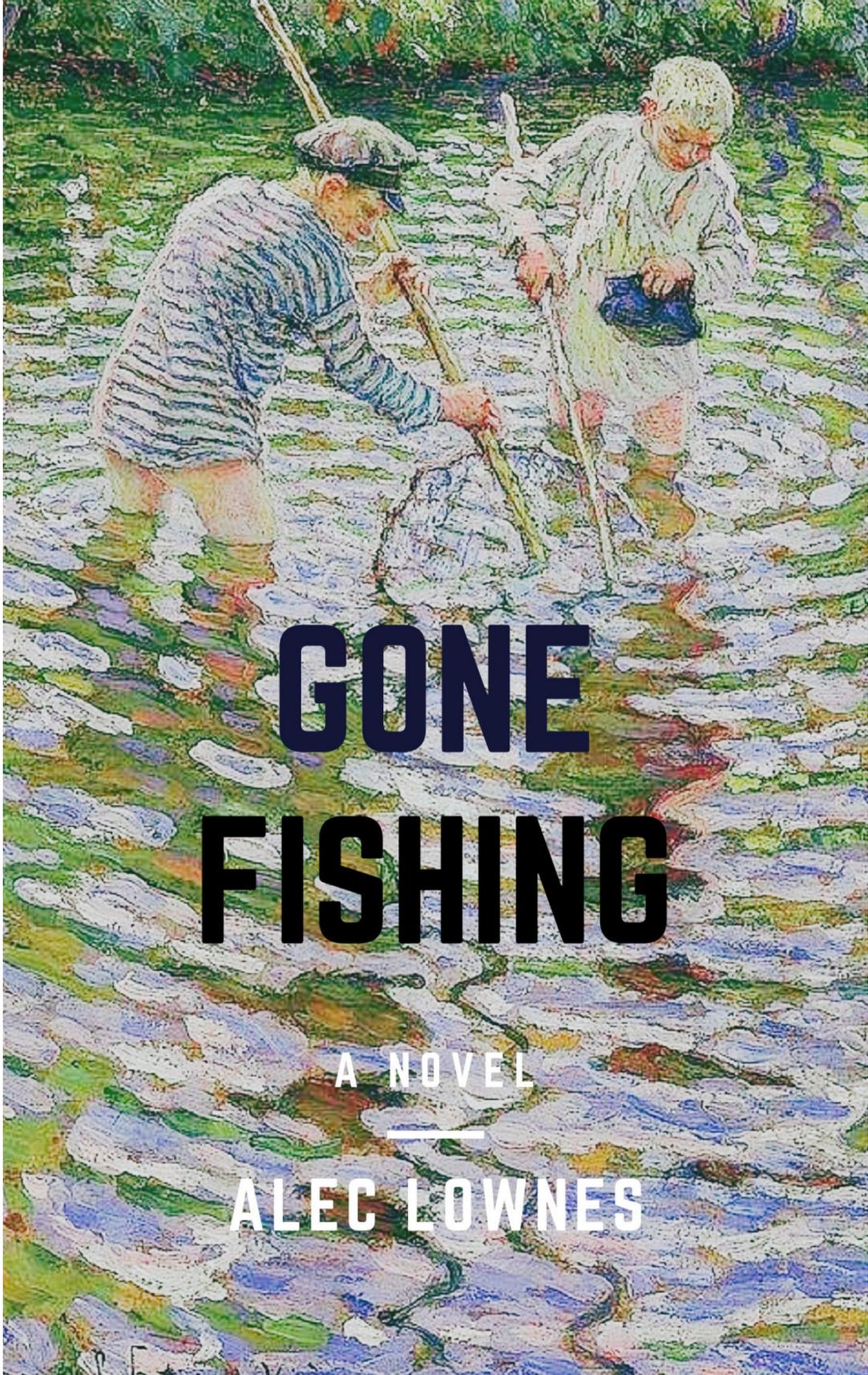
An impressionist painting of two fishermen in a boat. The scene is rendered with vibrant, textured brushstrokes in shades of green, blue, and white, capturing the shimmering light on the water. One fisherman, wearing a striped shirt and a cap, is bent over, handling a long wooden pole. The other, in a white shirt, stands nearby, also holding a pole. The overall mood is one of quiet industry and natural beauty.

GONE FISHING

A NOVEL

ALEC LOWNES



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Gone Fishing

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First edition

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Chapter 1

Jake's alarm clock started ringing on its tiny metal bells at six thirty in the morning, he had never felt so tired. The eleven year old boy lifted his head out of the pillow, searching with half open eyes for the source of the commotion, and was finally able to reach out and grab the clock, his hand interrupting the hammer's infinite journey between the bells. He brought the clock with the glowing green hands into bed with him, turned it over, and tried to make out, in the dim early morning sunlight, the markings on the back of it. Here was the winding key, here was a knob for the time, how did you turn off the racket?

He found an up-down sliding switch and, even though he couldn't make out the words beside it, hoped that this would turn off the alarm. He tried to slide it down, but his sleep-weakened thumb slipped off the roughened surface, and he took his left hand off the top of the clock to apply more pressure. The hammer clanged against the bells again, and he could hear his parents turn over in bed in the next room.

