says.

He doesn’t seem to notice, or care. Sometimes, he has trouble reading people’s faces.

“I’ll do my best to work things out. You know boys do these kinds of things all the time, right?”

But he seems to know that, through no fault of his own, he is *not* like other boys, and can’t expect the same reaction.

Suddenly there is a loud knock at the front door. She knew she had forgotten something. She could feel it picking at her while she slept.

There are two officers, both young men, though one of them seems less nervous than the other. He has his radio out, but he turns it off as soon as she opens the door.

“We’re responding to a call about a homeless child,” he says.

“Yes, we called last night,” says Grace.

In the still air they can hear a motor start across the lake. Soon the plume of someone’s motor boat is visible against the pale blue backdrop of the island.

“You should really speak to Bo,” she says.

He nods abruptly.

“He’s the one who says he saw her.”

She stands aside to let them in.

“Do you want some coffee?”

“That’s alright, it shouldn’t take long.”

It is also clear that they insist on standing, so she stands beside them, waiting.

“So,” the younger one says, “No one is in trouble here. We just want to hear about this girl you saw.”

“She wasn’t wearing any clothes,” Bo says.

The older officer laughs shortly.

“I mean, was she scared? Or hurt?”

“I couldn’t see her well. She was young, with black hair, I think.”

“Okay. A female child with dark hair. Is there anything else you noticed?”

Grace wishes that she hadn't let them in. She's eager to get on with the day, and feels confident that, these days, orphans come from shaken families, not from forests.

"You used to live on Harbor Island?"

It's the older officer, who's obviously given up on getting any useful information.

"Yes," she says.

He nods, as though this means something to him, but doesn't offer any explanation.

"Well," she says, "I hope you find her."

They are happy enough to leave. When they're gone, she finds Bo sitting solemnly over his plate, with his eyes shut. Sometimes, she isn't sure if he knows he is doing it.

"I have to go get Ernest," she says. "We'll talk more about this later."

He seems happy enough to be left alone.

When she opens Ernest's door his fingers jerk, but he doesn't wake immediately.

Yesterday was a long one for him, especially since he didn't get much attention. At two-and-a-half, he's hit a stage where he has trouble calming his emotions. Small changes in routine will often wear him out. She wakes him up by running her fingers through his hair (which needs a wash) and makes a promise to herself to pay him more attention today.

She opens the curtains to let the sunshine in, and Ernest grunts and rubs his nose.

"Time to get up," she says, sliding her hand beneath the quilt to rub his back. He brings his thumb up to his mouth, then pulls it suddenly away.

"Day?" he says.

"Yes, day."

"Down," he says.

"Okay."

She lifts him from the crib and sets him on his feet. He rubs his eyes, then goes and lies down on the rug, all ready to be changed. As Grace helps him, she is thankful for the fact that he has always been so pliant. Evie hated diaper changes—hated to be touched or cuddled.

She supposes Ernest will become the same soon. Sometimes, like just now, he bows his head and squints at her from underneath a furrowed brow, and she is certain she sees something she has seen in Bo—something that her mind can only label *boy* but which feels like a lot more. It is something genetic, lurking. Selfish. Like a panther hiding in the brush.

When she is finished Ernest struggles to his feet, saying, "done" over and over to himself. At times Grace feels like he is not connecting—not becoming part of her, the way that Evie did. In part, she guesses this is due to Ernest's independence. Evie always looked at Grace the way that she expected children to look at their mothers: as true lifelines; irreplaceable. Meanwhile, Ernest treats her like a servant.

As she helps him down the stairs he's alternating between "down" and "tee vee," in an off-key song. Of course, with Ernest, time is on her side. For now, she can push all these thoughts into the future. It is Bo, she knows, who needs the most immediate attention. She feels guilty, thinking of the sight he made this morning, coming in with muddy shoes at six am, before the light was even fully up. She's hoping they can start fresh, as they've managed to do every summer she remembers (including the one following her parents' deaths).

There is a reason, she believes, that all the tourists come here every year. The city isn't good for making new beginnings. There, the seasons have lost all their most important meanings. In Garrett every season is looked forward to, but none quite like the summer. For Grace, it is a special mix of freedom and activity—a time of organizing, planning, fixing broken things. She can admit they haven't started this one off on a good foot, but there have been much worse

beginnings. There were times the thawing ice broke up the docks on the far side of the island, and she and Harry spent most of the season patching them back up.

And of course, there was the summer (not that long ago) when Bo went missing. She still feels the sickening awareness of her failure, every time she thinks of it. *He's like Ernest*, she thinks, *disconnected*, though he doesn't seem to like it. With Eve, it had been easy.

She sits in her usual seat beside Ernest, so that she can help him eat. Lately he has been refusing help, but he looks at her, says "cut," and lets her break his pancake into manageable pieces. Now that she has gone to all this trouble, she does not feel much like eating.

Ernest reaches out to pat her arm. He's pointing to her plate, and to the little pile of cut fruit to one side.

"Sorry," she says, handing him her plate. Excited, he nearly drops it on the short path to the table.

"I know. You need more juice."

"Mo," Ernest agrees.

Nowadays his speech is mostly friendly babble, with a few clear words thrown in from time to time.

Bo asks to go upstairs. He has already wolfed down all his food. She nods—perhaps it's best to let him go.

She wishes she could make him understand. When she took him in, she knew that she could not expect things to go well. At least, not for a while. But Eve was almost ready to graduate, and Ernest was too young to be good company. She thought that it was time for a challenge.

It bothers her that she can't tell if she is failing or succeeding. Since last summer, they have fallen into a routine. Throughout the winter Bo went dutifully back and forth to school, ate dinner with them every night, and usually stayed downstairs to watch TV before bed. He's still quiet, but she'd hoped that these were signs of progress.

Now, she isn't sure. Maybe she's just giving in—starting the process of un-caring—bit by bit. Which even Candace would say is inevitable. She had warned Grace of emotional exhaustion.

He'll be working things out. He'll be raging inside. But you can't let that spread. You can't try to take it on yourself.

At the time, she didn't think much of it. Now, she finds it isn't much help. *Who else is there?*

Ernest asks her for more carrots.

"You have to finish these first."

"But I want new ones."

"Not now. When you finish these."

He shouts and knocks his cup onto the floor. She bends to pick it up. When they are finished eating, she takes him in the living room, where he sits down with his cars.

When things get hard, Grace is happy she has Ernest. It is comforting to have to care for someone, if they're willing. When they really *need* it. She imagines that a child's love is different from a parent's. To some extent, it must be earned. She must keep trying, both with Ernest and with Bo. But it is hard. It's been so long since she herself has felt that kind of love. Conditional.

Over the course of an hour, she tries unsuccessfully to convince Ernest to come outside. She is tired of the stuffy living room. Finally, she manages to bribe him with the promise of seeing the lake.

“Bo! Do you want to come outside? We’re going to enjoy the sunshine.”

There’s no answer, but she doesn’t really expect one. If she listens closely, she can hear him up there, chipping at the windowpane. He’s slowly picking off the white paint on the sill, leaving behind small circles of black wood.

“Let’s go,” she says, when she sees Ernest looking up at her expectantly.

The mist has burned off and it’s good to feel the spring sun on her face. Even Ernest seems to appreciate it. He grabs her hand excitedly, pointing up at the sky.

“You see? Clouds.”

She returns his smile, wishing she could see them with him, for the first time.

“Should we go down to the water?” she asks.

“Hmm.”

He thinks.

“No.”

“Okay, then. What should we do?”

“Maybeee...”

He thinks.

“Maybe tow rocks.”

She isn’t surprised, but she isn’t in the mood to watch. Iliss has already started talking about Bo’s influence on his younger sibling. She’ll be sitting by the dock, now, back among the

trees. She likes to stay out of the wind, but she still has a clear view of the house—a fact which never escapes Grace’s attention.

“Why don’t we take a walk?”

He hasn’t spent much time outside yet. Through the winter he was still too small to see above the snow.

He looks down the road both ways and points her to the right, where he knows there is a culvert cutting through the road. It has been alternately freezing and flowing all year, so that now the pavement’s cracked on one side, making the water leap as it flows off into the lake.

“That way?”

She takes his hand while they are on the road, listening for any warning of approaching vehicles. Above the culvert there’s a rock ledge jutting from the mountain, with some rough steps leading up to it. She helps him climb, enjoying how he takes his time, searching for hand- and footholds in the rock.

When she first got Ernest, he was small. He did well when it came to all the standards—mentally, at least—but his body always seemed to struggle to catch up. It’s good to see him doing things that she is sure Bo has forgotten ever learning.

At the top, he sits with her and looks out at the lake. From here, the view is slightly different. She can see the narrow road out to the island, with the waves beginning to leap up on either side. Ernest is more interested in the water rushing underneath them, spilling out onto the rocks. She lets him throw a few rocks, knowing Iliss can’t see them here. He is disappointed when they make no splashes in the running water.

Afterwards, he doesn’t want to leave. He’s getting hungry—overtired. When she asks him if he wants to have a snack, his mood improves.

“Okay, but we have to go inside.”

He looks at her, suspicious.

“And have sack,” he says.

“Yes.”

Back inside the house, she helps him with his muddy shoes. Luckily, he’s kept his pants’ cuffs clean, so she won’t have to change them.

She feels a little better while she sits him down and makes him something to eat. She hopes Eve will be home soon. It’s almost one o’clock. If she has to keep her meeting, she would rather have some extra time to clear her head.

She starts to work on what she’ll say to the Clarkes, but Ernest interrupts her thoughts again.

“I want blocks, now.”

“Just a second, honey. Let me think while you finish your carrots.”

He begins to shake his head, steeling himself for a dramatic refusal, but is cut off by the sound of footsteps on the stairs. At first, she thinks it’s Bo. Instead, she is surprised to see Eve, followed by her friend, Heather. She’s embarrassed, being caught off guard.

“Hi, Heather!” she says, trying to sound welcoming (but likely overdoing it).

“You don’t have to perk up,” Eve says. “It’s just Heather.”

“I know, but I’m glad to see her. It’s been too long.”

“It’s nice to see you too,” says Heather. She looks over-tired. Her eyes are red, and she has just taken a shower.

“How’s Ernest?” she asks.

“He’s doing well. Just getting in a late snack.”

“That's good.”

“There are bagels in the drawer,” Grace says. “Bo's upstairs in his room.”

“This late?” Eve asks.

“He's still pouting. I caught him outside this morning before sunrise.”

“He tried to run away again?”

“No,” she sighs, “But it still makes me worry.”

Eve says, “He understands, now. He won't go anywhere.”

She looks at her phone. She'd better leave if she does not want to be late.

“Listen, I'm glad you're here. Can you watch Ernest for a little while?”

Eve looks uncertainly at Heather, who shrugs.

“Heather, I can give you a ride home.”

“That's okay, I think I'm...”

“She's gonna stay a while, if that's okay.”

“Do you want to stay for dinner? We're all going to the island.”

“Um, maybe,” she says, looking at Eve.

“Can you all meet me over there?”

She wants to get out. Suddenly the kitchen feels stifling.

As she goes into the living room to get her keys and wallet, she's glad to hear the girls talking. They're usually so quiet when they're here.

It's only fifteen minutes into town, but she has bought herself enough time to take it slow. She likes the drive around the lakeshore, where the trees along the road are broken every mile or so to reveal a wide view of the water. On her way, she tells herself the meeting won't be too embarrassing. They'll understand.

It's strange, pulling into the school parking lot on the first real day of summer vacation. All the other parents have made plans, Grace knows. They'll spend this muggy afternoon at beaches all along the lakeshore. They'll be thinking about summer projects—home improvements, maybe. If not, they'll be getting packed to leave their little town for a few weeks, as it is quickly overrun by tourists.

She finds the front door of the school unlocked. she winces at the sound it makes—a heavy slap that echoes in the empty halls.

She still feels mildly uncomfortable setting foot in Garrett High. Having never gone to school and having spent her early years imagining it as a happy, formative experience, only to discover later on, through Eve, how much she actually managed to escape, she feels more confused about what goes on here than ever.

The silver lockers lined up like a double row of sentries used to spark her curiosity—her imagination. She would think about the things she'd keep in one—her personal, private safe. But it's been over a year since she last came here. The experience of walking down this broad fluorescent tunnel hits her differently. The lines of lockers look so similar to pictures she once saw of Aveyon, the boys camp Bo escaped from. The photos had no people in them—they were taken, Candace said, before the complex opened, by routine inspectors. There were maybe 20 images in all: dormitories, hallways, bathrooms, all of which looked neat and clean.

It's hard to understand from just these, Candace said. It's supposed to be some kind of rehabilitation, but it's run more like a prison.

This is what Grace thinks about most often when she thinks of Bo's behavior. Candace said he should be treated like a man who has spent time in prison. But in Garrett, Grace has only

ever heard of a few people being sent to the state penitentiary up north, and she has never known them—wouldn't even know if they came back.

Mr. Fox's room is down another corridor, less brightly lit. She hears a small commotion from an adjoining hallway—students' voices chattering.

Before she feels quite ready, Mr. Fox's door swings open.

"Mrs. Crane," he says, "thank you for coming early."

His face shows honest gratitude, though Grace does not know why. She hadn't thought that she was early.

Mr. Fox is a kind man.

She is confident in her ability to know these things. But there are other things about his posture that put her immediately on guard. He looks worried, though he hides it well.

"Mrs. Clarke said she would be a little late. But while I have the chance, I want to ask how Bo is doing."

Grace is afraid that she is showing far too much discomfort, and this only makes her more uncomfortable. She manages a smile and a shrug.

"I understand," he says, shaking his head. "It was a tough last day for him. I just hate to see the year end with an incident like this."

There is shouting from the other hallway, followed by a strained voice calling for quiet.

Mr. Fox sighs dramatically.

"It's summer school. First day. Don't worry, it gets worse the longer it goes on."

She knows that he is joking, so she laughs along, but inwardly she's hoping Mrs. Clarke will show up soon. The more she thinks about it, the more she wonders whether she has made the right decision leaving Bo at home.

He can see that she is nervous but does not appear to understand why. She could tell him. She could try to explain, but it will never make sense. In moments like these, she can hardly understand herself.

“So, um, look,” he says.

He sits down on one of the students’ desks and Grace follows his lead, a little awkwardly.

“I don't know what happened, but I feel pretty confident that Bo is not a violent kid.”

“He's not!” she says.

It makes her sick to think that anyone would even consider it.

“I know,” he says, acting suddenly defensive. “*I know*. Which is why I wanted to give this a shot. Most times we can clear the air a little.”

He shrugs.

“Or at least keep things from getting any more serious.”

She is about to ask him what he means by this (*how serious?*) but there are footsteps in the hall—the short, sharp taps of hard-heeled boots.

“Okay,” says Mr. Fox, sighing. “That must be her.”

Mrs. Clarke seems to find her way to his door without any trouble.

“Hi, Joe,” she says, with an apologetic smile.

“Hi, Margaret,” he says. “Come in, come in.”

He shuts the door behind him, though it doesn't block another burst of screaming laughter from the summer school kids.

“Oof,” says Mrs. Clarke. “I'm so glad I don't have to drive here every day this year.”

Mr. Fox nods a bit too vigorously.

“He did well this year. He mostly stayed out of trouble.”

“Ha,” says Mrs. Clarke. “Mostly.”

“How is he?” Grace asks.

The urge comes on her suddenly and, afterwards, she sees that she has taken Mrs. Clarke by surprise.

“He'll be fine,” she says, quite seriously. “Looks like it mostly got him in the nose.”

Mr. Fox grimaces.

“It looks bad, but the doctor says it's not the worst thing that he broke it once before.”

“Well, I hear kids bounce back.”

“Oh, they do,” says Mrs. Clarke. “But that doesn't mean you do.”

She gives Grace a look of sympathy, or commiseration.

“How's Ron doing?” Mr. Fox asks. “I'm sorry he couldn't be here.”

Mrs. Clarke waves this question off.

“He's fine. It's just his back again.”

Mr. Fox looks solemn. He is sitting on a desk again, one leg thrown to one side, his hands both neatly folded on his knee. This time, Grace remains standing, along with Mrs. Clarke, who seems more comfortable on her feet than in a chair.

“I'm glad that everyone is okay,” says Mr. Fox, breaking the sudden silence. “And, honestly, I hope it's fine with both of you if we just put this incident behind us.”

This is, Grace thinks, exactly what she'd hoped for. Even so, she wishes that she hadn't had to drive here.

“That's exactly what I want, too,” Mrs. Clarke says. “Exactly.”

“Good.”

“You know it's just the doctors now. Things were pretty tight because of Ron. You know.”

Mr. Fox nods solemnly again.

“I completely understand,” he says.

She turns to Grace.

“I mean, a thousand dollars just to crack his nose back into place. My God!”

Grace shakes her head, showing her agreement even though she doesn't want to. She is not sure why, but when Mrs. Clarke says, “I mean, I didn't know if you might want to help, or anything,” she feels a rush of indignation, as though she's been accused.

“Look,” Mr. Fox jumps in. “Look Margaret? You know that there are proper channels for getting reimbursed. I'd rather not go there, but if...”

“Neither do I,” says Mrs. Clarke sadly. “I'm just saying, it's the only thing still troubling me.”

She glances back at Grace, then back at Mr. Fox.

“I just want to make things right,” she says.

Mr. Fox leans forward on the desk, preparing to speak. By now Grace's indignation has turned to inexplicable fury.

“It was an accident,” she says. “I'm sorry, but we have our own bills.”

It's one of the most straightforward things she's ever said. Her body trembles with anticipation and her eyes begin to burn.

Mrs. Clarke looks shocked.

“I know he didn't mean it,” she says, waving Grace's anger off as though it is a bad smell. “Boys will be boys. I know that. I've got three!”

Mr. Fox looks down and shakes his head in sad agreement.

“I mean, Jesus! I'm not looking for a handout. I just think a parent needs to take responsibility.”

“Well, I don't,” Grace snaps.

Her head feels different. Full of pressure.

“Neither does Bo. If you had any idea what those boys have done to him...”

Mrs. Clarke just waves her off again.

“They're children! That's how children act. You can't hold them accountable.”

Grace looks to Mr. Fox for help, but he's averted his eyes. He is waiting, she supposes, for a moment when he thinks he might be needed.

Grace isn't sure what she is doing, or what she will say, until she is already turning, showing them her back.

“Oh! Mrs. Crane,” says Mr. Fox, but she's already through the door. She can hear Mrs. Clarke say something rude just as it shuts behind her, but can't make it out.

Walking back out to the car, her eyes still sting. She hears the summer school class erupt again and says, “oh, fuck you,” under her breath. She doesn't know who she is mad at—the unruly students, or the school, or Mrs. Clarke, or herself.

When she bursts out through the double doors, she slows her pace, hoping to be rid of all that laughter. The parking lot; the pines; the sunshine; everything is as she left it. After last night's storm the air is still wet, and the smell of damp wood lingers everywhere. She breathes deep, trying to compose herself.