"Jake," his father pleaded through half sleep, but Jake was nearly done. With a burst of strength from his sleep-deadened muscles, he cocked the switch down and the

hammer finally took a rest. A second later, he heard something fall onto the pillow in the other room, probably his dad going back to sleep. His parents normally got up at this time to go to work, but Jake had set the alarm on Saturday, for a very special trip.

Last week, Thursday to be exact, Jake's father had taken him out to try his brand new fishing rod that he had gotten earlier in the day, his birthday. They had walked down the street a little ways to one of the excavated artificial ponds in the neighborhood, the kind that the geese just loved to fly, and poop, around. Jake was holding his rod against his shoulder like a soldier with his rifle, and his dad was carrying the small case of artificial baits he got as a second present in his hand. The pond was one of the smaller ones, Jake couldn't estimate the size of it, but his friend Tommy from school lived next to one a lot bigger. There were benches set up every so often around the shore of the lake, anchored into the ground, where he often saw old folks sitting with loaves of bread, feeding the greedy geese.

They sat on one of those benches and his father taught him how to tie a spinner bait onto the line, and how to toss it out, but no matter how many times they tossed, or switched baits, they never got a fish to bite. As the sun sank lower in the sky, and they got hungrier, his father said the thing that inspired this sojourn.

“Maybe they would bite in the morning.”

“The morning?” Jake asked.

“Yeah, some fish like to bite at night, some in the day. Others are more active at twilight, when it’s hard for predators to catch them.”

“What kind of predators eat a fish?” Jake asked.

“Oh, all kinds,” his dad said, “some bigger fish, geese too.”

“Geese too!?” Jake exclaimed. “I thought they only ate bread.”

“Nope, they were around a long time before people came along with bread, they had to eat something.”

Jake imagined prehistoric geese flying around a heavily wooded little pond, pooping great dinosaur turds. Then his mind turned back to his rod with the line hanging limply in the water.

“Like what time do the fish eat?”

“Oh, in the morning and at night.”

“No, I mean what time is that.”

“Ah, well it’s getting light when I wake up at six thirty, so that’s morning. And I would say at eight it might go down, but you can check tonight when it gets dark.”

“Could we come out at eight to fish?” Jake asked, wanting to go back and get some supper before then, his stomach letting out its first growl.

“I don’t want you fishing by yourself out here at night,” his father warned, “and I’ve got some work to do tonight besides.”

“What about tomorrow morning?”

“Well that’s when I get ready for work, and I need to be in on time.”

“What about on the weekend?”

Jake’s dad thought. “Well, I think you’re big enough to come out here in the morning. Just be careful, and don’t talk to strangers.”

Jake had heard that warning a million times, from his parents and from the television, he figured if it hadn’t stuck in some kid’s mind now, it never would. But Jake, for his part, had never started a conversation with a stranger, who wasn’t a kid anyway. But he assumed that the warning didn’t pertain to them.

“I won’t, Dad. So do you think I can come out on Saturday?”

Jake’s dad mocked thinking. “HmMMM, well I would say so, but you’ll have to set your alarm, I’m not waking up that early in the morning on a Saturday.”

Jake made a fist with a hissed “Yess”, and his stomach growled again. Jake’s dad heard and said “what do you think we pack it in for today, these fish are fuller than we are.”

Jake reeled in the line and his father taught him how to hook the bait, this time a silver torpedo looking one with a propeller at the back that made a fan of water shoot up when he retrieved it, into one of the eyes on the rod. They got up and left the bench they’d been sitting on, the pond mocking Jake with its unreleased hordes of fish just waiting to be caught.

On Saturday morning, Jake having just turned off his alarm clock, he finally remembered why he was getting up so early, and the promise of fish that awaited him. On Saturdays he normally slept in past the seven AM that his mother woke him up on school days, and woke up around ten AM, just in time to catch the last few Saturday morning cartoons on the WB channel.

Enlivened by his mission, he quickly pulled on yesterday's clothes in the dark and grabbed his single key on a keyring, the key to the house. Earlier that year his parents had finally let him stay at home alone after school was over, as opposed to having to go to the church after-school-care, and with that came a keyring with one key. It was the only thing that went into his pocket before he left the room, but somehow it felt more weighty than it normally did, since he'd have to use it to go on his own trip.

He tiptoed through the piles of clothes on the floor, nearly stepping on a discarded case for a gameboy game. The soft carpet muffled his footsteps as he reached the bedroom door, he imagined he would have to get out of the house silently to avoid angering his parents into a trip refusal, and opened the door with a slow knob turn.

The door swished on the carpet as he pulled it open and exposed the dark hallway. A bannister in front of him looked down on the staircase to the first floor, down the hall to the right was his parents' bedroom, between them was the bathroom. He thought for a second, and decided that

brushing his teeth could wait until after his trip, he was sure his mom would understand.