The day she picked up Evie at the hospital in Franklin, she changed. It wasn't easy, or immediate, but looking back, that moment was the clearest break between her happy childhood

and her initiation into the more serious world of adults. *More serious*, she thinks, *because I had to find a way to live with it*—that terrifying feeling that she is responsible for someone else—that they depend on her completely. It had helped that Eve was more than ready to play her part. After everything she went through, all she wanted was some comfort. Even as she grew, she clung to Grace in ways that Bo and Ernest never have.

Now her mind is drifting. As she starts the car and checks her phone, she tries to pull herself back to the problem at hand.

There's a message from Candace, asking if she can come by tomorrow for a visit. Somehow, she must have found out about the incident. She isn't scheduled to come until next week.

Putting on her seatbelt—checking her mirrors—keeps her grounded. She tries to put the school behind her—all of it—and concentrate on getting home. But on her way through town, she suddenly decides to stop. It's getting late. The shadow of the old hotel lies long and silent over Main Street. She doesn't want to go back to the house until she's had some time to pull herself together. Eve would ask her what's wrong, and she'd find herself unable to explain. It would come out all wrong—her anger at the Clarkes' attempt to make her take the blame. To make Bo take the blame. They don't know what he's been through, or how hard it's been for him to acclimate to normal life. They weren't there when he spent whole days locked up in his room, until Grace started bringing him his meals upstairs (but Candace wasn't happy. *Giving in to his demands is no help*). They weren't there when he spent almost two days in the forest, after arguing with Eve. Grace hadn't slept. She stayed awake with Iliss, sipping coffee on the back porch, watching the tree line.

He had left a note: *be back*. And Iliss said to trust him. She still doesn't know if it was Harry who found him, or if Bo decided to come back all by himself. He never told her why he left, and after weeks went by, she realized she'd stopped asking.

At first glance, the problem seems to be that Bo is almost always honest. Candace will find out about his little excursion, as Grace always knew she would. She just didn't expect it to come this soon. Iliss said that by the time Candace found out, *this will all be just a distant memory*. But now the social workers will be looking closely. Candace will be on edge, worried, and determined to get the *whole picture*.

Grace feels guilty, thinking this way. She should want what's best for Bo, but somehow, sitting all alone in her car, attracting glances from the people passing by, she feels that she no longer knows what he needs. If she ever did.

She has stopped the car in front of the convenience store, which occupies a corner on the east side of the bridge. The dampness from the storm has had all day to burn off, but the sidewalks are still gray, and water still drips now and then from awnings on the storefronts.

She can hear the river rushing sloppily below her, swollen with meltwater and rain. Soon, the lake will rise and swallow up the rocky spit of land that binds the island to the rest of Garrett. It is good, she thinks, that they decided to have dinner there tonight. If they're lucky, they might get to see the water rise. Bo will like that—when Eve was a girl, they would sit for hours every spring, hoping to be present for the moment—when the water started rippling with white and it took so long for the waves to settle on the rocks but when they did, it seemed immediate—so much so that they had to ask themselves if they had really managed to see it at all. She realizes she has reached the point at which she's able to look back and see her life in stages: her childhood, her youth, her parenthood...but Evie doesn't have this benefit. She thinks her

thoughts and her desires will remain unchanged forever. *But there comes a time*, Grace thinks, *when thoughts slow and desires cool*. This is how it was for her, and when that time came it was good to have a place to land.

The lights above the supermarket switch on, making her look up. She remembers that she meant to get something for dinner. The whole thing feels much less important, now, but she won't to ruin it for everyone else. She has learned how to ignore her thoughts, if only for one night. Slowly, she takes her keys from the ignition, handling them gingerly as though it would be dangerous to make too much noise. She steps out into the street and shuts the door behind her. There are families and groups of teenagers along the bridge, and down the sidewalks, hanging around restaurants and bars. She walks quickly, though it's only five o'clock. No need to rush.

The store is crowded, full of hotel guests who congregate around displays of Molson. Luckily, she does not see many locals. Once the summer starts, they tend to do their shopping early, while the tourists are all still asleep.

She goes straight to the bakery, hoping to grab something for dessert, and hoping Iliss has already started dinner. The fluorescent lights seem overwhelming, making her squint tiredly at the small selection of pies and cakes. She tries to guess what Bo would like. It's hard to think in here—especially about Bo. She begins to feel lightheaded.

Apple will be fine, she thinks, grabbing the first pie within reach. It's doubtful anyone will care. She checks herself out to avoid the lines of people forming at each register. John-Thomas, the boy who usually rings her up, is trying to bag up an order while the woman waiting next in line stands by impatiently. He grins at Grace and looks confused when she does not return his smile.

On the drive back home she takes it slow, breathing deeply, knowing she will have to talk to Bo soon. He will want to know what happened, and he *should* know. He should finally have some idea of what they are up against.

As it happens, she can smell it long before she sees the flames. She knows that smell. Everyone does. But then it usually happens in the winter, when there are more houses standing empty—more old woodstoves ready to spit coals. She wonders whose house it is (even knowing it is likely near her own, she still can't put it all together). When she turns the corner at the pond, she finally sees the glow. Immediately, her gut tells her that it's coming from her house, but she will not admit it until she is pulling up in front, paying no attention to the road.

As she drives past the two policemen who are trying to wave her down, she looks down the hill at the dock. The rowboat's gone. They must already be out at the island.

Mark is standing at her window, tapping frantically, but she can only look at him slack jawed as she digs out her phone to call Harry and Iliss. In the end, she isn't sure if she's called them, or if they've called her.

“Grace! We see you over there.”

Harry's voice is high. “Those trucks got here...”

“Are they with you?” she asks. “Are they there?”

For a moment it sounds like his hand is covering the phone. She hears somebody yelling in the background.

“Yep. They're here... Eve and Ernest and Eve's friend. They're here.”

“Wait, what about Bo?”

Harry stumbles over words, drowned out by Mark's attempts to open her car door. She opens it herself and stumbles out, already pushing him out of her way.

“Grace!” he’s yelling—screaming, it seems to her—until he grabs her by the arm.

“Grace he's alright! We've got him.”

His voice is hoarse from talking over all the noise.

“What?”

She can't hear herself speak. Harry's saying something clearly, now:

“Just ask them, Grace. Ask them.”

Mark steps forward, taking the phone out of her hand. He talks into it with his back turned, waving one hand in the air like he's directing traffic. She looks up the hill, trying to see something through the smoke. The side of the house facing the woods has already caved in. The flames are flying from her bedroom window, even as the hoses douse it with lake water.

On the other side, the flames are mostly gone, leaving behind the charred roof, blowing ash across the lawn.

“Grace!”

Mark is giving back her phone.

“Come on!”

He leads her back along the road, until there far enough away from all the people to hear each other.

“It's okay,” he says. “We have him, and he isn't hurt.”

“Where is he?”

She tries to push past him, emboldened by the news that Bo has made it out alive.

“Whoa!”

He stops her firmly. His head bobs as he tries hard to catch her eye.

“Look, you can't see him right now,” Mark says. “They've already said we have to take him back to Franklin.”

“No,” she says, before she's even fully registered the thought.

“No. Where is he?”

“Grace, *he set your house on fire.*”

He stares at her, attempting to drive home the point.

“I know, but...”

Now she sees it: the police car at the end of the drive. Bo is sitting calmly in the back seat, no doubt answering their questions quietly and honestly.

“I know, I know,” Mark says. “It's all a mess right now. Why don't you go back to your car until they get this thing put out?”

She is watching...thinking without thought...as he walks her back along the road. When they reach the car, she shakes him off and goes down to the dock, far enough away to satisfy the firefighters waving her back. They have shut the door on Bo, and she can't watch. She thinks about the pie she left inside the car that they won't eat...not now...and then about her own pie, which is likely ash by now.

She can't watch, so she turns away. But as she does, she sees her family. They are all crowded together, riding low in the electric boat. The moonlight casts a golden glow across the lake, and she has never been happier to see them. Eve waves from the bow—a pale hand flashing—and Grace goes down to the water's edge, to wait.

Eve: Day 1

Eve thinks of herself as a very serious person. Perhaps not all the time (after all, she is seventeen and doesn't mind having fun), but she considers herself mature for her age. She has just come from a meeting with the school counselor, which she left early to go find a place to think.

It's fitting, that she's sitting here behind the old wing of the school, where she knows her mother also must have sat. She wonders if there's ever been a student at Garrett High who didn't sit here, where the curved lawn slopes down to the river, and the geese keep up a constant honking on the bank. Kids come here to make their getaways. She learned that early on. It's a place adults won't come without good reason.

In her mind, there is a sharp divide between reality and everything else. She has worked hard at building this divide and has been careful to set everything she knows on one side or the other, so that she won't become confused. Until now, college has been real to her; a carefully constructed vision of maturity and freedom. It is (she still thinks) the place from which her future will begin and spool out evenly, well-planned and well-ordered; stable and strong. But when the counselor began to list off schools in Arkansas and California, she began to feel the small anxieties that have been pestering her all winter finally break through and draw blood.

There is no reason you should go that far away, said Mrs. Itard, scrutinizing Eve's face.
I'm sure you'd be a top student at Garrett.

What do you mean, Garrett? Eve had said. *My grades are good enough—*

Of course, of course, they're good enough—but Eve, there's something to be said for playing things safe.

Her face was kind, but Eve could tell she didn't have any advice. Her message was clear. This is Eve's decision, and she'll have to make it on her own.

You've worked hard, Eve, but maybe it's time to relax. You have a wonderful family to take care of you. It's okay to let go just a little.

School is letting out now and the parking lot behind her has grown noisy with the shouts of other kids. She sees Heather and Beck coming toward her and waves.

They are laughing about something, obviously happier than usual. Eve should be happy too, with school done for another year and summer only weeks away, but she has trouble mustering enthusiasm.

“You get out early?” Heather asks.

Eve nods.

“I had a meeting with the counselor.”

“Oh!” Beck says. “How'd that go?”

Eve shrugs. She doesn't want to talk about it.

“We're gonna go to Mike's house. His parents let him use it for a big end-of-the-year thing.”

Eve grimaces.

“Oh, come on,” Heather presses. “You have to come. We need you to talk to people for us.”

“I don't really feel like talking.”

Beck bites her nails.

“You’re the only one who’s good at it. You don’t get nervous.”

“Yes, I do. I just know how to hide it.”

“So, you fake it. Still works.”

“Okay,” Heather says, taking Eve’s hand. “Just get in the car with us and you’ll feel better.”

Eve laughs despite herself. It’s good to feel needed.

They walk straight across the parking lot, following behind Heather, who ignores the mostly younger children parting unconsciously before her. As Eve gets into the backseat of the car, her friends are laughing again. Heather starts the car. The radio blares some sappy fifties pop song and Beck reaches quickly for the power button.

“How do you listen to that?”

“It’s my *dad*’s car.”

“Well, you drove it here.”

“Shut up. The tuner’s broken.”

“Sure, it is.”

“My parents say I’ll get my own car when I graduate,” says Heather, as they turn out onto the street.

“You guys, we’re all officially seniors now!”

Beck rolls her window down and sticks her open hand into the breeze. They are headed to the north side of town, where some families new to the community have built a series of expensive log homes up along the ridge.

“Does it really count if you’re in summer school?” Beck asks.

Heather acts offended.

“That’s only because Mrs. Buckett thinks I’m a degenerate. Anyway, it’s only one class. Even my dad says calculus won’t get me anywhere.”

“Depends on where you want to go,” says Eve dryly.

She is mapping out their route in her head, deciding how she can escape the party. Ordinarily, she wouldn’t be opposed to going. Her life thus far has taught her that there are strict hierarchies, and that the older one gets, the more hardened one’s position on these scales becomes. After what has seemed to her like many years, she has been able to carve out a place for herself that has proven fairly stable. She is not what she would call popular, but she is neither much disliked. She considers this a middling success. Though very few of her classmates know her apart from the friendly face she wears at school.

But today, she thinks, is not a day to worry about that. Suddenly her plans, which she has spent the better part of her life carefully constructing, seem unstable. Only half-considered. All she wants now is some time alone to reconsider, reconstruct; hopefully, to put her thoughts back into order.

Beck says, “That’s true. It isn’t like we’re trying to be doctors.”

“Well, Evie and I are.”

“Of course.” She rolls her eyes and turns her head to look at Eve directly. “I thought you were doing social work like Heather.”

“She is,” Heather says.

“Well, that’s not a doctor.”

“It should be,” Heather insists. “It’s just as hard.”

Eve shakes her head.

“Can you guys let me out up by the bridge?”

“Oh, come on!” Heather whines, slapping her palms against the wheel. “We need you there!”

Beck adds a vigorous nod.

“Without you, there are only two of us. We’ll end up in a corner, talking to each other.”

The thought of making conversation, not to mention managing her friends’ emotions, makes Eve long to curl up in bed.

“I can’t,” she says. “My mom wants me home.”

“Bullshit,” says Heather, but she slows down and pulls over as they near the bridge.

“Will you at least come over later?” Beck pleads.

“Maybe. I’m not feeling good.”

“I’ve got some aspirin,” Heather says, digging in the open console.

Eve stands on the sidewalk with one hand on the door.

“I’m fine,” she says. “I just need to get home. Next time, though.”

She shuts the door, and both her friends wave out the open windows as they pull away.

The town is filled with early season tourists, wandering haphazardly across the street and bunching up to read the brass plaque on the old hotel. The bridge is lined with families dropping stones into the river. She doesn’t want to walk along the road. It feels so open to her now.

Unsafe, especially the way the boys from school are likely to be driving on it. She takes the well-worn path from the turnoff to the creek, which she can follow to reach the back of her house.

The ground is just beginning to soften, and the path is strewn with small, clear puddles where the snow has melted. The forest is awakening, sending out tendrils of fresh scent: pine, wet bark and earth. She breaks a few leaves off a sassafras tree and tears them, surrounding herself with their smell.

As she comes around the second bend, where the creek bank rises toward the ridge, she hears a rustle, followed by a series of small splashes in the creek. She freezes, and remains perfectly still. The air hangs cool and silent for a moment; now she hears the starlings sounding all-clear. This is followed shortly by the scattered rustling of squirrels.

She wonders why the animals seem unconcerned, with the water in the pool still rippling from the disturbance. Suddenly (and for the first time in a while) she feels like a stranger here—among the trees, the rocks...the mud. A black fly lands on her forearm, biting quickly and breaking the tension long enough for her to find her legs. She creeps closer to the high bank, feeling her way across the rocks for fear of losing sight of the pool. She stops with her back against the bank (crouching, like a child) because she knows that she saw something she cannot explain. In her memory (a clear one still) she sees a dirty child, running naked across the creek. It stumbled only when it saw her, spilling sideways into the pool.

Eve searches her mind for explanations and finds nothing good (unless it is a prank or a game of some kind). Feeling steadier, she continues quickly along the creek, hoping Grace is home. As she rounds the next bend, she looks up the ridge and wonders if the person she saw is still up there. She stops and listens, hears a branch crack far away, then silence. If they are still here, Eve does not want to look panicked. She sets off again at a slower pace, concentrating her attention on her senses. By the time she finds the turnoff, she's become convinced that what she saw was simply something private, or some kind of joke. In either case, it isn't any of her business.

Coming through the trees she sees her grandparents are here—their little boat is tied up at the dock. At the back of the house, there is a narrow wooden stairway leading to the second floor. As she tiptoes up it, keeping to the sides to mask her footsteps on the boards, she hears her

Pop Pop laughing loudly inside. She imagines he is standing near the fireplace (despite it being summer) with his walking stick in hand. He almost always has it with him, since his knee is still bad after last year, when he went into the woods to find Bo. At this point, he might have it with him forever. She thinks its strangeness suits him, like the hollow echo of his laughter.

Grace has left the porch door open to blow out the winter's must, which makes it easy for Eve to slip through without a sound. She goes straight to her room, skirting the faded patch on the floor that always squeaks. It isn't likely they will hear it over the sound of Pop Pop's laughter, but she's become accustomed to playing it safe.

Her phone vibrates.

Please come! I dont wanna be stuck with heather.

She understands Beck's sentiment, and feels stuck. In her current mood, the last thing Eve wants is an evening with her grandparents, or Bo, or even with her mother, for that matter. They will notice she is quiet; feeling down. They will want to know why, but she won't be able to explain.

When she looks up, the first thing that she sees is her bulletin board, with its nine neat rows of pins. They're all from Heather, brought back dutifully every summer, from wherever she had been.

When Eve first came to live with Grace, having a room of her own was frightening. She was eight years old, and she could still remember each of the few times she had been left alone. Back then it had always been by accident. She was an early walker, and quickly became good at sticking to her mother's heels. She has broken memories of accidentally locking herself in the bathroom. Her mother must have been passed out (she never intentionally let Eve out of her sight) because Eve's frantic banging couldn't wake her. For some reason, she remembers the

cool touch of porcelain against her cheek. She can't remember how long she was left alone there. Back then, there weren't any markers. Time appeared to stretch on endlessly. Her memories are not of passing time but of the minutes just before her mother found her. There were sounds like stomping, back and forth outside the door. Her mother was calling her name—shouting it, it seemed, in a deep, bellowing voice that rolled beneath the door in waves. Eve would rock (with her face in her hands) until the door flew open and she felt her mother's warm hands on her back. The smothering of kisses.

The last time she was left alone like this, her mother never returned. This memory is clearer, though she tells herself it isn't shot completely through with trauma in the way that everyone assumes it is. She had been frightened (though she isn't sure how frightened, or for how long). After all, they tell her she was on her own for nearly two days; a time that she remembers as a lonely changing of the light.

Her room is still surprisingly bare. Grace used to tell her that she needed to move in, make it *her own*. Eve never knew exactly what she meant, and after she insisted for over a year that she preferred the emptiness (which, to her, was comforting in its simplicity) Grace gave in and quit pushing. Once, in one of her first talks with the counselor, Eve let herself become too comfortable and mentioned Grace's comments (that her room looked like she didn't plan on staying). The counselor said that this reluctance to move in (to *nest*, she said) is often due to a diminished capacity for trust. In that moment, if the world had been different than it is, Eve would have said that her capacity for trust had nothing to do with it. Hadn't she trusted the officer who told her that her mother was fine, because she couldn't stand up to the pressure (the trauma, she said) of telling a young girl she is all alone? Hadn't she trusted this town, and especially her grandparents, when they told her that her mother overdosed on the kissing bridge

at Garrett Creek (probably just watching stars, they said) instead of drowning in the public restrooms nearby? Isn't she still trusting, and trusting, because she really doesn't have another choice?

Eve doesn't like to think this way. She knows it does no good. Instead, she lays down on the bed and slides her laptop from beneath her pillow. She doesn't think, but lets her fingers work instinctively, bringing up a number of carefully bookmarked pages. She has not said any of this to Grace. Eve loves her mother, but as years have gone by, she seems less and less able to offer good advice. It has seemed to Eve that their experiences are diverging, like a river, and they soon will both be lost at sea.