He left the bedroom door open behind him as he tiptoed down the carpeted stairs to the first floor. The sky through the first floor windows was already starting to change to a light gray, and he hurried past the kitchen to the front door closet. After opening the closet door, he wrestled past the overflowing bunches of puffed winter coats to find his hung up light jacket. From the temperature of the house, he assumed it would be a little chilly outside.

He yanked twice, the jacket stubbornly hanging onto the rack, but on the third time it came down with no effort at all, swinging the hanger up to smack the shelf above it. He stopped, listening for a yell from above. He could almost hear it, “Be nice to the house”. He had heard that shout so many times. Nothing, he was free and clear. Turning to the front door, he saw his plastic box of artificial baits on the ground and his fishing pole leaned up against the door jamb, where he had left them last night after pleading with his dad. He was afraid that he would forget something, his dad didn’t want anything cluttering up the hall, but with enough asks something had to give. “I don’t want to see this here when I wake up in the morning,” his dad had said, “you better put it upstairs in your room afterwards, where it belongs.”

Jake leaned down and grabbed the clear plastic box, the green plastic worms were fluorescing in the morning light

through the case, his pole beside it, and opened the front door.

Beep Beep Beep

“Oh shit,” Jake muttered under his breath, and ran over to the white box with the green display mounted on the wall. He reached up on tiptoes and flipped open the cover, punching in the four digit combination on the lit up buttons that would make the security system go back to sleep. A chime, loud enough to make Jake wince at the sound, and the security system was quiet. He listened to the house, but heard no yells from upstairs. Flipping the cover back up over the keypad, he went back over to the cracked door and opened it all the way.

The world was lit with a weird ethereal gray light, which looked extra strange with the streetlights still on. A mist seemed to hover in the air, and the wind that blew into the house from the door made the hair on Jake’s head stand on end. Morning was a weird time. He went outside and shut the door behind him. Leaning the rod on the porch for a second, he fished around in his pocket for his key, and then seriously locked the door from outside, trying the handle to make sure, before he picked up his rod again and walked down the steps onto the street.

The house’s walkway from the front porch steps led to the poured concrete driveway, which continued directly to the street over an inclined curb. Jake wished that they had a sidewalk in front of their house, like in the cartoons, or in the city. Instead of living on a city block, they lived two houses

away from a cul-de-sac, with nearly identical houses on all sides. Jake turned left in front of the house, away from the cul-de-sac, towards the pond.

The houses reflected a creepy distortion of the sound his shoes made slapping on the blacktop. He looked around behind him every few steps, it sounded like someone was following him, and he could swear he could feel eyes, but there was no one around. The light was getting a little brighter, but the mist wasn't letting up, and Jake felt chilled. *Maybe I should have put on one of the puffy jackets*, he thought. Too late now, especially if he wanted to catch the sunrise fish.

He turned left at the first intersection, and then followed the road down. He knew he was getting close when he could smell the faintly acidic, earthy smell of goose poop. He heard them next, a few honks in the mist ahead. He saw the blacktop, newly laid just last year, run out into dirt ahead, the dirt transition to gravel, and he knew the pond was right there. He walked down to the pond edge, hearing forlorn honks, and saw its surface extend into the mist. You could almost imagine that you were on the edge of a great sea, like the beach that they went to last year, but right next to his house.

The water made a wet lapping sound on the muddy gravel bank, and the earthy smell was stronger here, standing in the middle of all of those brown and green cylinders extruded on the ground. Jake carefully picked his way between the droppings to his left along the edge of the pond, to where the

bench he and his dad had sat on last time was. The mist was gently receding as he made his way, and soon enough the edge of the bench materialized in front of him. He continued tiptoeing, and then stopped when he looked up and saw a man in a hat sitting on the far side of the bench.

The man turned to his right at the noise and looked at Jake curiously. Jake could see that the man was old, as old as his grandparents at least, and his clothes looked like stuff you would find in one of those ancient movies his dad made him watch, as old people so often dress. The hat wasn't a baseball hat like he thought originally, it was one of those Bogart ones with the brim that went all the way around. The man was wearing what looked like a light brown flannel jacket in the mist, but it could have been any color in the dull gray light. Jake froze for a second, taking this all in, hearing warnings of stranger danger echo in his head, but weighing that against the prospect of having to awkwardly turn around and backtrack to the other bench, admitting to the man, and himself, that stranger danger was exactly what he was thinking. He decided to play it cool.

Jake picked his way past the goose droppings to the bench and eased down in what he hoped was a nonchalant way on the near side. He saw the old man from the corner of his eye turn his head back to the pond, back to the line leading to a fishing pole in his hands! *This was a good time, Jake thought, someone else is here fishing too.* Jake sat the translucent bait case down to his side, away from the man, and unhooked the

torpedo from the eye on his fishing rod. He flung the rod back and cast out.

The torpedo went about three feet out, with twice as much line, and dropped into the water with a sad belly flop. Jake felt the blood rise in his cheeks and his neck get hot, how embarrassing in front of another fisherman. He turned the reel, heard the catch snap, and started reeling in the line. He thought it would all just untangle as he brought it in, but he saw a bird's nest of line slowly climbing into the air, towards the tip of his rod. Maybe, he thought, if I reel fast enough, the line will untangle. He really laid on the reel crank, and the whole bird's nest zipped through the first eye of the rod, and got tangled around the second eye.

"God dammit," he said, then gasped. That was the hot curse among his group of friends, Justin was apt to say it every fifth word, but never in front of adults or teachers. He heard the old man snort, hold his breath for a second, and then let out a laugh. Jake nervously laughed once too, this seemed like a good sign, but what if he asked who his parents were and where he lived? He had once been approached in such a way when he was playing in the construction site of a new house, throwing dirt clods against a tree trunk, and the woman had marched him back to his parents' house by the scruff of the neck. Somehow it was so much worse when strangers got you in trouble.

The old man fished around in his left pocket for a second, got something out, and held it out. "It looks like you might

need some assistance,” he said, and something long and silver was in his hand. Jake looked closer in the rising light of the morning, and saw that it was a pair of fingernail clippers. “No, that’s alright,” Jake said, feeling the hot blood rise up to his ears again. He got up, put the pole handle on the seat of the bench, and walked out two steps to the location of the bird’s nest between the first and second eyes. He would fix this all on his own.

What felt like an hour, but by the sun was only probably five minutes, later, Jake’s face was full red with embarrassment as the old man pretended not to watch him struggle with the tangle of line that just kept getting worse. Every time he would pull one loop, another would tighten, or loosen, in an inexplicable way. He had dealt with knots in his shoelaces before, or a knot in his jacket hood string, and his dad had taught him a thing or two about how to tie a good one, but this was seeming more and more impossible. He thought you could always find the place where, if you applied the right pressure, the knot would fall apart, but this was mind bending, and it didn’t help that the clear line made it impossible to focus on any one part of the knot. He could feel the hot tears brimming in his eyes when the old man looked over again.

“Is this your first time fishing,” the man asked? Jake blinked a couple times at the knot and said “No.”

“Have you ever gotten a knot that bad before?” the old man continued. Jake, feeling like he could cede on this point

of pride, said “No” again.

“See, that’s what old fishermen like myself like to call a lost cause,” the old man said. Jake looked back at him, letting his arms finally hang down, and feeling the blood rush back into them. “It’s just impossible to get out, and not worth it if you do, since your line’ll be all bent up anyway.” He handed out the clippers again to Jake. “Use these to clip the line, and re-tie to the fresh end. If there’s anything a fisherman has, it’s plenty of line to waste.”

Jake took the clippers and tried to pull the knot through the first eye again, but it was all tangled around the second eye. “Just clip it there,” the old man said, motioning to the line below the knot, “and pull it through once the line is clean.” Jake clipped the line below the big knot, watching the normal unharmed line fall down to the ground with a feeling of relief in his stomach. He clipped the line above the big knot too, and after tugging twice to get it off the eye, he pulled the knot off, and looked around for a garbage can.

“Just keep it in your pocket for now, till you get home,” the man said, and eyed down to his right pocket. Jake looked down and the man pulled out several pieces of severed line, “knots come even to the best of us,” he chuckled, “although I wouldn’t say that I’m the best, not by a long shot.” Jake stuffed the springy mass of translucent line into his front pocket and held out the clippers to the old man. The old man took them and then held out his hand. “I’m George, George Lloyd.”

Jake took his hand in an awkward grip “My name is Jake Tower.”

“Well it’s nice to meet you Jake Tower, I don’t often see other fishermen around here at this time. What brings you to *this* pond?”

“I live right up the street,” Jake said, pointing to the pavement that he could see now in the lightening mist, “this is the closest pond to my house.”

“I see, I used to live around here too, just around the bend up there.”

“You don’t live here anymore?” Jake asked.

“No, not anymore, but the fishing here’s better than where I live now, that’s what keeps me coming back.”

Jake had pulled out more line from his reel, threaded it through the last eye of the pole, and grabbed the torpedo bait from the bench beside him. He realized that there was still the length of old line tied to the end of it, and looked up at George.

“Um...”

George looked over again from the pond’s surface and saw the bait with the line. “Oh, here you go,” he fished in his other pocket for the clippers and gave them to Jake, “those are very handy, you might want to snag your bathroom set when you go, it won’t hurt ‘em none, and you spend more time snipping line than you would think.”

He watched Jake cut the line from the eye of the torpedo and said, “That’s a nice bait you have, real good for bass, but I

don't think there's any in this pond. You might do better with a hook n' bobber."

"A hook and bobber?" Jake asked, and looked out at the pond to the end of George's line. Sitting on the surface, barely dipping up and down, was a red and white ball.

"Here," George reeled in his line and let it hang from the tip of his pole. The bobber was at eye level when he held the pole tilted up. "You gotta set it up like this, the pond isn't so deep, so this is all you need." The bobber was about four inches from the hook, and there was something white stuck to it.

"What's that?" Jake asked.

"Waxworm, the bluegill seem to eat 'em up around here, so I always bring a case of 'em." He reached to his left side and brought over a styrofoam cup with a lid, and set it down between them.