There is nothing she can do about this, so she writes to Beck.

Can you guys pick me up?

She only has to wait a minute.

Yes! There in fifteen <3

She will have to tell her mother that she's leaving. With the house this full, Grace won't care. Eve has always been a *good kid*; she's *responsible*. She's got a *level head*. Adults don't worry.

She takes a few minutes to fill her backpack with spare clothes, then spends her time checking her face in the mirror above her desk. Her nose and cheeks are still flushed from walking in the cool spring weather. She picks a hooded sweatshirt off the floor (slate gray, with *Garrett HS* on the front) and pulls it down over her head. She will wear this shirt most of the summer, even in the few short weeks of real heat, when everyone else (even Iliss) won't consider going out in anything warmer than a t-shirt. Her Pop Pop is the only one who seems to share her

love of thick and roomy clothing. *You can always take a layer off*, he says, though Eve has never seen him do it.

She hears the voices in the kitchen quiet down, then Grace calls out,

“Eve! Is that you!”

“Just a minute!”

Her phone dings.

Coming now.

She doesn't hurry, knowing that Beck's underestimating how long it will take to get here. Heather will be drunk, but hopefully okay to drive. Eve doesn't want Grace seeing her.

Downstairs, Iliss says something excitedly to Ernest. As soon as Eve opens her door, she raises her voice.

“Hiding from us?”

Eve smiles, trying to shake off the attention.

“Yeah. There's a bonfire at Mike's house.”

Harry says it sounds like fun, and Iliss reluctantly agrees. Eve is happy when she turns to Grace.

“You never went to parties like that.”

“It's a little harder when you're home schooled,” Grace says.

Ernest starts to yell “Ding! Ding!” as Harry starts to say something about the boat.

“Of course!” Grace seems happy. “Eve can help, too, can't you, Eve?”

“Can I leave after?”

“Yes.”

She's glad to get away. It's always hard getting out of the house (especially when Iliss is there) and she'll take any head start she can get.

Outside, she is looking for distraction. Bo is asking Harry about something.

"That depends on where you saw her," Harry says.

"Up above the creek," Bo says. "Up on the ridge."

She can't resist.

"You aren't supposed to be out there alone. Grace told you to stay on the trails."

Bo doesn't respond. They cross the road and he takes off, trotting to the dock and jumping lightly in the boat's bow.

"Let him go," says Harry. "He'll be fine."

When they reach the dock, Bo has the cover out and is already spreading it across the bow.

"I don't know why we bother," Harry says, stepping into the stern. "For all the good it does, we might as well just hold umbrellas. I'll still have to change when I get home."

"Only if it rains before you make it," Eve says.

She kneels down to help Bo.

"Hmm." As Harry fumbles with the pole, he says, "You think that girl was maybe just a girl? Could be tourists. There are nudists come up here, you know."

Eve laughs. "It must be a short season."

"Not at all. They've got thick skin." Her grandfather pinches his arm. "Like deer."

Bo says, "I don't think so."

They finish snapping on the cover in silence. Eve offers Bo a hand to help him back onto the dock, but he waves her off. The wind has picked up, rocking the boat against its rubber bumpers. She does her best to hold it still while Harry steps out onto the dock.

“Ah,” he says, “it’s good to have help.”

He stares up at the sky.

“We should get moving. There’s no sense in getting caught in this.”

She hears a car horn blare behind her. Beck and Heather are here, and Eve is more than ready to get away. As she gets into the backseat, she can smell the weed Heather’s been smoking. She is glad they didn’t come too close to Harry, who would definitely tell Grace.

“Sorry,” Beck says. “Hard to breathe in here.”

“I told you, you can roll a window down,” says Heather.

As they turn onto the road, she hands a pipe and lighter back across the console. Eve takes it quickly, still a little anxious Grace might see.

“Come on,” says Heather. “Someone has to smoke with me. You’re lucky I was still sober enough to pick you up.”

Eve isn’t sure she wants to, but she wonders. As long as they’re spending the night, she might want to take the opportunity. *In any case*, she thinks, it might keep Heather off her back for a while.

“All the guys have spent the last two hours arguing about how to build a fire,” Heather says.

Eve coughs, less because of the small hit she took than the impressive haze inside the car. Beck rolls her window down.

“Shit,” Heather says, “you’re gonna let it out.”

Beck hangs her head out, breathing deep.

Eve laughs. She is already feeling better. As always, she reminds herself that this new happiness is temporary, and will only leave her with a hazy mind and scratchy throat. It's enough for now, and she's determined to enjoy it.

"Are you really okay to drive?" Eve asks.

"Jesus, you sound like Mike. I'm good."

Beck pulls her head back in and shuts the window.

"He wanted to drive," she tells Eve. Then, under her breath, "They're fighting."

"When are they not?" Eve says.

She pitches it like it's a joke, but she has never liked Heather's most recent boyfriend. She hopes they won't let things get out of hand.

It's a short drive, but they take it slowly at Beck's urging. Coming through the final stand of trees, a person in black jeans and a sweatshirt runs across the road, far enough away for Heather to react, but close enough to make her jump.

"Dude what the hell!" she screams, punching the horn. It sounds louder on top the mountain, even from inside the car.

More people, all in black or camo or some combination of both, come out of the woods in front of them, waving their hands and shouting. Eve sees Mike among the crowd, making cutting motions with his hands.

"Stop it, Heather! Stop it!"

She doesn't stop until a bunch of boys run up and slap the hood with fists and open palms. When she takes her hands off the horn, they all immediately step back. A few of them, Mike

included, stick around for a few seconds, peering down to see who's in the car. The others are already stumbling away into the dark.

“Sorry!” Beck calls through the open window.

Mike glances in her window, but goes around to Heather’s side.

“We want to keep the noise down,” he says, a little louder than he needs to. He waves his arm at the now deserted road.

“Just pull all the way around the garage.”

No one says a thing as they continue bumping over tracks cut through the road by dirt bikes. The shaking makes Eve queasy. She shudders.

Mike’s garage looks like a hangar, tall and wide, with floodlights covering the entrance. Heather circles the lighted patch and drives around the side, where other cars and trucks are already lined up along the wall.

“We’re gonna get blocked in,” says Beck.

“So what? We’ll have them move. I just wanna get out.”

“They were just fucking with you Heather.”

“I know I just need a sec. I hate stuff like that.”

By the time they’ve parked the car and found their way through a dark maze of open doors, Heather has shaken it off. They move towards the field, where everyone is hanging out around the fires. Beck pulls out a bottle and they all drink. It is cheap wine, and Eve doesn't drink much. When it's Heather's turn, she takes a long drink, then another, until she sees Beck's hand reaching for the bottle.

“They’ll have more inside,” says Heather.

“Nothing good,” says Beck.

“No, probably not.”

They follow the dirt path through the bushes to the field, where kids are packed in groups around a number of small fires. The boys are sipping confidence from long, tall bottles of malt liquor mixed with orange juice. They are seniors, graduated, now, and they have obviously been drinking since school let out. Heather reaches for Mike’s bottle, trying to catch up.

Someone taps Eve’s shoulder and she turns to find Devin, Mike’s friend, grinning down at her.

“I’m glad you came.”

“Thanks,” she says, looking around them. “Is everybody staying over?”

There are at least twenty kids, and a few older boys she doesn’t know.

“Yep, everybody’s staying. Right?”

The kids around the fire cheer half-heartedly.

“We’re camping!” Mike shouts.

“Shit, you mean in tents?” says Heather.

Devin says, “Wait, you’ve never camped?”

He’s overdoing his incredulousness, but the others are prepared to play along.

“Come on,” says Mike. “We live in a state park. You can walk outside and camp wherever you want.”

Heather gives him a hard bump on the chest.

“It doesn’t mean you have to,” she says.

Mike laughs. He grabs her wrists and spins her, so her arms are crossed. The black hood of her sweatshirt pulls down over her face, and for a moment Mike looks like he’s wrestling a shadow. Beck pushes him and he lets go, staggering a few steps backwards.

“Get off!”

Heather flips her hood back and immediately starts to walk away.

“Where are you going?” Mike asks.

“Bathroom,” she calls back.

He wanders off, his head held high, to join another group of kids down by the pond.

He thinks she'll come and find him, Eve thinks, but she's probably just off to find more—
liquor, hopefully, and nothing harder.

“So, you don't really drink, do you?” Devin says.

He's smirking at her, small teeth blinking in the firelight.

She gives him her standard answer.

“I do, but I have to drive home.”

Eve's never really had fun at a party since eighth grade. As soon as her friends reached the lowest levels of maturity, they wanted more. But Eve was frightened, and still is, of what comes after growing up. At times she can't help thinking of adulthood as a cold and lonely platform, nothing up above and nothing down below.

She says, “I like smoking better,” before she has time to regret it.

“I think Mike might have some,” he says, perking up.

She acts quickly.

“It's okay,” she says, reaching for his arm.

Instead of swinging it away from her he meets her halfway, catching her hand in his.

“It's fine,” he says, laughing. “If he has some, he's got plenty.”

Suddenly he turns away from her, shifting his attention to the shoreline. There's a group of kids all stripping off their clothes and daring one another to jump in the water. Eve turns away from them. She's never liked ponds.

"Looks like everybody's going swimming," Devin says. "You wanna come?"

Eve doesn't often think much about love. When she was small, they called her *tomboy* even though she didn't take to sports of any kind. Because she had an apathetic attitude toward anything romantic. She's been interested in boys, and has had minor crushes, but has always treated them as childish distractions—something to laugh over with her friends between classes.

Her body stiffens. She sends Heather a message—*are you okay?*—knowing she won't get a response. In a minute she will get too worried and will have to go and find her.

"Are you sure you don't want to come?" asks Devin. "You can just watch."

His goofy smile puts her at ease, but she sees Mike already naked, egging on the others from the far end of the dock.

"I think I've seen enough," she says, laughing through her teeth.

He holds his hands up, giving in, but backs away slowly, still smirking, waiting until she has turned her back on him to shout:

"I'll look for you!"

She turns around briefly, smiling to hide the fact that he has hurt her. He can't know it, and it seems to Eve that no one ever tries to hurt her. It's always like this. Careless comments. Well-meant jokes. Time after time she tells herself that she has hardened like the others; shaped herself to take the impacts without pain. But every time she is surprised to find new cracks and weak spots, imperfections that she can't see and does not know how to mend.

All of that is nothing, of course, compared to Heather. Eve can't imagine what it must be like to live with her anxieties. Harry once said Heather looks like she thinks she is being hunted. That was before he knew her, and he's tried to take it back, but Eve knows that it's true. When Heather hides, it isn't just for show.

Mike's father is a contractor, and built his home himself in bits and pieces, adding floors and rooms wherever he was able, and without any adherence to a plan. When Eve was small, she was invited to a birthday party here, and still remembers losing her way in the warren of dim, slender hallways. The main room, which she enters through the back door, is large and open, with a long stone counter blocking off a kitchen area to one side.

There are two boys sitting on the counter, one about Bo's age, and another slightly younger.

“Oh,” she says. “I didn't think anyone was in here.”

They look at one another, then at her. The older one starts swinging his feet against the counter, making hollow tapping sounds backed by the gentle clink of dishes.

“Are you Mike's brother?” she asks.

“I am,” says the older boy. “He's my cousin.”

The younger boy looks down at his shoes. He seems uncomfortable with their conversation.

“I'm Eve, just one of Mike's friends.”

“You're not supposed to come inside the house,” the older boy informs her. He says it with some resignation, as though he doesn't expect her to listen.

Suddenly the younger one speaks.

“I thought they could come to use the bathroom.”

Eve tries to humor them.

“So, what are you guys, guards?”

The older one nods, smirking.

“I guess. My dad told me to watch the house. He doesn't trust Mike.”

She almost says something to support this, but manages to hold it back.

“I won't touch anything,” she promises. “I'll just find my friend. You didn't see her?”

While Mike's brother shakes his head no, the younger boy blurts out “she's upstairs.”

Both of them are suddenly nervous; shifty, the way kids get when someone brushes up against their secrets.

“Do you know where?”

The little one scratches his nose.

“She's in Eli's room.”

“Where's that?”

Mike's brother slides down off the counter, makes a fist, and hits his cousin on the thigh.

“Hey!” Eve says automatically, “Don't hit him!”

“He means my room,” says Mike's brother. “I'm Eli.”

The cousin looks on, his face slack and accepting.

“Are you okay?” she asks him.

“It doesn't hurt,” he says. “I don't mind.”

“Can I do it again?”

The cousin stretches out his leg, and Eli punches it again, leaving his fist there for a moment when he's done, as though trying to leave an impression. The cousin shuts his eyes and groans.

Eli smirks at Eve.

“Can you get her out?”

“What, out of your room?”

“Yeah.”

The cousin says, “We’re supposed to be in bed.”

“No, we’re not,” says Eli. “We’re supposed to guard the house.”

The cousin massages his leg.

“Well, I’d rather be in bed.”

“Can you show me where she is?” Eve asks. There are three separate stairwells leading to the main room, and she doesn’t want to get lost.

Eli turns away from her, considering. From outside, Eve hears firecrackers and excited screams.

“I think she’s asleep,” he says finally. “It doesn’t bother me if she stays there.”

“Yeah? You like having a girl in your bed?”

The cousin grins and Mike shrugs.

“I don’t mind it. I’m not tired.”

Giving up, Eve picks the closest stairway and starts moving.

“She might be sick,” she says. “I have to find her either way.”

“It’s the other one,” says Eli, “That way. If you’re going up, I’m coming with you.”

“Fine,” Eve says. “I already asked you to.”

The stairs are worn and unfinished, but sturdy. There are no lights on upstairs, and as she follows Mike into the darkness, she can hear his breathing and the sound of laughter from her

friends outside. At his bedroom door, Mike stops and stands back. She can hear the cousin finicking behind her.

Heather is curled up on Eli's bed, exactly where he said she'd be. She has thrown off all the bedding, and her boots have torn a football poster from the wall at the foot of the bed.

"What's with you?" she says. She's unsurprised, as though she's just been waiting patiently for Eve to come and find her.

"What's with *you*?" Eve says. "Why do you always make me track you down?"

"It's our thing," says Heather. "Like hide and seek."

For a few long minutes she is quiet. When Eve finally looks over at her, she is blinking, hard and fast.

"Do you have something in your eye?"

"No. They're just dry. Mike says it's allergies."

She turns onto her side and groans.

"This fucking pain."

"What?" Eve says, alarmed.

She feels her limbs lock, wondering if this will be the night she has been dreading. Heather sighs and lets her head drop on the pillow. She makes a halfhearted attempt to blow away some stray hairs that are hanging in her face. Eve senses something growing. Finally, the weed is wearing off and it has left her feeling anxious.

"I have to tell you something," Heather says. Her voice is sleepy; far away. She's reached the point at which she doesn't seem to think or feel. She has become a ghost of Heather, wandering confused through worlds it no longer understands.

"Do you guys want a soda?"

Heather jerks her head around, then grabs her stomach.

“Get out you little shit!”

Eli is unfazed.

“We have beer,” he says.

With another sad groan, Heather settles back into his pillow.

Eve waves him out, but he’s reluctant.

“Go downstairs,” she says. “We’ll be out soon.”

When he's gone, Heather reaches for Eve's hand.

“Why does he keep coming in here?”

“We're supposed to be outside,” Eve says. “You ready?”

“No, no. No. I have to tell you something.”

“Okay.”

“I got pregnant.”

This is not what Eve expected.

“Okay,” she says stupidly.

“Yep,” says Heather. “I did.”

“Wait. Like, now? You're pregnant now?”

She thinks of all the drinks she's watched her friend put down over the past few weeks.

Spiked coffee; spiked Coke; mini bottles stood up neatly in her locker.

“Jesus,” Heather says, “no, not now.”

To Eve, this makes no sense.

“So, you’re not pregnant.”

“Uh-uh, uh-uh. I went to the clinic.”

Understanding comes on slowly. When Eve thinks about this moment later on, she'll think of Grace, who told her what she can remember of the day her parents died. *A child's memories are shapeless*, she said. *They don't know yet how to organize things. They tell me that's why, when I try, I can't see anything except a pillowcase. I must have cried into it.*

It was red, she said, *with little black bears on it.*

Eli's pillow is a simple blue.

"When?"

"Yesterday. Mike took me. His mom works there."

"Don't your parents have to sign something?"

"I don't know. Guess not, thank God."

She pulls her sweatshirt's sleeves down over her hands and hugs herself.

"He's gonna find out, though."

"Who? Your dad?"

"He asks around. You know him."

Heather's quiet, breathing deeply. Then she sits up straight and says, "It's just so selfish. It's like, when you do that first really desperate thing, you realize you only actually care about yourself."

"You were protecting yourself. That's not selfish."

"Protecting myself from what, though? My dad's bitching?"

Eli comes back into the room, moving slowly this time with his head down, trying to avoid being noticed.

"Jesus," Heather spits.

She picks up a pillow and throws it hard at Eli's head.

“Can't you find another room!”

This time he is scared enough to shut the door behind him. It slams and quivers. They can hear the two boys whispering before their footsteps move off lightly down the hall.

“God,” Heather says. “Perverts. They're all perverts.”

She flops back on the bed and Eve lays down beside her. In the twin bed they are shoulder to shoulder, staring up at faintly glowing blobs of paint that may have once been stars.

“Can you open the window?”

Eve sits up and crawls to the foot of the bed, where there's a window that looks out onto the lawn. As soon as it is open, she can hear Mike and Devin yell as they jump in the water, bodies flashing in the firelight.

“The worst part is it didn't even work. He'll know as soon as he runs into someone from the clinic.”

Eve knows Heather's dad.

“You think he'll kick you out?”

Heather laughs sarcastically.

“It doesn't matter. I can't stay there anymore. I've wanted out forever.”

“I know.”

“I could live with Mike. He wants to get an apartment together this summer. I keep telling him to do it and maybe I'll move in, but he wants me to say yes, first.”

“He should have his own place anyway, by now.”

Heather snickers.

“That's true.”

“He just wants a maid,” Eve says.

“It's more than that.”

“I bet.”

All night long, the sky has been both clear and open, filled with starlight. Now, a bank of gray clouds rolls in off the mountains. Eve can see the first big drops of rain begin to fall, making the fires sizzle. Everyone still standing by the fires starts to run towards the house, laughing and shouting as they go. They're all ignoring Mike, whose screaming for them all to stay outside. He runs along the line of tents, pausing when a head or two pokes out to tell it to stay put.

Eve hears a door fly open downstairs. The house immediately fills up with the sounds of people looking for their clothes.

“Let's lock the door,” says Heather, sleepily.

There are still some people out on the wet lawn; shadows stumbling and stalking one another in the glow of dying coals. She sees Devin sitting outside one of the tents with Beck, half naked, on his lap. Some boys are still down by the water, tossing empty bottles in the pond.

She lies down again next to Heather, who refuses to move over to make room.

“It's okay if you want to stay with me,” Eve says.

“Really?”

Heather's eyes fly open, though her body doesn't move.

“Of course.”

“It might be for a while.”

“That's all right,” Eve says.

She's tired, now. The voices downstairs have calmed down a little, and the sound of Heather's shallow breathing leads her into sleep.

Night

The first thing she can see is moonlight, filtered through the trees above the creek. It casts a blue pall on the wild girl, crouched among the stones. Eve watches her bend lower to drink from a dark pool in between the rocks. When she finishes, she stands up straight and shivers. Now the light wanes, fades, and brightens once again into the broad, warm light of day.

She thinks she must be in a cave, or well; somewhere where the light is different; shifting.

Bo is with her. He is like a colored shadow of himself.

“Are you okay?” he asks her breathlessly.

Eve fumbles at her raised leg, breathing heavily.

“I fell,” she says, “and this thing...”

“Is she here?” he whispers.

“What?”

Her hands grope down along her leg until they reach the bottom of her thigh, just above the knee. Her breath comes faster as she starts to panic.

“I fell,” she says again, as though she isn’t only frightened, but ashamed. The sharp point of a broken branch sticks up above her thigh, wet with blood and rising higher every time she moves her leg. She isn’t crying any longer, and she hardly seems to feel the pain.

“Stop moving,” Bo says, with a clarity and confidence that makes Eve stop and hold her breath.

“It’s all the way through,” he says. “You shouldn’t pull it out here. Not like this.”

“Bo,” she says quietly, her voice strained. “Go get Mom.”

“I can’t leave you.”

“You have to. I can’t move.”

Grimacing, he puts his hands on either side of Evie’s knee.

“I’ll snap it off,” he says. “Then I can help you home.”

She shakes her head and pushes him away.

“It hurts,” she says.

He puts the heels of both hands on the slick branch.

“I’ll make it quick.”

He pushes. Fresh blood wells up around the wound, staining the sleeves of his shirt.

Eve’s breath becomes ragged again, and her wide eyes fill with tears. For a moment she is also filled with hope—a hope just strong enough to approach a feeling of safety—at the sound of Bo’s footsteps fading. Then, slowly, the silence closes back around her like a fog, and she can’t see anything except the smooth rock face in front of her. Afraid to move too much, but beginning to feel her left side, which is pressed against the ground, starting to go numb, she twists her shoulders until she can rest one up against the rock wall. As she relaxes into it, she feels a sudden pain run from her thigh into her hip, spreading out into the rest of her before it dissipates.

The girl’s eyes are green—so green it is as if the forest has leaked through her, filling her with its own essence. When Eve takes her hand, she finds it surprisingly soft, like the wet footpads of a dog. She strokes it gently for a minute; runs her fingers through the girl’s soft black hair; before taking her small hand completely in her own. Their skins warm against one another, until she can’t feel the difference.

Eve: Day 2

Laughter. More laughter; more than last night. She remembers when the kids all making noise downstairs realized that the rain would not stop. They decided to give in, *or maybe Mike eventually found them out*; she heard the screaming as they all ran back into their tents. Despite having to deal with Heather, Eve is happy that they didn't have to spend the night outside.

She climbs carefully over Heather, who is still deep in sleep. She goes to the window and looks out across the lawn. It's early afternoon, she thinks, and checks her phone for messages from Grace. There aren't any, and as she watches a group of shirtless boys spill out of their tent, one by one, exaggerating how much sunlight hurts their eyes, she isn't sure exactly how she feels about this. On one hand, she is happy that Grace isn't worried. On the other, it's unlike her not to check in. Eve supposes there is something going on with Bo, again. If something else is keeping her mind occupied, it can't be Ernest.

For a second, she can't keep herself from hoping that he's gone, or will be soon. It's just a flash; it is the kind of thought she has ten times a day but never lets grow bigger than an ember. Grace will want her home, even if she doesn't say it.

Heather's hard to wake, even this late. If she had something that she had to do, or *wanted* to do, Eve should say, she would get up, but today it isn't just the fact that she could not care less. Her face is red and puffier than usual, and when Eve finally gets her up onto her feet, she wobbles and complains about a sharp pain in her eye.

"You're fine," Eve coaxes, wanting to escape before the others wake up.

It's late morning, but the yard is still as quiet as it must have been just before sunrise. The sloping field still sparkles with dew, which leaves black circles where the fires burned out.

Heather stops outside the door and squats, cradling her head in her hands. She doesn't seem to be in any pain now, apart from what must be an awful hangover.

Eve waits, breathing in the dark scent of fresh charcoal with the cool, wet air.

“Ugh,” says Heather, spitting on the ground between her feet. “We seriously have to walk?”

“You're blocked in, and you know Mike. He's gonna try to make us all stay here until dinner.”

“That's not his fault. He just hates watching Eli alone.”

“Anyway, you're still too much of a mess. If we drive through town, you'll do something stupid.”

Heather's quiet for a moment, obviously biting her tongue.

“I'll get Mike to move it,” she says, but she doesn't move.

Finally, she says, “Okay. You promise I can stay with you tonight?”

“Of course,” says Eve, proud to find she means it.

Eve isn't looking forward to it, either, but neither of them wants to wake the guys to move their trucks. Eve wants to call her mom, but Heather cuts her off.

“I gotta get cleaned up, first. I can't let her see me like this.”

“She won't care. You can take a shower at my house.”

Heather stands, takes a few unsteady steps, and stares out at the still pond.

“Were you serious last night?”

“Of course.”

“About me living with you.”

“Yes, Heather, of course I was.”

“It's okay if you have to think about it more.”

There's a burst of laughter from inside the house and Heather tenses up.

“I don't,” Eve says, “I just have to ask my mom.”

“Who's gonna say *no*.”

For the first time Eve thinks seriously about her suggestion. When she made it, she was only trying to help. She thought that Heather would forget by morning or would write it off as an immature fantasy, like running off to become pirates.

She says, “I don't know. I'll talk to her, though.”

Honestly, she can't predict what Grace will think. If she tells her it will only be for one year, she might agree. Heather can take care of herself, and she can help with Bo and Ernest.

The road; The sky; The forest; Everything seems cool and open as they start their long walk, accompanied by the sounds of birds and squirrels in the brush. Heather holds them back a little, shuffling her thin shoes slowly through the dirt. The ground is still wet, and her toes are soon splattered with mud.

At the end of the dirt road, they cross the highway to the hiking trail, which winds around the lake towards town. Eve is comfortable, having walked this path so many times before on hikes with Grace and Iliss (Harry, too, before he hurt his knee). Last summer, they took Ernest for his first walk on the section down behind the house, where the trail crosses over the stream. There's a little log bridge there that he likes throwing things off of, watching as they disappear beneath the surface, only to pop up again on the other side.

She is thinking of what Iliss once said: *He's lucky to have this*.

Grace said, *We are all lucky*.

Today, Eve feels the sense of this more strongly than she has in years.

Another thing that Iliss says: *This family is special. Do you know why? It's because we chose each other.*

“It will be okay, you know,” she says to Heather. “If we tell my family about everything, they'll want to help. We always help.”

Heather says, “Oh God, you want me to tell them?”

“Well, they're gonna ask.”

Heather is embarrassed and begins to comb her fingers through her tangled hair.

“Is it that obvious?”

Eve stops and turns to face her. In the strong light coming through the trees, her friend looks much worse.

“I mean, they're gonna wonder why you can't go home.”

Heather squats again and takes dramatic, deep breaths. She is trying hard to pull herself together.

“Are they cool?” she asks. “I really don't want all my shit all over town.”

She doesn't seem to realize, and Eve doesn't want to tell her, that it doesn't matter. Garrett is so small. Her secrets all came out the moment she walked in the clinic.

Heather's quiet, breathing more deliberately now and rocking gently on her heels. Here, in the forest, all alone, she's had some time to think. Eve kneels beside her friend and wraps her arms around her. Heather smells like vodka. They will have to fix that.

“Look, I don't think I'm gonna go to college. At least not right away.”

Heather's quiet, and Eve wonders if she's listening.

“We can take some time, you know. To figure things out.”

In her heart, Eve knows that this is probably true.

Heather looks up, and her eyes are red. She might be crying if they weren't so dry.

“Okay.”

“Okay?”

Eve helps her to her feet and gets her walking again. The path is easy, rolling lightly over hills and ridges, following the stream. She tries to keep Heather's spirits up, insisting on how kind Grace is; how generous.

Part of the trail cuts right through Garrett, with a narrow wooden footbridge spanning the river. There's a small dam with a waterfall below the bridge, where they used to toss in feathers, watching as they fell over the falls and sometimes, if the wind was blowing west against the current, rise again to dance above the spray.

The day is warm and sunny. In town, there are couples strung along the bridge, passing one way or the other, or just standing at the railing, staring down into the water, whispering. The trail follows the sidewalk for a few hundred feet, then ducks behind the bowling alley before turning back into the trees. A group of older guys are sitting on the bank behind the store, smoking cigarettes and talking quietly. There are discarded sandwich wrappers at their feet. They must have just finished their lunch.

Eve quickens her pace, worried they will try to talk to her. The men in town are friendly—usually polite. They never have a reason, though, except (she thinks) to make her stop—to look her over, find things that will make for lively conversation right after she leaves.

Unfortunately, Heather has other ideas. She plucks at Eve's sleeve, motions for her to wait, and wanders over to the bank.

Eve knows what she is doing, even if she doesn't turn around to see the capitalized “LIQUOR” sign behind her.

At first, they try to brush Heather off. Eve doesn't blame them. Heather's rough night shows. Her hair is still a nest of tangles, even though she has been working at it with her fingers ever since they left Mike's, and her clothes look worse than slept in. But, of course, she doesn't take these hints. With a pleading look, she kneels down in the grass, making some of them laugh.

Eve has watched this same scene many times. It doesn't always work, but once she makes them laugh, they always say yes.

There's one who's younger than the rest. He can't be more than twenty-five. It's awkward to watch Heather focus on him, making him increasingly uncomfortable with her eyes. She's nice. She's sweet. And he must see the other men all looking at him with a kind of playful envy. Finally, the guy stands up and takes the money Heather offers him. She follows him up the embankment and around the corner, leaving Eve alone to wait.

She knows it won't take long, since Heather never asks for something complicated. Eve would feel more comfortable if Heather used her charm for party drinks, or even beer. But she stopped bothering with all that last summer, when she came back from her aunt's. Since then, she's insisted on hard liquor. The cheaper the better. It's as if she's made it part of who she wants to be, like how she dyed her brown hair black in eighth grade. Every time the other kids would either brush these changes off or fall in love with them. They never lead to taunts, or gossip, probably because the whole school was afraid of Heather and her acid tongue.

But this year there has been some talk. They've started to despise or pity her, depending on their preference, but everyone agrees that she is headed towards a heavy crash. Eve doesn't blame them all for clearing out, attempting to avoid the kind of personal implosion that, having grown up in Garrett, they are already well conditioned to avoid.

The men down on the bank pretend to talk but they are throwing glances at the corner, waiting. Eve walks casually further down the path, until their view of her is blocked by trees.

She's tired. Eli's bed was small and hard, and Heather slept in it as though she were alone, lying flat out with her limbs all splayed, pushing Eve against the wall. She was too heavy for Eve to move. All night, the poster pressed against her back kept crinkling.

When Heather and the older guy come back around the corner, Heather has a little paper bag in one hand. She is holding it down low, pressed against her hip. Her face has changed, gone back to an expression of contentment. The poor guy hangs around a second, watching her walk off without another word or glance in his direction.

“Did you have to?” Eve asks, once she's close enough to hear.

“What? Don't make it a big deal. Remember, I'm homeless.”

Eve starts walking, moving fast and leaving Heather to catch up or fall behind. She's angry, but she doesn't know how to express it. She isn't even sure what she's angry about.

“Hey!”

The trail turns off into the woods. It's steep and rocky, forcing her to slow down.

“Eve come on. It took me like five minutes. We can go now.”

“You're not homeless,” Eve says.

She feels Heather's hand rest lightly on her arm.

“That's nice, but we don't know if it's official yet.”

“What?”

“I mean, your mom could still say no.”

Eve shakes her hand away.

“That's not what I meant.”

She starts walking again. Behind her, she hears Heather take the bottle from its bag.

“You know you can't bring that inside,” she says, hoping Heather will detect the heat in her voice.

“Don't worry,” Heather says, coughing. “It'll be gone by then.”

“Heather, you already stink.”

“Well yeah. I bet you do too.”

Eve turns around, her sneakers scraping up the pebbles underneath her feet.

“You stink like vodka, Heather.”

For a moment, Heather looks shocked. It might be the first time she has heard this from a friend.

“I'm having a bad day, Eve. When did you start working for my parents?”

Looking up the path, Eve sees the turn-off to the house. Heather's getting angry, and she doesn't want her to take off. If she truly has nowhere to go, she'll find her way to Mike, or to some other guy who she thinks she can manage and (Eve thinks) that will be it. There won't be any going back.

“Look,” she says, taking a deep breath.

Her mind clears. She can hear the birds.

“Just finish it, okay? We're almost there.”

“Can I call her mom?”

“What?”

“Can I call your mom, mom.”

“No.”

“You call her mom.”

“I know. That's different. I'm adopted.”

“So, if she adopts me, I can call her mom.”

Eve laughs despite herself. She means it to sound spiteful.

“It's not that simple. There are usually years of paperwork.”

“I'll be eighteen, soon. Once I'm legal, can't I just like, sign something?”

“Seriously? Once you're eighteen you're an adult. Adoption's just for kids.”

Heather looks disappointed.

“I guess that does it, then,” she says.

Eve assumes that Grace is home. The car is in the driveway, and she would have let Eve know if they were going over to the island. She leads Heather up the back steps to the second floor. She's careful with the door, trying to keep it from squealing. Downstairs, she can hear her mother in the kitchen, cleaning dishes. Bo's bedroom door is shut tight.

Eve's first goal is to get Heather in the shower before Grace sees her.

“We could lie down for a while.”

Heather's breath stinks in her ear. She's whispering.

Eve shakes her head empathetically.

“If you want to stay, you can't look like you've been out all night.”

Heather bites her lip, but follows Eve's instructions. When Eve can hear the water running, she goes back into her room to wait. She wonders if she should go down and talk to Grace, just to get the conversation started, and to read her mood. Instead, she looks around her room, imagining what it would be like to share it with Heather. She wanders past the pegboard with its rows of shining pins, all from places Heather's been. None of them are far away, but they're all far enough for Eve, who's never traveled further than a school trip to the city.

She knows the counselor is right. If she leaves here, her future only stretches like an ocean of quicksand, limitless in its capacity to suck her in. Heather would tell her this is wrong; that there are opportunities and many people ready to help keep her head above the sand. But Eve is cautious. This is part of her she can't control. It's been this way since she was small. Grace says she never had to put locks on the cabinets, or cover up the oven knobs, because Eve was so cautious.

Not fearful, she would say, just cautious. Extremely cautious.

She has to be cautious. There have been too many times when she has made decisions without knowing it; closed doors she always thought would stay wide open. But she wonders if it isn't simply cowardice, after all. Heather, who Eve supposes really shouldn't have a say, tells her she is too afraid to fail.

Look at me, Eve! I'm a fucking wreck. But I keep trying.

It made even more of an impression, given she was spitting drunk.

Eve is *not* afraid to fail. She doesn't think she is. She is afraid of what she thinks her friends don't see: the stalking ghosts of loneliness and being left out in the cold.

Beck sees this. She will stay in town forever, working at her father's store, holding down a tiny fortress holding out the world. She won't talk about it this way. Instead, she says, *my family's been here so long, it would be weird to leave, or, I'm just glad that I don't have to apply for jobs*, but Eve sees the wisdom in these words.

She hears the shower stop and cracks her bedroom door to listen. Everything is quiet downstairs. Ernest is probably eating lunch. She shuts her door again, and she immediately hears Bo's open from across the hall. She freezes, hoping he won't come to ask her whose here. Instead, he goes the other way, towards the bathroom.

The danger dawns on her too late. She's just in time to see Bo slap the door open.

Heather shouts and Bo steps backwards; just a few steps, staring.

"Oh, God. Sorry," Heather stammers, slamming the door shut.

This time it sticks.

"Bo!"

He looks at her, aghast, as if he expects her to share his surprise. She watches as he puts together what has happened, glancing back and forth between Eve and the now closed door.

"Who's that?" he asks.

"It's my friend Heather."

"She left the door wide open."

Eve doesn't like his attitude. He never seems embarrassed, even when he should be.

"So what? You knew someone was in there."

He shakes his head slowly.

"No, I didn't."

The handle on the bathroom door turns, but the door doesn't open.

"Okay," Eve says, frustrated. "Just go back inside your room."

He does as he is told, and she knocks on the bathroom door.

"It's okay, it's just me, now."

The door swings open. Heather's put on the clothes Eve gave her. In some places, they're too big; in others, too small. As always, though, they don't look out of place. Something about Heather's attitude, or else her indifference, makes it work.

"If I'm not family now," she says, "I don't know what will do it."

She says she's tired and wants to hideout in Eve's room, but Eve's still stuck on Bo. This is far from the first time he's done something like this. For her, everything changed when he came to live with them. Suddenly, the quiet house was filled with noise. Not real noise; not happy noise like most boys make. But noise around her, in her head. A static or a tension covering her thoughts until she hardly recognizes them as her own.

“Can we get something to eat?”

Their walk has left her hungry, and she wants to talk to Grace.

“Yeah,” Heather agrees. “We might as well.”

When they go down to the kitchen Grace is sitting at the table all alone except for Ernest, who's engrossed in his small bowl of applesauce.

“Oh!” she says, looking up as they come in. “I didn't know you had a friend with you.”

She's happy, or at least she's managing to fake it. Eve saw how she was slumped over her coffee cup, before she noticed them.

“You don't have to perk up,” Eve says. “It's just Heather.”

“I know, but I'm glad to see her. It's been too long.”

Heather grins and says, “It's nice to see you too. How's Ernest?”

Grace looks over at him, watching them over the handle of his spoon.

“He's doing well. Just getting in a late snack.”

“That's good,” says Heather.

“There are bagels in the drawer,” Grace says. “Bo's upstairs in his room.”

She sounds disappointed.

“This late?” Eve asks.

“He's still pouting. I caught him outside this morning before sunrise.”

Heather looks appropriately shocked. Eve starts to make toast; simple food she hopes will settle Heather's stomach.

“He tried to run away again?”

She watches Grace out of the corner of her eye, trying to gauge her mood.

“No,” she sighs, “but I'm afraid he's planning to.”

Eve says, “He understands, now.”

She is hoping for an opportunity to change the subject.

“He won't go anywhere.”

“Well,” Grace says, “I'm glad you're here. Can you watch Ernest for a little while?”