"I think you might have more luck with some of my bait, do you have any bobbers and plain hooks in your case?"

Jake was looking at the styrofoam coffee cup, which was making a slight scratching sound, when he registered what George said and looked up. "Oh, um, let me see."

He set his pole down on the ground, propping it up between his knees as he opened up the clear plastic compartmentalized case. The red and white plastic balls caught his eye immediately against the neon squishy squids and the metallic spinners, and when he picked one up he saw a little plastic baggie of tiny hooks under it. He palmed the

bobber, the biggest he could find was still smaller than the man's, and picked up the tiny baggie.

"Are these good," he asked, holding his hand out to George. George looked down at the bobber and baggie of hooks. "Those'll be fine."

Jake brought his hand back and looked at the hooks. "They seem so small," he said.

"Bluegill have tiny mouths, for their size," George said, looking out at his bobber, "you'll be surprised at how big a fish you can catch on a tiny little hook, if you're fishing bluegill. Bass, well that's like for your torpedo, they have big mouths so you need a lot of hooks together to get 'em."

Jake was half listening as he put his torpedo bait with its treble hooks back and opened up the packet of small single hooks. He tried twice, and on the third time was able to get one of the tiny hooks out. They were no bigger than his fingernail, and the eye that he had to tie the line to was even smaller than on the torpedo. But the morning was getting brighter, which made the whole hook tying operation easier than it would have been before.

After tying the hook on, and sliding the bobber up four inches above the hook, he looked back over to George. "Can I borrow one of your waxworms?"

George chuckled. "You can *have* one of my waxworms."

"Where are they?" Jake asked.

George motioned down to the cup between them with his head, "In that cup, just reach in and get one."

Jake had a moment of repulsion, previously thinking that the cup was full of coffee just to find out that it was actually full of worms. But it quickly passed and he picked up the cup, which was surprisingly lighter than he thought, and opened the lid. It was full of sawdust, and something light brown wriggling in between the wood flakes. He reached his hand in and lightly picked up one of the squishy grubs, which had too many stubby legs and two big hard eyes on the front, and looked at it up close.

The grub was nearly sawdust colored and its eyes up front, if they were eyes, were dark and spherical, like a beetle's. It twisted this way and that, trying to get out. "Do they eat the sawdust?" Jake asked.

"Hmm, I don't know, I never thought of that before." George responded, looking over at the cup of wiggling worms. He pushed down the raised lid, sealing the worms up in the cup.

"Do I just..." Jake began, but trailed off when he held up his hook next to the waxworm.

"Yep, just run the hook through lengthwise. If you don't, the smaller fish'll take the worm before you get into anything big. It still might happen, even so."

Jake gripped the hook in his right hand, which was difficult since it was only as big as the tip of his finger, and the worm in his left hand. He felt a little bad just before running the worm onto the hook, but told himself that the worm *probably* didn't even know what was happening to it. A

yellow clear pus came out of the exit wound near the worm's head, and Jake's mouth turned down in surprise.

"Uugh," he involuntarily uttered, as he wiped his fingers on his jeans. The worm on the hook swung crazily below the slowly swaying bobber on the line as he stood up to cast the line out. Remembering his earlier embarrassment, he carefully moved the rod around his head until it pointed backwards, and then, as gracefully as he could, swung the rig overhead.

When the bobber hit the water and the hook descended, he looked down at the reel to find the handle, and turned it halfway around until he heard a click. He sat back down again and looked over at George, who had his eye on his own bobber about half as far out into the pond. Jake had noticed that the old man wasn't working his bait at all, that he was just letting it lie and keeping an eye on it, and from what he remembered from cartoons, it seemed like that was the way to go with a bobber, so Jake followed suit by setting his eye on the bobber on the surface and sitting down.

A few minutes of silence passed, with Jake getting noticeably colder in the chilly morning air. He would have to get a heavier jacket, if he wanted to come out again in the morning. But he could also feel a warmth radiating against him from the slowly rising sun as the mist was clearing away. Looking over his shoulder, he could see the road clear back to the intersection where he had turned, only the furthest houses had any hint of mist around them.

He turned back to the pond just in time to see the bobber bounce up and down, and he yanked hard on the line. The bobber jumped up out of the water and landed with a plop about a foot closer, but it was still.

“Dangit,” Jake said, feeling his spirits sink as he missed his first fish.

“Would you care for a bit of advice?” George asked. Jake hummed assent.

“Bluegill are a picky fish, they like to play with their food a bit before they take the bait, but when they do, they’re real aggressive. They’re not like a bass, which’ll slap the water when they take the bait, they want it so bad. You gotta let the fish take the bait down, ‘til it starts to run with it, then you can set the hook. When that bobber takes off, that’s the time to pull.”

Jake nodded, feeling like more of a fool, somehow it made it worse that he hadn’t missed the fish, but had jerked the hook right out of its mouth. He didn’t know exactly what he was looking for from what the old man had said, but he concentrated hard on his bobber, he would get it this time.