Eve looks uncertainly at Heather, who shrugs.

“Heather, I can give you a ride home,” Grace offers.

“That's okay,” says Heather, looking helplessly at Eve. “I think I'm...”

“She's gonna stay a while, if that's okay.”

“Do you want to stay for dinner? We're all going to the island. Evie, can you take over Bo and Ernest? You can meet me over there.”

Eve isn't surprised. They eat out on the island often in the summer, though tonight seems early. She dreads the thought of having to convince Bo to get in the boat, but after her day with Heather, she's pretty sure that she can handle him. Besides, it will be good to have them all see Heather again, before she says anything to Grace.

When Grace leaves, they take Ernest in the living room to eat. He wants her bagel, but she knows he isn't big enough to chew it.

“It's okay,” says Heather. “I'll take him.”

Eve laughs. “You're trying to help out already?”

“It’s never too early.”

As soon as he sees she is willing, Ernest starts to pull the pieces of his train set to the center of the room.

“Ooh, trains!” Heather says. “That works.”

“What’s wrong with you?”

“Nothing. I just like kids.”

There are footsteps up above them.

“Oh God,” Heather says. “I’m so embarrassed.”

“Don’t worry. I’m sure he’s seen worse.”

She does not want Bo to come downstairs. She’s used to him containing himself in his room. If he comes down now, it won’t be for nothing.

“B-B-B-” says Ernest.

“Don’t you say it,” Eve warns.

“Bo,” he says, emphatically.

Bo isn’t looking at her as he comes downstairs and goes into the kitchen.

“Do you want something?” she asks.

No answer. He is probably looking for a soda.

“Hey, Bo!” Heather calls out. “Nice to meet you!”

Still no answer.

When she hears the screen door squeal, she’s up and moving long before it stops slapping against the frame. He’s already halfway to the tree line, walking quickly.

“What the hell, Bo!”

She's surprised to see him stop. He turns to face her, with the blank expression that he usually reserves for Grace.

"What are you doing?"

He shrugs.

"Taking a walk."

She sighs.

"I wish you wouldn't act like you're the only one who matters."

He does that. He is selfish.

He looks conflicted for a moment, like he's struggling to hold something back.

"I'm looking for that girl. You can't stop me," he says, in a small voice as if this is something he has just discovered. Eve doesn't think he even notices the way his feet are moving—sliding backwards slowly.

"Bo. If you run away again, they'll send you back."

"I'm not," he says. "I'm not running away."

"Bo, stop. Why can't you just go hide up in your room? That's what kids do."

Smile.

But he isn't looking at her anymore. He's right. She can't do anything to stop him.

Eve wonders: is he lying? It's not like him. He does things he's not supposed to. He exaggerates things if he thinks that it will get him out of trouble. *But he doesn't lie.* Not even when he should. Because he's innocent that way. He's never had to practice being loyal.

"Tell me the truth," she says, trying to catch his eyes.

"Seriously, Bo."

She grabs him gently by the hair and lifts his head.

“Look at me. What did you see? It’s just a homeless girl.”

“There are only a few hundred people in this town,” he says, as she realizes she still has her fingers in his hair.

“So what? None of them are homeless?”

“No. I mean, wouldn't someone notice? Why would she go in the woods?”

“I don't know. Maybe she's in trouble.”

He nods, but she can't tell what it's supposed to signify.

“Look,” she says, “My point is, there are people who can deal with it. If she's really out there—”

“She's out there.”

“Someone's bound to find her. Maybe she's already gone home, but if not, they'll find her and take care of her. Like they did for you and me.”

Bo shakes his head. His breath is getting fast and shallow.

“She doesn't walk like us, Eve. I saw.”

His eyes shut and she thinks he’s trying to convince her with the sheer weight of his exasperation.

“They'll never find her.”

“Look, Bo. You have way too much to worry about on your own.”

“I'm fine.”

“You are not fine. No one’s fine, Bo! I don't know everything because you won't tell me, but I know enough to know you've been through real shit. Be a guy and think about yourself for once.”

He looks away immediately, chewing over what she's saying even as she's saying it.

Turn your back now. Let him see you're calm. Don't hear him when he calls

“Just tell them not to worry! I'll be back!”

When he's gone, it seems unnaturally quiet. The way she feels on walks with Harry, when they spook a deer and it runs off, through dry leaves, twigs, and other bracken, making no sound. For a moment, she lets her fears get the best of her. Grace told her not to let him leave, and now he's gone. But she can't know how gone he is. She remembers when he ran away a few weeks after being placed with them. It was only for a few days, and she'd known that he would come back, or let himself be found, because who would want to live out there when there are people still willing to help them?

Since then, he has left and come back more times than she can count. It's like he made some kind of deal with Grace. They all know Bo is not supposed to leave. *Home; School. Home; School*, Candace said.

As she walks back to the house, she tries calling Grace, but she's silenced her phone again.

“Heather!”

“We're in here!”

She's sitting cross legged on the floor, watching Ernest push his little wooden train cars down the track. He smiles at Eve, then looks down at the two cars in his hands, one green and one blue. Having decided, he holds the blue one out to her.

“Oh Eve! You be blue?”

“What's going on?” asks Heather.

“He left.”

“So what? You're gonna let him go?”

“What was I supposed to do? Lock him inside?”

“I don’t know.” Heather hugs herself. “Your mom’s not gonna like it.”

“Maybe we should just go to the island,” Eve says.

“Without him? What’s he gonna do if he comes back?”

She’s taken Ernest’s hands in hers, and they are rocking back and forth together, while he whispers, “Seesaw. Seesaw.”

“He’ll just take the canoe. He likes it better, anyway.”

She goes to the kitchen, where Grace keeps the diaper bag. Ernest was potty trained last winter, but Grace still keeps it full of snacks and juice for short trips. She hopes there is an extra shirt, in case he tries to slap the water as they get out of the boat. She doesn’t bother checking. If it isn’t there, she’s sure Iliss will have something.

“Okay, let’s go,” she says, adjusting the bag on her shoulder.

She lets Heather carry Ernest. Eve is tired; worried; and she doesn’t feel like giving her friend any breaks.

When they reach the dock, she sets the oars into the locks, while Heather helps Ernest into his vest. *It’s orange*, she thinks, *so they’ll see us coming*, but she doesn’t know why this, of all things, makes her feel better.

The lake is smooth and quiet. After yesterday’s storm, everything has settled in to wait. Heather plays with Ernest in the bow, behind Eve’s back. She’s trailing her hand in the lake and dripping water on his nose. The sun is setting. Eve pulls harder on the oars. She doesn’t like to go out on the lake at night. It is a landscape she does not know, and this makes it much more dangerous.

“Your grandpas coming down,” says Heather, as they come close to the island.

Eve turns to look and sees that she is drifting towards the cliffs. She turns the bow around against the current, pulling hard, until she's out of breath.

As they come in and bump against the dock, Pop Pop grabs the rope that Heather throws him.

“Where's Bo?” he asks.

She can feel them looking at her—all of them—including Heather, who is only trying not to look at Harry.

“That's why we're a little early,” Eve says.

“You not early. I was just starting the grill.”

“He's coming later,” she says, rolling out the words before she even knows that she has found them.

“In a little bit.”

“He's taking the canoe,” Heather puts in.

“Okay. Are you sure he's alright? Why is he staying over there?”

“He didn't want to come with us, says Heather. “I don't think he wanted to sit in the rowboat with the girls.”

Her grandfather looks at her, and Eve nods.

“Who's this?”

“Heather,” Eve says.

“Well,” he says, “We'll give him some time. Keep an eye on the house, though.”

Eve helps tie up the boat, then follows Pop Pop up the gravel path. The island is mostly wooded, but there's a clearing at the end of the path, where the house stands. Heather is already

sitting on the low rock wall surrounding it, while Ernest shuffles through the gravel, looking for pebbles.

“It's really nice here,” Heather says.

Eve wonders if she's been rehearsing.

“I've always seen it from the highway, but I've never been out here.”

“You know we get teenagers sometimes,” Iliss says.

She's sitting on the front porch, leaning forward so her face is in the light.

“That's right,” says Harry. “Up there by the cliffs. Eve's had to clean up after them.”

Heather says, “I haven't heard about that.”

Harry grins.

“We're kidding. You want to help me cook?”

“Um, okay.”

It's clear she doesn't want to, but Eve doesn't care enough to help her. Harry only wants to prod her for more clues about his mysterious teenagers.

“I help cook!” cries Ernest.

He is hugging Harry's leg, trying to get picked up.

“No,” says Harry, “if you want to come, you have to walk.”

Ernest lets go and starts to make his way back to the grill.

“That's good,” he says. “That's good.”

When they're gone, Eve sits down beside her grandmother.

“Where's Bo?” Iliss asks.

Eve shrugs.

“He says he's coming over soon. He's taking the canoe.”

“Ah.”

Eve realizes that they aren't looking at each other, as they normally would, but out at the lake; the dock; the house.

“Is that one of your friends?”

“It's Heather. You've met her.”

“Oh, yes. She doesn't look good.”

“She had kind of a rough night,” Eve says, happy to change the subject.

“How so?”

“She's just... Her dad's kicking her out.”

For the first time since she sat down, Iliss turns to face her.

“Seriously? Over what?”

“I don't know,” Eve lies. “She won't tell me yet.”

“Well, you know she can stay here tonight, if she wants. But I guess she'd be more comfortable with you.”

With her mind still set on Bo, Eve takes the opportunity to tell her some good news.

“I thought so too. I told her she can stay with us as long as she wants.”

“Oh, Eve.”

Her face turns suddenly cold.

“Oh, Eve. You never promise.”

“I didn't,” she insists.

But Iliss only nods.

“You did. You did as soon as you suggested it. Think of what it means to someone like that. Someone truly desperate. You can't just go around offering things that aren't yours to give.”

This is all she says. She seems to want to let it go, but Eve can't help feeling embarrassed.

It's getting dark, now. When they came across the lake there seemed to be plenty of daylight left, but now the sun has gone behind the mountains.

"He'd better get moving," says Iliss. "If we don't see him soon, I'll send Harry over in the motorboat."

She pauses, tapping her fingers on her chair.

"I'd call him, but I don't think he would answer."

Eve can hear the shushing sound of Iliss's chair as it glides back and forth, just like a clock hand keeping time. She hears Pop Pop's voice from around back, showing off his red brick grill. Around them, everywhere, the insects start up, humming as the twilight falls. Her eyes are focused on the house, which is still barely lit against the hill.

"Harry!"

Iliss stands up shakily, fixated on the orange glow.

There's laughter from behind the house.

"We'll be done soon!" Pop Pop calls back.

"Harry!"

Now the glow is spreading, filling out the windows of the house from top to bottom. As Eve watches, slack jawed, flames begin to lick the apex of the roof. The chimney starts to blow a steady stream of glowing cinders.

She can hear their footsteps as they come around the house. Her grandfather's, slow and steady, Heathers, barely there, and Ernest's, scuffing quickly down the path.

"Hold your horses," Pop Pop's saying.

Iliss is already on her phone. Heather squints at them, searching through the darkness.

“Eve, what's wrong?”

But she is already following Eve’s gaze. She stands up on tiptoe, as if that will help her look over the trees, then gives it up and comes onto the porch.

“Shit! Isn't that your house?”

Eve doesn't have the words, and anyway there's Pop Pop going to the dock to get a better look.

“No, off of forty-one,” Iliss is saying.

Flames are rising high now from the windows and the roof. The chimney disappears into a plume of black smoke.

“Did we leave something on?” asks Heather.

Eve shakes her head in disagreement, and in disbelief.

“Oh shit. You don't think it was Bo?”

She hasn't thought this. Not yet, though as Heather says it, Eve knows she is saying what Eve’s gut’s been telling her since Bo first came to stay with them: that he is dangerous.

“Heather. Heather, sweetie.”

Iliss holds her hand against her phone.

“Do you have somewhere you can go?”

Bo: Day 1

On a fencepost in the alleyway behind the school, a robin suddenly appears and flaps its dusty feathers. From an oak branch high above it, a blackbird squawks. Even through the years of dirt accumulated on the classroom window, Bo can see the patch of orange blaze above its wing. He wonders what they're looking for, or fighting over, as the case may be. It must be food, but he sees nothing in the alleyway apart from a discarded soda bottle. The blackbird has gone silent now, as the robin bends its knees as though preparing to take off, but only hops a short distance to the next post.

Behind him, he hears the staccato pop of Stan Samuel's laughter, which is followed by a sound like coughing. That must be Evan Clarke, who is going prematurely hoarse. Bo knows the teacher can hear them, but it's the final day of school, and nothing is taken very seriously. He feels them landing on his back now—little clumps of sticky-willow, like being hit with cotton. He can feel the itchy fibers working through his shirt.

His first impulse is to turn around, pretend that he's in on the joke, and hope the other kids buy it. After all, it *is* funny, or it would be if he weren't so aware of all the eyes attached to him, awaiting his reaction.

This feeling—the intensity of knowing that the actions he takes now will soon be set in stone, forever, is not unfamiliar. He remembers earlier this morning, when he stood in Grace's upstairs bathroom, naked and his skin still clammy from the shower, and told himself that it was only one more day. The summer would be (he believed back then) like every other summer since he came to live with Grace: a long, hot, happy dream, into which he has become quite good at disappearing. From Evie's bedroom down the hall, he'd heard the sound of drums. She says that she prefers instrumentals. The rhythm has stuck with him all day. Now his mind has raised the

volume, so that every thought he has is muffled like a low voice in a crowded room. It's a heavy, deep, chaotic beat, and underneath it he is thinking frantically, without words, drawing ever closer to decisions he is unprepared to make.

He reaches over his shoulder to remove the burrs. He can feel them but can't seem to get his hand back far enough.

All around him, kids begin to giggle. He can hear the teacher saying something, but he can't understand. Now he hears her coming toward him; sees the pale blue shadow of her skirt. He feels the room—his sight and sense of it—begin to narrow. It's as if he has been plunged, without warning, beneath the rippled surface of a pond, his world suddenly made strange, and all his senses muddled hopelessly by fear. The colors of his classmates' clothes and faces blend, their outlines growing soft and bleeding in and out of one another; all their voices turned to groans. He tries to turn his head to find the window but has lost even this small sense of direction. And, like being underneath the surface of the pond, he feels himself pressed hard on every side by danger. There is only danger, which he fights without knowing what it is or how or where to find safety.

Now he's rising, pulled up by an arm as numb as sackcloth. He jerks, pulling clear, and runs out through the open classroom door. He runs down the hallway, towards the main door of the school, unsure if he's running or imagining he runs. He feels the danger pushing in behind him and ahead. He feels that he is being hunted. There are people in the parking lot—mothers, students and administrators who all turn their heads to watch him as he passes by. He holds his hands up to his face, as if this desperate act could keep them all from recognizing him (the boy in patched up desert camouflage, without a coat despite the wintry bite still snapping in the air).

He makes straight for the forest, where he knows that he can be alone. Jonah taught him to trust the forests, and he's thankful for this now, because he knows that in the world-as-it-is it gives him power: there's always one place he can feel safe.

The little ridge behind the school is strewn with footprints, bits of food, and crushed-out cigarettes. He hikes up further, past the stands of birch and aspen to the tall firs up above. At the top, the ground levels off and opens to a floor of moss and needles. He's been running all the way, and stops to catch his breath. He's certain no one followed him. Nobody cares enough to chase him even this far. Nonetheless, he doesn't feel the usual exhilaration of escape. The wind off of the mountain is warm and wet—but fresh—so new it makes him shiver. This sudden, involuntary movement frightens him, and for a second he believes he's running—faster than he ever thought imaginable, with the colors of the trees, and rocks, and sunlight gone to riot, and the wind just absolutely roaring in his ears.

But his feet (his legs, his knees) are numb. He finds himself crouched down behind the black root-structure of a fallen oak, weighted heavily by a suspicion he is being hunted. It's the same dumb panic that he used to feel when waking up, on nights his father came home after dark. His father taught him how to still-hunt rabbits, moving slowly through the long grass, creeping up by inches on the pile of logs and bracken at the corner of his uncle's lot. They stood there in the blue fog rolling off the ridge until the sun rose and began to burn it all away. His fingers grew stiff around the forend of his gun before his father slowly raised one hand to point. His voice refused to rise above a whisper.

Two o'clock, he says. You see the eyes?

Bo sees: a black spot blinking at him from behind the piled branches. He starts to raise his gun, but his father stops him with a firm hand on the barrel.

He'll break, he says. They're nervous. They can't stand the wait.

His own paralysis is broken by the sound of children's voices. They're familiar, cutting into his thoughts. When he finds himself again, he's running, this time very clumsily. It's as if the forest floor is shifting, preventing him from finding any rhythm in his footfalls. He's soon back down on the ground, sprawled behind a rotting birch log. The sudden smell of damp earth is comforting, and he no longer feels like running.

A boy's voice calls out:

"Yeah, I think it's him!"

This is followed shortly by a chorus of laughter. Three other voices, two of them laughing louder than necessary, toss out garbled statements of support, and one of them is laughing only weakly. He can see them clearly now: Evan and the other boys from class.

"Hey! Are you gonna run away again?"

They all laugh, genuinely this time.

"Mr. Crane says he's not coming after you next time!"

A different boy, the one that Bo is sure is Evan, says "We won't tell anyone!"

Their shouts are flattened by the damp air.

Bo's fear and panic turn quickly to humiliation and the sweet smell of the earth beneath him goes sour. Near his head, a black fly shuffles up the log. He sits up without thinking, trying to slap it away.

The other boys can't see him clearly through the trees, but they've noticed something. Just enough to tell them he is still there.

"Holy shit! There he is!" cries Evan, and one of the other boys laughs.

"Why didn't he run?"

“Maybe he got stuck.”

“In what?”

“I don’t know, a frickin’ hole or something.”

“Stan, school’s over. Just say ‘fuck’.”

Their voices hush and mingle with the sound of running meltwater in the ravine.

Bo’s father would begin and end each hunting trip with whiskey, mixing Bo’s with a few drops of apple juice. This taste is in his mouth now. His throat’s burning with the effort of holding back tears. Feeling helpless, he picks up a fist-sized rock and stands to face them.

The boys’ low voices and the ripple of the water both begin to fall away, until he can’t hear them past the sound of his own heart, can’t hear them (they are yelling, now) past the bright spots dancing in the trees.

It’s only once the rock has left his hand that he regains his senses—on his knees behind the log. The world has gone still and speechless by his absence. The four boys are standing haphazardly around a pool in the ravine, all looking up with shaded eyes, searching for something in the bright light pouring through the branches. Bo looks up, only to have his attention broken, once again, by screaming.

Sometimes, when his father got tired of coming home empty-handed, they would hunt on land they weren’t supposed to. Jonah was always nervous on these trips. If they came across anyone else, he would always take off running. It was up to Bo to follow, but he had to do it quietly, the way his father did—bouncing from rock to log to root, so as to make no noise. As Bo runs, he feels the rhythm of these hops returning easily, and only starts to stumble when he knows he’s far enough away. His dad would say this kind of running is the kind of thing you can’t do unless you need to. He said that nothing good can happen without pressure.

When he reaches the other side of the ridge, he's forced to walk to make it safely down the slope. He can hear the others' voices, carrying on behind him. He wonders what he'll do if it turns out that Even's dead. He doesn't think it's very likely, though it occurs to him that he should probably not take the chance. In the wasp's nest of his mind, the home that he has lived in for the past three years is burning.

When he hears a second scream, louder than the first, his body responds. All in a rush, the feeling of unpleasant vulnerability returns. He feels much too exposed, much too confused, to think. On this side of the ridge the forest gives way to a small pine wood. Down here, the ground is fairly clear. He breaks into a trot, his footsteps falling softly on the bed of shed needles.

When he reaches level ground, Bo slows his steps, still keeping to a path that puts as much distance as possible between him and the others. He tries to imagine the rock he threw (heavy, maybe granite) and wonders briefly if the fact that he threw it downhill means it picked up speed along the way. He tells himself that chances are it landed somewhere relatively unimportant, like a shoulder or a knee.

His feet ache as he makes his way through a small marsh. Past this, there's a place where three large boulders make a little hollow in the ridge just big enough to move in, and to sleep. Even in the grip of fear, he finds some comfort in his knowledge of this place. The first time that he ran away from Aveyon, it didn't take him long to find that what his father said was true: *all forests aren't the same, and it takes time to get to know one*. In the field behind the bunkhouse, he had taken off his thin shoes and run straight for the trees. He wasn't much concerned about the miles of wilderness that he was running into—relying on the rocks and plants was part of daily life with Jonah—but he was unprepared for how hard it would be to walk in blind.

The forests further west (Jonah's forests) were much kinder. They were warmer, for one (it had been late fall, and he'd never experienced *real* cold) but it was not the gentle threats the wind made in his ears that got him caught—it was the simple fact that without moonlight, he could not see.

At his orientation, the camp's commander had explained the dangers of the forest, obviously trying to preempt any thoughts of escape. Bo had noticed a degree of true respect in his voice when he said the words *old growth*, as though the words themselves could conjure up the images of fairy tales and black woods that he tried so hard to describe.

There are animals out there that don't know human beings exist, which means they don't know you're supposed to be the one on top.

It wasn't until he escaped the final time, for good, and after he had come to live with Grace, that Bo found time to understand the growling complications of the words "old growth."

On the far side of the marsh, he scrambles up among the rocks to higher ground. It's not until he reaches it that he can feel his legs begin to go limp. He knows this feeling too—this sudden numbness—like his body wants to separate itself from him—and it takes all his concentration just to maintain contact with his limbs. At last he manages to make it to the hollow, where he feels he's safe enough to rest.

His buzzing thoughts break cleanly as he catches sight of movement in the sunlit gap between the rocks. It's far away—halfway up the western ridge, which he has never climbed—and must be something big to catch his notice through the trees. His instinct is to think that it's a deer—perhaps a bear—but as he stares longer down the ridge, he feels the tongues of panic lashing him again. If he shifts his gaze a little to the side, his eyes begin to find the outline of a face. Not clearly, but in general impression, like the faces in the background of the oil paintings

Jonah hung up in their cabin. He sees nothing and has almost convinced himself it is a clump of mushrooms pushing out from underneath a log. Then the clouds break, and a wave of bright light washes down the mountain. In it, he can see a pair of eyes blink closed, then disappear amidst a sudden flash of brown hair.

For a moment he is frozen, unsure what he's seen. The tongues flick hard inside him and his body tries to bury itself in the dirt, as though another person at this moment is more frightening than any animal. Through a crack in the rock face, he sees the spot where he believes he saw her face. He stays here motionless for a long time—until the birds have started calling again and the sun has given way to wisps of gray clouds—and he isn't disappointed. At first, she's just a sound, a semi-rhythmic crackle in the brush. He isn't sure until he sees her, stepping confidently on the scattered rocks below. She is followed by a dog, or a coyote. He can't tell.

He feels his chest seize. Not because she's naked, but because she doesn't seem to know it. As he watches, she drops down on all fours, calling out in quick, sharp tones to the dog, which whines excitedly in reply.

Suddenly the dog looks up at him. It makes no noise, but the wild girl must have noticed the change in its stance: its tensed back legs, its lowered snout. She emerges from the hollow in the rock and lifts her eyes, and for a moment Bo, the girl, and the dog all stare at one another, swapping gazes back and forth in slow time, until the dog lowers its belly to the ground and starts to growl.

He backs up slowly, keeping his eyes fixed on the dog. Just before the dog's head disappears behind the small horizon of the overhang, and just before he turns to run for home, Bo glances over at the girl. She is looking at him quizzically. Her eyes are green.

He drops down the other side of the hill, still running, and only slows down when he finds the well-marked path beside the creek. He pauses to look around, finding his bearing and looking for any sign of the wild girl and her dog.

He isn't far from home. He listens, holding his breath despite the pounding of his heart. There's silence in the trees.

He waits a minute longer, standing tensed and anxious, until he hears the birds resume their chirping. Then he walks home, quietly, each foot placed confidently on the soft ground, in the way that Jonah taught him. If asked, he could not explain his thoughts in words. Instead they are a mix of what he now considers old emotions—true fear, true excitement, true *importance*, but, also, finally, a kind of longing.

As soon as he breaks the cover of the trees, he sees Grace coming toward him on the lawn.

“The police are here,” she says.

He doesn't understand.

“Are you okay?” she says.

He sees it, now—the white police car at the bottom of the hill.

He waits for her to say more, wondering if someone else had seen the girl, but one of the officers is coming up the hill towards them. He feels lucky when Grace turns away to talk to him. He's found that, with Grace, he's best off keeping quiet. She takes his silence for remorse, or shame, and after an initial outburst of frustration, falls back on pity. With Eve, it's the opposite. If he is quiet, she assumes he isn't listening. When she's upset with him, she tries to exercise authority. But he gets pity out of her, too. Eventually. It's the same way that he used to deal with people in the towns he passed through after he escaped from Aveyon.

Of course, they aren't here for the girl. They're more likely here for him. He understands this, now.

He sneaks away from them to the front of the house, where Ernest has his nose pressed to the door.

"Get back," Bo says. "You can't go out."

"But I want go out."

He forces the door open, being careful to do it gently. Even so, Ernest starts to wail.

"Fine," he says, looking down so Ernest can see the anger on his face. "You win."

He continues on around the house, to the side facing the drive. After a minute, he can see the cops leave, just as Harry and Iliss show up.

He thinks he'll wait until they go inside to go back in the house. There's a good chance he can make it upstairs while they all say hello to each other.

As he comes back inside through the back door, he hears voices in the kitchen cutting short, then Iliss calls him.

"Is that Bo?"

Suddenly he feels uncertain. He can hear the others in the kitchen waiting for him.

As soon as he enters the kitchen, Grace asks if he's okay. He looks at his pant cuffs, which are caked in mud. He hadn't taken notice of the damp spring ground. His blood has not yet cooled, and he is having trouble putting his erratic thoughts in order.

"I saw a girl in the woods," he says. "That's why I ran."

He's trying to explain—to shift the focus of their gaze—but can't seem to think clearly.

"You saw a girl in the woods?"

He feels his panic rising, pushing out words.

“She was all dirty and naked. I think it’s an emergency.”

“She was naked?” Harry says, and Iliss brings a hand up to her mouth.

“She couldn’t have been...”

“Was she in trouble?” Grace asks.

With great effort, he can to look up at her face, holding it there the way Jonah used to hold his when it got this way. He wants to backtrack—curl up somewhere beside a fire and nod off until a time when this whole day can be forgotten.

“I don’t know,” he says. “She was with a dog. It looked like a coyote, but I think it was a dog.”

Grace doesn’t pause for breath.

“Was she upset? You didn’t talk to her?”

Harry says, “Naked girls in the woods. Best to leave those alone.”

Iliss comes to his defense.

“It isn’t funny, Harry,” she says. “I know it’s probably all a rush right now...”

She motions for Bo to come closer and he does, and her hard hands on his shoulders are comforting. They make him feel a little more secure.

“We just need to know if we should do something,” she says.

He nods.

“Yes? You understand? You think we need to?”

He doesn’t think, but rather feels that he has said the wrong thing and in doing so, has started something that is quickly spinning out of his control. He knows that he can’t say what he wants to: there are no words to explain the way the wild girl’s eyes have unnerved him.

“I think she needs help,” he says, finally.

“Okay.”

Iliss leans back in her chair.

“I’m not implying anything here, Bo, but I need to know if this has anything to do with what happened today after school.”

He searches his mind for a memory that has already started fading.

“Bo, we know you hit Evan Clarke with a rock. We aren’t upset, we just want to know what happened.”

“Did he do something to you?” Grace asks.

“I didn’t mean to hit him.”

“All right,” says Harry, shifting his feet. “It’s gonna be alright. You just didn’t have much time to think things through.”

Bo focuses on Harry’s beard—the long white streaks shot through with red.

“He was really far away.”

“Of course, he was. You didn’t know you had that kind of aim.”

“Look,” says Iliss.

Her face is kind.

“Why don’t you go get washed up, and we’ll talk about it later. But before Harry and I leave.”

A floorboard creaks above them, and Iliss asks, “Is Evie home?”

“I guess so,” Grace says.

They listen until they hear her footsteps on the stairs.

Ernest shouts “Eee! Eee!”

“Oh!” says Iliss, “*You* know, don’t you!” She turns as Eve comes into the room.

“Hiding from us?” Iliss asks.

Eve is going out, which is fine with Bo. The last time that he tried to talk to her seriously, she said he might be better off out in the woods. He knows, now, that he didn’t understand her—that he shouldn’t be upset, but it doesn’t help that she has hardly said a word to him since.

In the kitchen, he hears Harry say something about putting the cover on the boat. Going to the door, he says

“It’s not a joke.”

But they continue talking over him, until they have decided he will go with Harry. He smiles to show his approval—he is ready to escape this room and all these anxious faces.

“Bo,” Grace says, “Are you alright? We’ll talk later, but I promise, everything will be okay.”

He believes her. She’s always trying to make things better.

“Well,” says Harry. “Let’s get going.”

After putting on their boots, they follow Harry down the rutted driveway to the road, slowing their pace to match his. Bo doesn’t need to watch his steps (he knows these ruts well) so he looks up, above the pointed tops of the firs, to where the sky is rippling with gray. He is thinking of the wild girl. In his mind it seems as if he could go back now to the hollow in the rocks and find her standing there, still tensed, still staring, waiting for him with her eyes.

“Do you think they’ll look for her?” he says to Harry.

“That depends on where you saw her,” Harry says.

“Up above the creek. Up on the ridge.”

Eve, who has been trailing them until now, finally decides to speak.

“You aren’t supposed to be out there alone. Grace told you to stay on the trails.”

He speeds up, keeping well ahead of them, but careful not to go too fast. He doesn't want to make Harry feel rushed. Inside, his joints are aching from the effort that it takes to hold them back.

They cross the road and he can see the little whaler tied up at the dock. The wind is picking up and waves are jumping in the middle of the lake. They aren't too big yet, but the black sky in the distance promises to push them higher.

When they reach the shore Bo runs ahead, jumps down into the whaler's bow, and rocks with it, as if this simple exercise might clear his troubled mind. When he hears Harry knocking on the boards behind him, he turns.

"Is the cover still under here?"

Harry tips his chin, and Bo gets on his knees to lift the panel in the boat's deck. Underneath, the canvas cover is folded neatly in one corner, strewn with spider webs and dust. He shakes it off, sets it down beside him, and closes the hatch.

"I don't know why we bother," Harry says, stepping heavily into the stern. "For all the good it does, we might as well just hold umbrellas. I'll still have to change when I get home."

"Only if it rains before you make it," Eve says brightly. She kneels on the dock and Bo passes her one side of the cover.

"Hmm," says Harry.

They snap the cover to the grommets on the bow, working silently while Harry sets the pole.

As he fumbles with the hardware Harry says, "You think that girl was maybe just a girl? Could be tourists. There are nudists come up here, you know."

Eve laughs. "It must be a short season."

“Not at all,” says Harry, smiling. “They’ve got thick skin. Like deer.”

Bo says, “I don’t think so.”

With the final snap in place, Harry sets the pole and climbs back out onto the dock. Eve reaches down her hand to Bo, but he won’t take it. He doesn’t like her assumption that he needs help.

Harry stops and looks up at the swelling sky.

“We should get moving,” he says. “No sense in getting caught in this.”

Eve thrusts her hands into her jacket pockets. She’s always overdressed—a trait that she and Harry share. The wind is picking up and blowing cold across the lake, and Bo can feel it cutting through his cotton pants and shirt. But he’s known cold that makes a person stumble. He’s known the fear of falling numb. This cool spring weather is a small annoyance—one that he refuses to take seriously.

Eve’s friends show up in an old jeep that looks uncared-for. He can’t see through the shaded windshield, but he thinks it’s Heather, who he doesn’t mind. She seems to take things much less seriously than Eve.

“They’ll find her,” Harry says, when they are gone.

Bo says, “She won’t stay here, though. Not now.”

Harry is annoyed, but not too much to miss out on a conversation.

“You said that she was with a dog, or a coyote. They’ll just track that.”

“What will happen to her?”

“They’ll take care of her, and find her a good home, just like they did for you.”

He thinks about the Franklin hospital, where his rescuers dropped him off; about the doctors who insisted he was sick and made him drink and swallow vitamins; about the nurses

who would come to pity him—about the fear in their eyes when they told him they could not find Jonah.

The wolves inside his head begin to snarl, and he has to push them down.

“What if she doesn’t want to be found?”

Harry snorts.

“Well then she doesn’t know what’s good for her. There. That does it.”

Bo holds the back-porch door for Harry, then follows him inside, already kicking off his muddy shoes.

Out on the road, a logging truck goes by and Ernest hurries to the window. As usual, he is annoyed by all the tall pines blocking his view. Bo wonders briefly if the baby will grow up to be like Eve, with a cold core made hard by ambition. He doesn’t know why she wants to leave this place, or rather, he can understand the leaving—there’s excitement simply in escape—but where she plans to go sounds worse than Garrett. He has not had time yet to think much about his own plans. Jonah always made it sound as though a person’s life is set from the beginning (*from the moment you are pulled up from the dark*) and so it didn’t make much sense to fight it. He thought everything that happened was ordained by nature.

He watches a house-hunting show on television. Eve makes fun of him for watching shows like this, but he has not been able to deny his interest. Grace says it makes sense—that he has catching-up to do when it comes to learning how most people live—and he supposes she is right. Tonight, the familiar sounds and pictures calm him, though he isn’t paying close attention. Instead, he listens to the clatter of dishes and the murmur of low voices in the kitchen. He expects to hear them talking about him. At the camp he learned that talk about others is rarely kind, and this is truer when the people talking are adults. Since he was found, or rather after he

gave up attempting to survive the forest and walked into town, he has been waiting for the moment when they turn on him, the way Jonah said they would *turn on you, once they find out what you are*—(but)—he has begun to understand how much more complicated things are than the way Jonah described them. He's wondered if the world isn't wholly the decrepit landscape Jonah thinks it is, and all this wondering has led him to the thought that maybe men like Jonah and the counselors at Aveyon are simply bitter, or afraid.

On the TV, they are choosing colors for a nursery. He wonders if he ever had a nursery, and he feels the punch of worry. Jonah never talked about the past. He said time doesn't run that way. As a result, Bo knows nothing of his past. His memories are all about the cabin, and the woods. He's tried to chase them backwards but has always reached a hard wall.

He hears Ernest laughing. He doesn't think much about Ernest. At first, he saw the baby as a mystery—a stark reminder that he, Bo, was once a child, and of all the questions that this fact entails. He has no memories of anything before Jonah, if there even was a time before. When he asked, Jonah always grinned, as though they shared a private joke, and said that Bo was motherless. A miracle. *Autochthonous*, which Jonah said meant *made of earth*. Bo never wished he had a mother. He was fine with everything the way it was and seeing Grace and Evie smother Ernest with attention only made him more concerned that mothering is just what Jonah said it was: careful training in dependence and docility. Jonah called the earth his father, and he said that if the mothers of the world had their way, all men would be weak.

When he's called into the kitchen, he's surprised to see a deer roast sitting on the table. He has never seen them eat it before.

Grace tries to cut it into even slices, but the knife is dull, and she's baked it until it's as tough as goose. He takes his plate politely, happy for the smell of meat again, even if it's blackened.

He can't help giving Harry pleading looks across the table, as he saws at his meat with the butter knife Grace gives him.

"Yeah, I know," he says. "I promised we would talk about the girl again."

Iliss says, "Oh, Bo, I'm sure we'll hear something."

He hates it when they act like he is stupid. None of them believe him. They're all just waiting for him to give up.

"But I'm worried about her."

Harry backs him up, suggesting that they call someone. But Grace will not be moved.

"We've already had the cops here once, today."

"I'm worried about her," he says, trying to keep the conversation going.

Harry fills his plate and puts his elbows on the table.

"It just might be a good idea just to call someone."

Grace shakes her head, showing her concern despite herself.

"We've already had the cops here once today."

"No," Bo says, "I didn't mean ..."

He's suddenly afraid—his stomach clenched in knots. He'd only wanted them to let him go and find her.

"Well," Harry mutters to himself, and lets the rest disperse into the air.

"Well," Iliss echoes. She reaches for her purse, pulls out her phone and squints down at the screen.

“I’m not sure who to call...”

Because Jonah would say...

“That sounds fine,” says Iliss. She is speaking into her phone. “Yes, yes, they sent me here.”

She nods.

“Well, I have a boy here who say he saw a girl in the woods. I mean a –” She pauses, waves her free hand in the air, and clears her throat. “Well, she was alone,” and Iliss cuts her eyes to Bo.

“And it sounds like she was naked. Yes, she looked a little wild, I suppose. Yes, you can see why we were worried.”

Iliss listens for a moment.

“Oh. I’d hoped you had. But I suppose...”

Now, suddenly, she laughs.

“Well, that’s true,” she says, looking somewhat apologetic. “Yes, yes that’s fine. We’ll be here. It was in the forest, between here and the school. Yes, we’ll be here.”

She puts the phone down on the table.

“They’ll come out tomorrow.”

Bo grimaces. He knows now that he should have kept this to himself.

“Tomorrow!”

Iliss shrugs.

“They haven’t had any other reports. I imagine with the weather we’re expecting, they decided it could wait until morning.”

Before he can stop himself, he says, “I just want to do something.”

“Bo.”

Grace is already reaching over, trying to make him feel better. He appreciates her efforts, but he can't explain.

She says, “Calm down. We're listening.”

He tries to pull himself together.