Not half a minute later, George’s bobber dipped down and popped back up. Jake shifted his gaze to it, and it dipped again. A second passed, two, and then the bobber jerked down and to the side, moving quickly. George swung his rod up with the barest hint of a swish through the air, and Jake could see the line tighten in a flash of sunlight that outlined it against the pond surface in a line of fire. George started reeling in,

Jake saw the ripple where the line met the surface of the water swing left and right, and the tip of George's pole bend down and slacken, but the fish was coming. A few clicks came out of George's reel, the same clicks that came out of Jake's when he pulled the line out. *The fish must be fighting hard*, he thought.

George stood up, Jake could hear his knees pop, as he walked the couple of feet down to the edge of the water, and he held the end of his pole low over the pond. When it looked like there was about four feet of line left, he brought the pole up, and jerking between the bobber on the thrumming line and the pole tip was a green-yellow fish with a dark stripe on the back. George turned around and walked back towards the bench with the fish held out in front of him on the end of the line.

George sat back down with a grunt and brought the fish over, steadying the handle of the pole on the bench seat, and grabbed the line right over the fish. He said "They've got spines, see? On the top, they'll stick you if you're not careful," and swept his hand down the fish from the front to the back, laying the spines down until he grabbed the fish around the middle. Jake could see that it was a little bigger than his hand, as George straightened out his leg and reached into his pocket again.

He brought out a metal object that looked like something between scissors and tweezers, it was long and thin, with holes for your fingers in the end, but clamping jaws at the other after a hinge. He one-handedly fitted them over his

fingers and clicked them open, then reached the jaws towards the fish. Jake leaned forward, was he going to kill the fish now?

George reached the clamp into the fish's mouth, closed on something and wiggled it a second before extracting the whole hook from inside the fish. Now that Jake was looking at the fish closer, he could see that its mouth really was tiny compared to its body, much smaller than the hook on the torpedo he was using. George held the fish over to Jake and pointed at its side with the clamp.

"They don't all have 'em, so it's not a great name, but those are the blue in bluegill." He was pointing at a spot of blue nearby the gill, which opened up to red fleshy sheets inside.

"I thought the gill would be blue," Jake said.

"I think nearly as I can tell, all fish have red gills," George responded, taking the fish back and getting to his feet. He walked over to the edge of the water and leaned over, dipping his hand and the fish under the still surface. After a second, he brought his hand up again without the fish, and walked back over to the bench and his rod, shaking off the water and slime.

"Why didn't you keep it?" Jake asked when he sat down again.

"Well," George said as he took the dangling hook from his pole, which was leaning up against the side of the bench, in one hand, and opened the cup of waxworms with the other,

“you can keep the fish, bluegill specifically, you catch, if they’re over five inches long, but only three of them per day, and only between the months of April and September.” Jake knitted his eyebrows together as he tried to figure out if all of those statements were true right now.

George chuckled. “That fish wasn’t big enough, and I don’t much like to eat ‘em anyway, there’s not much meat on ‘em unless you catch a really big one.” He pinched another waxworm between his fingers and closed the coffee cup lid with the flat of his hand, bringing over the wriggling worm to the hook. “There’s a lot of to-do involved with keeping a fish, you gotta bring a livewell, that’s a box full of water to keep the fish alive in, or a box of ice, to keep the meat cold, if you kill ‘em here. I like to just bring my rod and my worms, maybe a few extra hooks.”

“Oh,” Jake said, his voice trailing off. He hadn’t heard the last half of the sentence, his bobber out on the glassy surface had caught his eye. In the strengthening sunlight, which additionally was wonderfully warm to Jake, his new bright red and white bobber shone out on the surface of the pond, and he had noticed its brilliance dip mid-way through the explanation. Jake eyed it, tightening his grip on the pole, tensing his arms. The bobber went down once again, just a little bit.

George was looking out to it too now, holding the waxworm precipitously above the hook, but forgotten, as he watched the bobber. The bobber gave a big lurch downwards

and took off to one side. George opened his mouth to call out, but Jake swung up on the pole, and George saw the tip bend down and the line go tight.

Jake immediately felt the tip of the rod pull down, and the reel started clicking like crazy as the line was being pulled out of it. He fumbled for the knob on the side of the rod, the one he had loosened to pull out more line, to clamp down on the pressure. He turned it halfway to the right, and the clicking stopped, but the rod tip was yanked down harder towards the water's surface. He thought back to the hundreds of times he had seen someone fishing on TV or in movies, and pulled back on his rod, holding it back over his head in emulation of those salty fishermen.

"We're gonna need a bigger boat," he called out, and George howled with laughter beside him at his over-the-top Roy Scheider impression. The reel was getting harder and harder to crank, and every time he rotated the handle it clicked a couple more times, despite the drag being set so high, and the tip of the rod bent down further. George looked up to the tip of the rod and saw the fiery line of light which was the monofilament intersect with the rod a good three inches under the tip.

"Hold up," he said, getting up and reaching out for the tip of the rod, "you've got the line wrapped around the end of your rod." Jake could feel the fish jerking in the water, swimming left and right, as George delicately plucked the line and the rod tip apart. "Okay, you're good to go," he said.