“I only want to look for her,” he says.

“What do you mean, look for her?”

Before he can respond, Iliss breaks in.

“Grace tells me that you had another attack. Do you feel alright?”

He nods. It isn't good if they begin to notice he is frustrated. They'll only start to push him harder.

“It was probably a girl in a bathing suit,” says Harry. “It's only May, but people get excited for the summer.”

He can only stare down at the deer meat still sitting, uneaten, on his plate. He doesn't want to waste it—if only for Jonah's sake—but he's feeling down and angry.

Grace says, “You can go watch TV if you want.”

He wants to glare at her but doesn't dare. She only wants to have him gone.

He climbs the stairs slowly, thinking Jonah used to say that moments like this made the difference between predator and prey. He showed Bo the fragrant flowers in the greenhouse and they walked along together, snipping yellowed leaves and broken stems. *No sense feeding useless parts*, he said. *You cut out all the weak parts, and the plant can focus on what makes it strong.*

In bed, Bo stares out at the moonlit yard and thinks about his weakness. If Jonah returns and sees the way that Bo is living now, he'll see a sick plant, weakened (maybe temporarily, but possibly forever) by the years that it's been left unpruned.

He knows he shouldn't think like this, and so he turns his thoughts back to the wild girl (he can see her eyes still, shadowed in the darkness). Bo is comfortable out in the woods—at ease, he tells himself, with loneliness and hunger. But if she really *is* wild—if she isn't just a child—she must be important.

They don't know how hard it is to forget, especially at times like this when everything that Jonah said seems to be coming true. *The world-as-it-will-be*, he said, *is a garden: not a gated garden, not a palace garden, but a wild garden, untouched and unbounded, so that every place is nowhere and to go is both to leave and to return.*

When Jonah drank, he'd talk about the coming change. Most of it Bo didn't understand. Jonah's vision of the world now exists in Bo's head as a half-remembered dream. He's tried to grasp it more fully, but the details kept slipping away. Jonah was only sure about one thing: that Bo has an important role to play. *A universal* role, he said. This had to do with *natural understanding*. There were scattered days devoted to developing this understanding. Days spent in a tent alone (to understand silence), days in late fall when they'd sit outside unclothed, clutching every muscle tight to check their quaking (and in this way Bo began to understand cold, though it wasn't until Jonah ran off and left him at Aveyon that he was introduced to weather in which simply stepping out without a coat on could be lethal). At night, he tried to understand the darkness. In the heat of summer, he would try to understand thirst. The only thing that Jonah never asked him to understand (which was some comfort) was pain. *Pain is simple*, he

said. *Everything can understand pain.* And maybe this is it: the wild girl's pain the key and this—this moment, something he can only feel he understands—the proof of something greater.

Nights spent on the ground and in the cold have made him good at forcing himself into sleep. He thinks that his escapes into unconsciousness are much like opening a heavy door. He pulls it toward him, catching just a glimpse of the beyond. But he's uncertain. He's afraid that he has given up the wild girl's hiding place (*the same way you gave up on us, you little...*). He realizes suddenly, and with a shiver, that he doesn't want the cops to come. He doesn't want the town to know. The forest covers miles, but eventually they'll find her. And he doesn't want her to be found. He wants her to stay just exactly where she is.

He sits up straight in bed, squinting out the window toward the corner of the yard, where the path leads to the creek. He feels an overwhelming urge to go back to the hollow. He should warn her.

The floor is cold against his bare feet as he creeps across it toward the door.

Grace turned off the heat a week ago, when the new grass was no longer stiff with frost, but the nights are still unfriendly. He clenches up his muscles to forestall another shiver. Cautious, he's still thinking about going out again, if only to make sure the girl has moved on (but otherwise to warn her) when he hears Eve say his name, pronounced as though it carries great significance, and Grace's heavy sigh in answer.

It's not (necessarily) panic he feels, but (he supposes) something like shame. Grace and Eve might be weak, but they're kind. He doesn't want to make things harder for them. He can feel his plans evaporating into haze and climbs back into bed to stare again out at the moonlit yard. He tells himself that he'll go out as soon as light breaks, before anyone's awake. Before the cops come, and with plenty of time to make it back before they notice.

He sets his mind to sleep, opening the door and stepping quickly through.

Bo: Day 2

It's still dark when he wakes, his eyes still watery and swollen from the pressure of his dreams. He flings the covers off and gets onto his feet, before he's fully awake, and sways a little, his bare feet cooling on the smooth pine floor. He waits here, still and silent, until he can feel his blood rise and his muscles loosen. Now he shivers, lifts his heavy canvas pants from the crumpled pile near his bed, and pulls them on. From the top of his dresser, he gathers his things: watch and knife and lighter, slipping them into the well-worn pockets of his pants, where they fall easily into the faded outlines of themselves.

The house is quiet. He imagines he can hear the sounds of breathing through the walls. In the darkness, he can almost hear the walls themselves breathe, in the way that Jonah said everything does.

In the kitchen, he moves easily in darkness, working with what little light he has and with his memory to guide him. He would like to run a glass of water, but he won't risk waking Grace. Taking care to do it silently, he takes a can of soda from the fridge and carries it onto the porch. He stares up at the moon—a washed-out yellow orb against the gray sky.

The can's tab breaks the silence momentarily. He waits for it to settle once again before he drains it in a few long gulps. He puts the empty can behind a bush beside the porch steps and crosses the yard quickly, keeping to the edge in case Grace is awake and looking out her window. Once he turns onto the forest path, he slows his pace considerably, stepping carefully in an attempt to hide his presence. He won't escape the notice of a few red squirrels, woken early

by the promise of storm-blown seeds. At the path's end, where it fades away into the stony banks of the creek, a starling passes overhead, calling out a warning.

Bo does not like seeing starlings—birds that he and Jonah would use to practice wing shooting. In lean times they would sometimes eat these kills, and even Jonah admitted they were good (a bit like dove) but both of them hated the tedious process of boning out so many tiny mouthfuls of meat. For the most part, they left their spoils to the feral cats and foxes. *Starlings*, Jonah said, *aren't welcome. They are just another clear example of the way man has mismanaged earth.*

Bo takes a shortcut up the ridge and through the mossy glade below. Even in the half-light of the rising dawn, the moss is green with spring and loosing little trails of pure white mist. In places like this he feels he has stepped into a dream—as though the earth itself is dreaming, lying clam and yawning, open to the whole of possibility. Walking on the thick green mat of moss, his footsteps make no sound. It's as if he moves in spirit, gliding without effort, seeing without sense. As he approaches the hollow where he last saw the wild girl, he does not know what to hope for. If he can't find her, he will look for sign, and if he can't find that, he is afraid of what he'll feel. It won't be simple disappointment. She already means much more to him than that. It will be the grief of hard loss. He has not allowed his hopes to blossom into promise—he is too familiar with that danger to succumb to its temptations—but he knows that if he finds her (if she wasn't just some panicked camper)—she'll accept him. She will teach him, answering his questions with a depth and clarity that he has never known.

As he approaches the overhanging rocks, he hears a branch snap down below. Instinct brings him to his knees, where his face will be hidden. Here, within a little stand of peeling birch, he waits. His mind is empty. All he does is listen.

In this silence he begins to see the colors of the forest bloom. The light is rising. Squirrels chitter, and from somewhere far away a turkey shouts. Bo's head does not move, though his eyes are busy, flicking back and forth between the edge of the embankment and the rocky slope that leads down to the hollow. He's used to this—he's waited this way for all kinds of creatures—but this time his heart thumps and his hands shake as they did the first time.

That's excitement, Jonah said, which is only an excessive word for hope.

His eyes were shining in the early light.

The deer comes or it doesn't. Either way, it should be all the same to you. You have to crush that feeling down.

Bo would imagine heavy fists inside him, beating down his hope.

As it sometimes used to happen when he hunted, the girl shows up sooner than expected, before he's had a chance to fully settle into place. He hears a little yip, like a coyote, and sees the dog exit the cave, followed closely by the girl. She has dark hair twisted up into a black nest above her head, and skin the color of the trees. For a moment he stops breathing, mid-breath, as he used to just before he pulled the trigger. Knowing it will be too difficult to follow her without being seen, he simply stands, and lifts his arms.

The girl and her dog both turn around. She is less than fifty yards away but doesn't appear frightened. She's curious, Bo soon decides. She wants to know what he is doing here, in her woods, watching her awake.

He knows he should do something to hold her interest. The dog has already turned and is looking back at her over its shoulder. He takes his lighter from his pocket and holds it in the air, snapping the wheel so she can see the flame.

She leans her body forward for a better look. The dog is urging her to go and Bo can see that she won't wait much longer before following it. Quickly, but quietly, he goes to the top of the rocks. Making certain she is still watching, he flicks the lighter one more time, then sets it down and backs away.

She watches him, still leaning. He can see her eyes, squinting up into the sunlight. When he stops moving, she makes a chuffing sound between her teeth, then turns and runs. She doesn't seem afraid; her quickness on all fours seems almost natural, mimicking the dog. And like the dog, her disappearance is entirely silent. He can see her moving, taking long, high strides above the rocks and fallen trees, but doesn't hear a sound. He has seen animals move like this—predators—not people.

For a minute he stands staring at the place where he last saw her, thinking of the colors of her hair, her skin—the strange curve in her back—trying to commit it all to memory the way he used to memorize the pictures of game birds in Jonah's *Field Guide to American Wildlife*. He wants to know that he can recognize her in the same way she can recognize him. They are connected, then—at least by that.

He leaves the lighter on the rock, afraid of driving her away with his intrusions and thinking it will help him know if she's been back. He takes a shorter route back to the house. He can hear chainsaws starting in the distance, and he wants to be back in his room before Grace wakes.

If Jonah were here, he'd say that Bo had done the right thing. *Take it slow*, he'd say, *take everything slow*. He'd agree that there was no point in finding the girl if they didn't have her trust.

Bo is gentle with the back door, but the hinges still squeal. He keeps quiet, hoping no one's heard.

“Bo! Where have you been?”

He sits down at the table, hoping that she won't make things too hard.

“Just down to the creek,” he says. “I couldn't sleep.”

She crosses her arms and frowns.

“You were looking for that girl.”

It's a fair assumption, though he doesn't like the way she has of saying things like this out loud. She seldom offers her opinion freely, wrapping it instead in layers of confusing tones and gestures.

“I saw her,” he says.

“I know you did, Bo. I believe you.”

He looks at her and thinks she is telling the truth. Alone with her in the quiet kitchen, he feels the burden of his thoughts more acutely. He wonders if he shouldn't let it go—pass all of it to Grace and trust that she'll have answers.

“What is it with her, anyway?” Grace says. “Is there something you're not telling me?”

He shakes his head immediately. “No, I just want to know she's okay.”

“Listen, Bo,” she says. “I'm sure that the police can handle it. And after yesterday, I need you to lie low, okay?”

She takes his hand and says, “Just try to stay here and relax. It's the first day of summer!”

She smiles, so he smiles back.

“I want it to be a good one, okay? The best. But you have to start taking responsibility for yourself.”

“Yes, ma’am,” he says.

This seems to bother her. She stiffens.

“Bo, I’m not your jailer, or your captain, or whatever. I’m just here to help.”

He wonders.

“Bo, we want you to be part of this family. Do you want that too?”

He nods. “I like it here.”

“Well, that’s the thing, Bo. We want you to stay because you like it, not because there’s nowhere else to go.”

They say this, and he’s almost come to trust it. Still, when she tries to put her hand on his he feels uncomfortable and wary of her motives.

“If I’m going to help you, I need to know what happened,” she says.

He shuts his eyes, feeling the pressure. He insists he didn’t mean to hurt him, which he thinks is true, but doesn’t really care if it’s not.

He hears her saying, “Bo, you do know they could transfer you. Or move you back to Franklin. I don’t know...they could even send you back to Aveyon. I understand that’s something you don’t want...”

“You can’t understand it if you haven’t been there,” he says.

“They showed me pictures.”

Pictures, Jonah said, are dead things. Bo is even more confused. His head is buzzing. He can feel her staring at him, waiting for him like a spider.

Finally, she gives up. There is knocking at the door.

Two officers enter the kitchen, both in dark blue uniforms, and Bo is thankful that it's only local police. He stares into his lap, uncertain if he hopes that they'll believe him, or that they will only laugh at him and leave.

He hears their questions and he answers them. He does it honestly, the way Jonah would want him to—without revealing too much. Finally, they seem to lose interest. He hears Grace and the officers continue talking, straying from the subject of the girl. He doesn't think that they believe him. Not entirely. They'll probably just call the summer camps and, when they don't find anything, give up. He decides that this is for the best. At the very least, it gives him time to gain her trust.

“I have to go get Ernest,” Grace says. “We'll talk more about this later.”

Then she's gone, and he is left with just his thoughts. He notices the light shift in the kitchen, brightening until the edges of things start to look much sharper. Upstairs, he hears Ernest's door swing open, and the floor creak under Grace's feet. He wonders how he can convince them that the girl is important to him; that he needs to be involved.

At times like this, he knows what he would like to say. He has rehearsed it and revised it so often that it comes to mind unbidden: *What have I done?* He would ask, in Jonah's voice that he reserved for people who he thought were being difficult. *Is it wrong to be able to take care of myself? Is it wrong to hunt? To camp? To go on walks?* They tell him he should ask first, but there isn't always time and he does not like confrontations. He's getting tired of their wanting him to not know things that he already knows.

Reluctantly, he goes up to his room and sits beside the window, where he can look down at the yard. He's frustrated. He has tried so hard to tell her that he likes it here. It's better than the camp, of course, but there are lots of things he now knows he missed out on when he lived with

Jonah. There is good food—lots of it—and soda, and they never ask him to do work, apart from jobs he likes, like cutting back the weeds around the island with Harry’s old scythe. He likes the motorboats, especially the fast ones.

Now he’s thinking of a boat ride: Harry driving fast on smooth water with the light wind whipping overhead. He wonders what the girl would think. He imagines she’d be frightened, and, as Jonah would say, *with good reason*. Harry would say it too, but with a different meaning.

Looking for something to do, he unpacks all his schoolbooks, sliding them beneath the bed. He’s glad the year is over. Weeks ago, just after he came home again at lunchtime, Iliss started talking about home-school. He is hoping this is good news. When he lived with Jonah, he had liked to learn things. He expects his lessons here will be much like the tests he took each year. They weren’t too difficult, especially with Jonah there to tell him what he didn’t already know. More importantly, it might give him a way to get away from all the other boys at school, who either taunt him, like the counselors at Aveyon, or won’t have anything to do with him.

He takes a plastic box from underneath his bed and fills his backpack with the things that he has put away: some extra socks and shirts, matches, a water bottle, and his hunting knife—the fixed-blade Grace will only let him keep because it was a gift from Jonah. He adds a flashlight, and some rope.

Thinking that he should fill up the water bottle, he goes out into the hall and pushes on the bathroom door.

“Bo!” Eve cries, at the moment he sees Heather, standing naked at the sink. She turns around and tries to cover herself, then slams the door shut.

In the moments just before she does, Bo’s world slows. It isn’t that he’s never seen a girl naked, though he hasn’t. It’s how much she looks like him. Bent over, covering herself, her wet

hair matted to her head with white streaks showing in between the long black ones. She's skinny, like him. Like she might be too afraid to eat.

“Who's that?” he says, trying to feign ignorance.

“It's my friend Heather.”

“She left the door open.”

He is genuinely sorry. He is only trying to explain, but Eve is angry.

“So what? You knew someone was in there.”

He shakes his head slowly.

“No, I didn't.”

The bathroom door begins to shake as Heather struggles with the sticky knob. Eve tells him to go back inside his room, and he's happy to escape.

For a minute he sits with his back against the door while Eve and Heather talk to one another. Jonah never said much about girls. Only women, like Grace. Now, Bo thinks, there are two girls—girls who came into his life at almost exactly the same moment, in the same way.

He goes back to the window. Outside, the grass is still wet, and the holes near the beginning of the path have filled with black mud. He wonders if the girl will know how to use his lighter. It would have been cold last night, especially among the trees.

There's movement on the other side of the lawn. He stares down at it, relaxing his vision, waiting for the second flash.

It's just a cardinal, hopping through the branches.

He's getting jumpy—like when he first started hunting and would lose his breath at the slightest snapping of a twig. He needs to be *out there*, with her. Even if he doesn't find her, he

might find more pieces of the mystery. If he can keep track of the time, he can be back before Grace.

Finally, the girls go downstairs. He listens to them talk to Grace, and to the sounds of Ernest babbling. When he hears Grace leave, everything goes quiet. Before long he feels he has been forgotten, and he's not unhappy. He might have a chance to fix his mistake, after all. He should never have told anyone about the girl. If he's the only one she wants to see, it's not his place to judge.

Eve and Heather are downstairs with Ernest. He can hear the clacking of the wooden train cars running down the track. Sometimes, it seems like all they ever do is play with toys. Jonah wouldn't have allowed it.

On his way into the kitchen, he is careful not to look at them. If they're distracted, he can sometimes sneak by unnoticed. This time, he can feel Eve watching. Out the back door; ten steps on the wet lawn, and she's there, behind him, yelling. He breathes deeply, struggling to keep his feet still. Every muscle is already poised to run.

"What are you doing?"

He turns slowly, with his hands against his sides to keep them from shaking.

"Taking a walk."

She sighs.

He's thinking of last night, when she was gone, at Mike's house. It's clear to him that no one cared where she was, or when she might come home. With Jonah, he had this one freedom: to come and go exactly as he pleased. Jonah never treated him like a prisoner.

"You can't stop me," he says.

"Bo. If you run away again, they'll send you back."

“I’m not!”

He feels like he is screaming.

“I’m not running away.”

“Tell me the truth, Bo. Seriously.”

She reaches out and grabs him by the hair. It doesn’t hurt, but he can feel his right arm tense. She smells like woodsmoke and violets.

“Look at me. Honestly, she just sounds like a girl in trouble. Homeless, maybe.”

He puts his hand on top of hers, and she lets go. He steps back until he thinks he’s out of reach.

“There are only a few hundred people in this town,” he says.

“So what? None of them are homeless?”

“No. I mean, wouldn't someone notice? Why would she go into the woods?”

“I don't know. Maybe she's in trouble.”

Why is it so hard for them to understand? What’s a few hours in the woods, or even a few days, to them, if he comes back? He wants to scream at her *I like it here! I like it!*

If he wants to run, he’ll run. Until then, they can count on him to come back. Jonah used to go away for weeks. It never bothered him—

“Look, Bo. You have way too much to worry about on your own.”

“I’m fine.”

“You are not fine. No one’s fine, Bo! I don't know everything because you won't tell me, but I know enough to know you've been through real shit. Be a guy and think about yourself for once.”

He turns away from her. If she hasn't threatened him with anything by now, he's won. He's tired of these conversations that go nowhere.

Today the weather is the nicest it has been in months. The path is damp, but not wet. Soft, so that his footsteps make no sound. In any case he doubts if he could hear them over the insistent calling of the birds. He pauses by a huge pine growing where the creek veers from the path, continuing away from him into the forest. On his side of the creek there is a narrower path, worn by teenagers and fishermen, that pushes on into the trees.

He knows that he will have to cross the creek at some point, but the creek is wide here, filled with deep pools where the water appears cold and black. He heads down the narrow path, keeping his eyes open for a better place to cross. He feels his heartbeat quicken as he ventures further in, though he can't say why. He has no reason to be frightened—if he finds the girl, he doubts that he'll be able to get close. His intention is to find some sign of her. Some proof that she exists.

He reaches a place where the round river rocks have piled up, forming a shallow but turbulent crossing. He takes off his shoes and puts one foot into the water, searching for a steady stone. The water is (as always) colder than he has imagined it would be. It occurs to him, as he wobbles carefully across the rocks, his shoes held high in one hand, that the girl would have trouble staying warm. Not just at night, but on spring days, like yesterday, on which the sun does not shine.

He guesses this is why the adults seem reluctant to believe him. They can't believe a child could survive alone here. It's possible that they are right (that the girl is only a girl) but she might still need help.

On the other side of the creek, he sits to dry his feet off on the grass and put his shoes back on.

He imagines what it would be like to find her. She could be in a precarious position (caught in a trap, perhaps) in which case, Bo is confident, she would be grateful for some help. Grace has an extra mattress they can put in Ernest's room.

No, *that would not be smart*. They can take the girl to the island, where she'll be less likely to decide to run.

The land is flat on this side of the creek, and once he makes it up the bank the way is clear and easy. Here the pine trees rise so high that little sunlight makes it to the forest floor, and that which does comes through in shining yellow patches, so that Bo feels he is passing through a sacred place where he does not belong. The quieter he makes his footsteps on the spongy ground, the more he feels unwelcome.

He stops again beside a small, uprooted pine and tries to listen, the way Jonah taught him. He can hear the birds, and something rustling amongst the leaves. A squirrel or a chipmunk, he assumes. A breeze comes through and makes the pine trees' smallest branches tap against each other. Bo shivers and steps out from behind the fallen tree, into the light.

The wind dies and he hears a branch snap close by. Instinctively he turns and sees a flash of movement further on, just where the ground begins to rise. He crouches, peering over the top of the dead tree, through the settling pines. There is a second flash of movement as some kind of animal (large; black-and-brown) runs silently between the trees up on the ridge. His initial fear turns quickly to excitement as he focuses all his attention on the climb, moving in small bursts between the rocks and saplings. When he reaches the top, he half-expects to see the girl and her dog awaiting him.

There isn't anything up here apart from more trees. They're sparser here, at least, and he can see a hundred yards in both directions, all along the ridge and far into the wide ravine below.

He thinks briefly about going back to get tell the others. But he feels it much too strongly: he must be the one to flush her, or else risk her running out of fear. He knows the kind of fear that paralyzes—when the counselors at Aveyon lit up the trees like daylight and he waited for them, cowering and cold. When that momentary shock wore off, he found his tense limbs filled with fire and he'd run until he reached a road with cars and families too naive to ask too many questions.

He sets off along the flat top of the ridge, moving quietly and with an eye turned toward the shallow ravine down below. Without much thought, he forms a plan to walk the length of this ravine, pushing deeper into the forest as he goes, before turning back along the next ridge toward the rocky hollow.

Now, alone and undistracted, he can fix his goal more clearly in his mind. It's as though the world is no longer separate from him, but shot through him, working deeper with its roots and creepers until he can no longer feel himself—no longer thinks about himself except as eyes and ears, panning, searching; noticing. The change is like the one that he has always felt while hunting, though it's been so long since he was with Jonah that he is surprised to find it coming back to him so easily. He's even more surprised to find that it has come back stronger—more intense and far more focused.

He moves slowly, painfully so, almost forgetting his feet as he scans the woods for sign. There's a black woodpecker pecking at a big birch down in the ravine. He can't hear it, but he sees the quick flash of its head, bright red against the white bark. There are songbirds talking all around him—these he ignores, as he does the chattering of squirrels and the restless drumming of

a grouse. Once he catches sight of a young deer on the opposite ridge. He hears it before seeing it, having followed its meandering track in hopes of finding somewhere that the wild girl might hide.

He pauses at the end of the ridge, where the ground slopes gradually down towards an open marsh. He cuts away from it, down into the ravine, and stops to drink from the stream. He hasn't done this in a long time—not since he first drank the water in the stream behind the bunkhouse back at Aveyon and spent the next three days in bed. But now he isn't thinking, feeling good and comfortable with this because he knows that it must be the way the girl lives—with little else to think about apart from her own senses and her own need—no plans and no responsibilities, no structure—living in a time that always has just started and will never end.

Suddenly he hears a scream, then silence, then more screaming. He flings the water from his hands and breaks into a flat-out run. He pushes himself hard, taking risky leaps between the boulders in his path and scrambling with feet and fingernails wherever the ground proves too steep, hoping to get there in time to see.

He's very near the wild girl's hollow. He slows down as he approaches, moving back and forth between the trees and on the lookout for the dog. He's up above the rocks, now, having worked his way deliberately upwards so he'll have the benefit of higher ground. Here he stands still for a long time, both to catch his breath and to listen. He's all nerves, waiting for something to happen. The air on top of the ridge is cool and he feels jittery and open, waiting for some kind of signal.

He hears a rustle down in the ravine and turns to look. The forest down below is quiet for a moment. Then the girl and her dog break from behind a rock and trot down toward the creek. It's odd, Bo thinks, to see a girl running on all fours, almost as effortlessly as the dog. It's like a

story he has read or seen somewhere. A fairy tale, or something so rare and incredible that it might as well have been one. He begins to run along the ridge, keeping a sharp eye on where the girl disappears into the foliage. He feels his foot slip first, then the scraping as his hands drag on the rock. The fall itself is not long—less than ten feet—but the impact knocks his breath away. His chest is filled with warmth, then heat, then fire.

As he lands, his head knocks back against the packed earth, hard enough to blur his vision. By the time it clears, his body feels large and remote.

Then, slowly, the silence closes back around him like a fog, and he can't see anything except the smooth rock face in front of him. Afraid to move too much, but beginning to feel his left side, which is pressed against the ground, starting to go numb, he twists his shoulders until he is able to rest up against the rock wall. As he relaxes into it, he feels a sudden pain run from her thigh into his hip, spreading out into the rest of him before it dissipates.

The cave is small and dark. Across from him, an animal lies in the scattered shadows from above. A doe, half-eaten. Looking down, he sees Eve, lying on a pile of broken pine branches.

“Just go,” she says. “Go get help.”

The fear in her voice makes him worried, and he sets off running. He is focused on the house and on his footing, flying down the ridge at a dangerous pace. Once he slips and falls, bashing his shoulder against a rock. When he reaches the creek, he doesn't stop to find a crossing, but sashes straight through, so that when he finally reaches the yard he's out of breath and soaked.

They must have seen him from the window, because he's hardly left the woods before he sees Grace running toward him.

"Eve's hurt. She fell and needs help," he pants.

She turns around to shout at Harry, who is coming out onto the porch.

"Where is she?" Harry asks.

"Eve's hurt! We have to go now."

He tries to think of something to get their attention.

"She's all alone."

Grace says, "Hold on. Where is she? How bad is it?"

"She's in the woods. It's pretty bad, but I think she'll be okay if we get help."

Harry growls.

"Alright," he says to Grace. "You wait here, and Bo and I will see what we can do to help."

Grace seems unsure, but Bo knows the most important thing is getting help to Eve. He takes Harry's hand and starts to move back toward the trees.

At the bottom of the path, Harry asks "Which way?"

"Up there," he says, pointing to the ridge. "But it's steep."

"That's alright," says Harry, "Let's go," and they cross the creek together.

Bo has seen him climb up hills before, but never this steep, and never so quickly. As they reach the top and approach the cave, he sees Eve lying on the leaves in front of it.

"She got free," he says. He's transfixed by this thought, looking back along the trail of scattered leaves to where her blood is smeared across the entrance to the cave.

"Bo. Over here," says Harry.

Eve's still awake, but isn't acting like herself. Harry tries to lift her in both arms, but stumbles on his way onto his feet.

Eve only moans as she rolls out of Harry's arms. Bo locks his fingers underneath her arms and pulls her halfway to her feet.

"Okay. Okay," says Harry, breathing hard. "Not like that. Just keep a hold on her."

He holds her this way until Harry takes one arm, and together they are able to get Evie's bad leg off the ground.

"Can you do it this way?" Harry asks.

Eve makes a sound like "yes" and seems to nod. Harry nods at Bo and they start back down to the creek.

He rubs the chafed place on his neck where Eve's arm hung around it. He can smell the sharpness of her sweat. His thoughts are buzzing uncontrollably. His arms and legs are stiff. He wonders whether or not he can trust the paramedics.

"Yes, she'll be okay," says Harry. "It's just good that you were with her. Listen, why don't you go up and change your clothes. I should give Grace a call."

Bo's shoes are muddy—the knees of his pants almost soaked through. He leaves his boots beside the door and goes up to his room to change. The house is quieter than he is used to, despite the worried sounds of Harry and Iliss's voices. He changes into new pants and sits on the edge of his bed. He faces the window, as though there is something soothing out there, past the yard and past the trees, that he must watch for. He wonders what will happen to the wild girl now. He wonders how she makes it through the cold months. Even wild animals don't always make it through. Last year, in the middle of a disappointing hunting season when the boys at

school were all bemoaning the long, frigid hours spent in stands, Bo found an old buck that had gotten itself stuck inside a snow drift and starved. He'd been lucky to find its tracks before the coyotes.

And Jonah said all that separated man from beast was man's fragility—his inability to cope with nature. He would find the wild girl. Bo is certain. He would take a backpack and a gun and search through winter if he had to—if that was the only way to learn how she survives. But it is almost summer, and the forest covers many miles. He imagines she'll go up the mountains (as he would) and hide out there until things freeze. By then they will have given up.

He's frightened by a sudden movement near the entrance to the cave. He turns and there, halfway inside it, is the girl. She's on all fours and making no attempt to hide herself behind the rocks. Her skin coated with a layer of dust, as though she's rolled in it deliberately. Her hair is knotted up and frayed. She takes a step back, moving hand and foot together like a dog. The ease with which she does this strikes Bo as unnatural—it makes his stomach seize again, the way it did when he first saw her running from him by the creek. He cries out wordlessly this time, heaving himself backwards with a jerk.

Back outside the cave, he realizes that he's lost time. It's darker than he thought it would be, leaving very little light for him to see. He waits patiently for his eyes to adjust, until he sees the clear blue moonlight painted on the trees.

As soon as he can catch his breath, he sets off running. He is focused on the house and on his footing, flying down the ridge at a dangerous pace. Once he slips and falls, bashing his

shoulder against a rock. When he reaches the creek, he doesn't stop to find a crossing, but sloshes straight through, so that when he finally reaches the yard he is out of breath and soaked.

His shoes are muddy—both knees of his pants are almost soaked through. He leaves his boots by the door and goes up to his room to change. The house is quieter than he is used to, and he realizes they have left without him.

Upstairs he changes into new pants and sits on the edge of his bed. He faces the window, as though there is something soothing out there—past the yard and past the trees—that he must watch for. He wonders what will happen to the wild girl now. He guesses they will look for her.

He thinks about tomorrow. If they all go to the island, it will be easy to find an excuse to come back over to mainland. He can say he's going fishing. They'll be happy to have him out of the way.

The first night he slept on the island, he went out onto the cliffs at night. The Crane's house had felt even stranger than Grace's. His room looked just like the rooms Jonah talked about in houses further down the mountain, odorless and clean and filled with what Jonah called *fake nature*. Worst of all, it had no windows. Harry said it was an old room, built for sleeping in the winter. He went out without a purpose other than to get away, but Harry saw him on his way back through the woods and was upset. He said, in an angrily exhausted voice, *you have to stop acting like an animal*.

Bo nods. He knows what Harry means—that if he runs away again, they'll all be hurt. He doesn't want to run away. Apart from school, he likes it here, but Harry will not ever be convinced. The first time Bo left he had planned on coming back, but Harry said it didn't matter, that *a person can't just disappear*, and, *you could have died out there*.

He only wants to find the girl.

But there's no point trying to express his worries. He thinks about the wild girl in the winter, curled up in a coyote den with family who do not require explanations. If he was still with Jonah, they would have been deep in the woods right now. Jonah would insist. He'd see her as a sign, and proof of Bo's destiny. In everybody else's minds the wild girl seems to be the same as him—what Iliss calls a child who has gotten *lost upon the path to adulthood*. Bo doesn't know which version to believe, wanting both and neither and afraid to find out which is real.

The house is very quiet. Outside the sky is darkening and the lake is still as glass.

Thinking back upon his thirteen years of life, Bo knows that he is not a child. He is not a man, like Jonah and maybe Harry, but he doesn't need protection either. Jonah made sure of that. He wonders if this is what makes him so much different from the others, and he wonders if this difference makes him better, special, or if it only means he's broken.

This is not what he has wanted or hoped for. It is, he thinks, *just what I get for playing with things I don't understand*.

The girl will be gone forever, now. He's sure of that. He'll never help her; She will never help him (he no longer knows which he expected) and he'll never get to know if she was real, or only his diseased imagination.

It's fully dark outside, now. Night has fallen, and he knows he'd better get out to the island soon. If he doesn't show up there for dinner, Grace will come back over. She hates being on the lake at night, and he would rather keep her happy.

As he lifts his bag onto his shoulder, he stands up and glances out his bedroom window. There's a dog out on the lawn. *The* dog, he thinks. It's circling a patch of weeds, nose to the ground. Excited.

Bo runs down the stairs and out the front door, trying to be quiet, though it's difficult with all the old boards. Outside, he can hear the dog's footsteps as it comes nearer, towards the front of the house. He goes around the other side, trying to hide himself behind the wall. He squats down in the cool grass, shivering a little in his thin shirt. He can feel his panic rising, blotting out his thoughts. He hears the roaring of a swollen river in his ears; the panting and the scraping as the dog comes closer. Both of these sounds grow louder, until he can't tell if they're real or not, or if they are real; whether they come from inside him or without.

In the distance he can hear their sirens.

They are coming here, to take him.

This time, *he has pushed it too far.*

There's a hollow pop from somewhere up above, as something warm lands on his head. The smell of his hair burning brings him back in time to swat away the embers. Crying, he retreats across the yard into the road. His scalp is burning, and his legs are weak from so much running. When he turns back to the burning house, he thinks he sees the girl—just a pale blue shadow melting off into the woods.

But he can't be sure. He isn't sure of anything, right now, except his guilty conscience and the pain in his legs and the sickness in his gut. He looks back at the forest, at the place where he expects to see her, if she ever comes back. There is a part of him that wants to follow, but he doesn't think he can. Not this time. Anyway, she doesn't want him. Why else would she try to run him off?

And this...as Jonah would say, is his just reward.

It's just what you deserve.

And Jonah said that he was wrong. The woods make no deals.

The truth is, they just don't care. Some people have a hard time giving in to that.

Jonah accepted all things, exactly as they came, and Bo tries to do the same. He understands, now, that there's not much use in fighting. To his mind, the message is clear. He has been contacted and has been found wanting. He isn't made to see the world yet to come. He's stuck here, now, in this one. He can hear the sirens coming closer, fading in and out as they weave through the mountains. For once, he is not scared.

Ernest

NY

Intake Assessment

Child Protective Services

Ver. 1

Case Summary

For administrative use only. This summary provides an overview of case details and should not be used as the sole means of coordinating decisions regarding care.

State Dep #	Region	Date (mm/dd/yyyy)	CPS Prior (y/n)
NY0024	2	10/22/2019	N

Race	Age	Sex (M/F)
Unknown	3	M

Response Priority: (3) LOW

Current Care Condition: Stable

Foster Parent: Grace Crane

1 Harbor Drive, Garrett, NY

Name	Ernest Fortier
Height	2' 11"
Weight	32 lb.
Eye Color	Brown
Hair Color	Brown

RYAN BURDEN

DEGREES

Ph.D. University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee, Milwaukee, WI, August 2016 – present

English and Creative Writing, Fiction, anticipated Spring 2021

Committee: Liam Callanan, Valerie Laken, Kumkum Sangari, Bonnie Klein-Tasman, Andrew Kincaid

M.F.A. Warren Wilson M.F.A. Program for Writers, Swannanoa, NC, 2011

Creative Writing, Fiction

Advisors: Stacey D’Erasmus, Dean Bakopoulos, Karen Brennan, Kevin McIlvoy

B.A. Kenyon College, Gambier, OH, 2007

English Literature

TEACHING EXPERIENCE

Graduate Teaching Assistant, University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee, 2016 – present

Introduction to Creative Writing, poetry and fiction (233) *

College Writing and Research (102)

Introduction to College Writing (101) *

Lecturer, Paul Smith's College, 2014-2015

Introduction to English Literature (102)

English Composition (101)

Technical Communications (210)

Introduction to Communications (101)

*Courses taught both face-to-face and online.

PUBLICATIONS

Short Fiction:

“After the Bull,” *Switchback*, 2018

“Coming of Age,” *Redivider*, 2016

“Porter’s Vacation,” *Crack the Spine*, 2016

“Real Fine China,” *JMWW*, 2013

“Dumb Animals,” *Gulf Stream*, 2012

“Making it Right,” *Spilling Ink Review*, 2011

“Fog Blind,” *Girls with Insurance*, 2010

“Crash,” *Foundling Review*, 2010

Novels:

Where the Light Flickers, represented by Grace A. Ross, Regal Hoffman and Associates

Reviews:

The Black Signs, Lars Mørch Finborud, *Necessary Fiction*, 2015

Pages from the Textbook of Alternate History, Phong Nguyen, *American Book Review*, 2014

AWARDS

Thomas J. Bontley Award for Fiction, University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee, 2017

Beacon Street Prize, *Redivider*, 2016

Chancellor’s Award, University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee, 2016

Graduate Residency Fellow, Warren Wilson M.F.A. Program for Writers, 2015

CONFERENCE PRESENTATIONS

Notes on Posthumanist Fiction: Virtuality and Multiplicity

Redrawing Forms: Energy, Media, Science, and Life, Rice University Symposium, 2017

PROFESSIONAL SERVICE

Managing/Fiction Editor *Four Way Review*, 2013-2017

Workshop Leader Writing Outside the Fence, Baltimore, 2013
Led writing workshops serving individuals impacted by
incarceration

Volunteer Books Through Bars, Baltimore, 2013-2014
Distributed free books and educational materials to individuals
incarcerated throughout the Northeast

Contributing Editor *Friends of Writers*, 2012-2013
Supported the Warren Wilson M.F.A. Program's fundraising
efforts through social media