Jake started reeling again, and the fish was coming easy, much easier than it was before. He played the rod up and down, reeling in sporadic bursts while he tried to get his timing right, and the fish kept inching closer to the shore.

Suddenly, the fish was on the surface, and a yank with the pole brought it past the waterline and it hit the shore with a smack. "Uh oh," Jake said, and looked over at George, but he didn't show what he was thinking. Jake got up from the bench, reeling in as he approached the fish, and lifted it up with the line, placing it gingerly back into the shallow water next to shore.

"What do I do now?" he called back.

George smiled and got up to walk over to the waterline, where the fish was flopping in the inch deep water. "It's a lot easier if you reel up to where you can get the fish and hold the pole at the same time," he said. Jake nodded and reeled the fish up out of the water, suspending it in the air in front of his face.

"See if you can grab the fish like I showed you before," George said, as he grabbed the line above the fish to keep it from swinging around.

Jake reached out with his right hand, keeping his fingers together in a flat blade, and swept them down the fish. It was wet, and kind of slimy, Jake thought, and right as he got to the point where he wanted to grab on, the fish bucked and flew out of his hand. Jake felt his cheeks flush, and repositioned his hand above the fish on the line again.

Sweeping his hand down a second time, laying the tiny spines down, he grasped the fish around its widest point. It looked to Jake to be about an inch longer than George's fish, and seemed to be fighting fiercer too. He could see the hook protruding from the fish's mouth, unlike George's fish, which had swallowed the hook whole.

"Sometimes they like to eat the whole hook, which makes these clamps come in handy, but yours hooked itself nice. I'll hold your fishing pole, and you go ahead and gently work the hook out and throw it back in." George held out his left hand and took the pole from Jake, and Jake brought the fish closer to his face.

Now that the sun was out, he could see that the hook went into the fish's mouth and came right out under its lower lip, where there was a little tear. He grabbed the tiny eye of the hook with the end of his fingers and started to slide it back into the fish's mouth, when the fish gave an almighty flop. Jake let out a surprised grunt, but the fish didn't get away. After a second of waiting, he grasped the hook's eye again and pushed it right down into the fish's mouth, straight past the hole in its lip, and pulled it out while the fish was gulping.

Jake looked back up to George and George said, "Alright, now toss 'em back." Jake smiled and walked over to the waterline, where he crouched down and submerged his hand in the water. The fish's weight disappeared in his hand underwater, and he only felt it shoot off after a second. He

could see it stop a couple of feet away, but when he stood up he lost it against the glare of the morning sun.

“Congratulations,” George said, as he handed the rod back.

“Thanks,” Jake said. He took the rod and turned toward the pond again, lining up for another cast far out, but the way the hook jiggled wildly below the bobber caught his eye. It took a second, but he realized that he no longer had a waxworm on the hook anymore, the fish must have eaten it during the struggle.

“Can I have another worm,” he asked George, looking back at the bench, “mine’s gone.”

“Feel free,” George replied, holding the styrofoam cup out.

They fished like that for a couple hours, until the sun was shining down hot on their heads and all suggestion of the early morning chill was dispelled. A few people had come down the road to the pond with little kids and loaves of bread to feed the ducks, but they stuck to the right side of the pond, away from the fishermen which they must have assumed were grandfather and grandson. Jake would ask George a question every now and again, and George felt himself slowly opening up to this enterprising chap, who came out to the pond all on his own to catch his first fish with a completely inappropriate bait.

“Do you have any kids,” Jake asked, several more fish into the morning-going-on-afternoon.

“I have two,” George replied, “David and Rebecca. David’s thirty five, Rebecca’s two years younger.”

“Do you have any grandkids?” Jake asked again.

“I do, in fact, three of ‘em,” George said, “David Jr.’s about your age.”

“Do they live here?”

“No,” George replied, “they live far away,” and looked over at Jake, “Montana.”

“Is that very far?”

“About a four day car trip.”

“Could you fly?”

George paused for a second. “Yeah, yeah you could.”

Jake heard the crunching of footsteps on gravel, but his ears perked up when they sounded like they were coming straight at them. He turned around and saw his dad walking towards them from the road.

“Hi Dad!” he shouted, and waved for extra visibility.

“Hey buddy,” Carter said and waved back as he walked the rest of the way up to Jake’s side of the bench. George reeled in, leaned his rod against the side of the bench and got up.

“Hello sir, I take it you’re this young man’s father,” he said.

“That I am,” Carter responded, looking hard at George, trying to place the face.

“Well it’s good to meet’cha, George Lloyd,” he said, and held out his hand.

Recognition and a smile broke on Carter's face as he completed the handshake. "Oh wow, I certainly wasn't expecting to run into *you* out here. Carter, Carter Tower. It's great to meet you in person!"

Jake thought he saw a look of confusion mirroring his own in George's eyes, before the smile made a reappearance and the handshake came to its vigorous end.

"Do you..." Carter looked down at George's fishing pole leaning up against the bench, "come out here to fish a lot?"

"I do, every so often," George said back, "I used to live here."

"Ah, I didn't know that," Carter said, "it's quite a drive out from DC."

"It is, but it's worth it." George responded.

"Has this one been giving you any trouble?" Carter asked, putting his hand on Jake's shoulder.

"None at all, you've got yourself a morning fisherman here, I was surprised to see anyone else out here this early. He brought in quite a haul today."

"Oh, how many?" Carter asked, looking at Jake.

"A few," Jake responded. It was six, the number was shining brightly with pride in his mind. Six times he brought a fish out of the water on the line, unhooked it, and threw it back in. Once, he needed to use the scissor tweezers that George had to get a hook that was too deep, but other than that it had been all him. And George's waxworms of course.

“Well, I came out here to get you for lunch,” Carter said, “we’re having casserooooooollleeee.” Jake loved his mother’s hamburger casserole, which seemed to get better every time they reheated it in the oven. “So pack up your baits and we’ll head on out,” Carter continued.

Jake hadn’t taken out his baits, constantly switching from one to another like last time. He’d only been using the hook and bobber since he caught his first fish with it, the bait box remained closed from when he put the torpedo back in. He reeled in the hook and bobber until it was at eye level for him to remove the soggy waxworm. But the hook was clean, a fish must have gotten lucky a few minutes ago, when he saw the bobber dip just for a second, and he reached out and stretched the hook and line down to hook onto the eye of his pole.

Jake stood up with his rod in his right hand and his tackle box in his left and walked around the side of the bench to his dad.

“It was nice meeting you, senator,” Carter said to George.

“Likewise, Mr. Tower,” he nodded down to Jake, “Jake.”

With his hand on Jake’s shoulder, Carter started walking back toward the paved road, steering Jake around. Jake said, before he was guided around completely, “It was nice to meet you too, good luck!”

“Thanks,” George said out to their backs as they walked away. He looked out at the pond again, at his bobber floating lazily on the mirror surface. He looked up at the thin white

clouds that were now making their appearance against the deep blue sky and smelled the warm, clean air.

* * *

Jake and his dad were walking back to their house along the black paved road, which was even now in the early afternoon sending off low waves of heat. Jake could tell that his dad was deep in thought about something, he had a particular way of walking with deliberateness, coupled with the lack of communication, that gave it away. For a minute they walked in silence, then Carter asked “How was it fishing this morning?”

“It was great,” Jake replied, “I had a lot of fun.”

“Good, good,” Carter trailed off, then said, “how was Mr. Lloyd?”

Ahh, Jake thought, he was wondering if this would come up. The Stranger Danger. Even he had been unable to escape the growing sense of unease at the other, broadcasted from the television set every night, or in his father’s conversation after reading the morning paper. He had heard the words the first time from his homeroom teacher this year, with a warning to never go anywhere with a stranger. That there were bad people, she said, and you never knew which side of the fence they were on, or maybe they were sitting *on* the fence, so don’t let your guard down.

“He taught me how to fish with a bobber,” Jake said, “I had a good time. No funny business.”

Carter jerked his head down to his son with a surprised look on his face. Jake had a small smile on, and Carter mirrored it after a second. *I guess I wasn't being that subtle*, he thought.

“Who is Mr. Lloyd?” Jake asked his dad as they rounded the corner onto their street.

“He's one of our senators,” Carter said, “one of two for Maryland.”

“Is he a good one?” Jake asked. He knew his father had strong opinions about politics, which usually fell along the party divide, but he still wasn't quite sure why each side was the way it was.

“Eh, he's a republican, but he's not so bad,” Carter said as probably the most nuanced answer Jake had ever heard from him regarding politicians. *There was some effect from meeting the man*, Carter thought, he always seemed a little too charismatic on the television, and he didn't have a good opinion of him before, but talking to him by the pond, it was very different than he expected. He had much more of a Maryland accent than he had on TV.

“Why so,” Jake continued.

Carter came out of his reverie, wondering at his change of opinion, and said “Well, he doesn't vote with the more extreme republicans, he's more moderate, and a moderate

republican in Maryland is a far sight better than a moderate democrat in North Carolina.”

Jake had often heard his father speak of growing up in North Carolina, and his relief of being able to move to Maryland after college, where he met Jake’s mom. To Jake, North Carolina was full of bible thumpers and frothy-mouthed racists. Maryland, Carter often said, had its problems, but wasn’t so bad as it could be.

They came up to the house, a two story affair on a street ending in a cul-de-sac, and climbed the wooden porch steps, their footfalls rasping like dry leaves on the paint that was beginning to curl. Every time he went out the front door, Carter was reminded of the task he had to do that summer, when it was warm and dry enough for the paint to cure on the porch.

Stepping up on the ornamental black rubber doormat, Jake reached out and twisted the shiny brass coated doorknob, opening the door to the smell of molten cheese and hamburger meat. The sensation immediately put a smile on Jake’s face, and he rushed in to take off his shoes and see how long until it was done in the kitchen. Carter entered after Jake and closed the door behind him, still in a daze. *What was it about that man*, Carter thought. Seeing him in such a normal place, instead of being interviewed with the senate chambers as a backdrop on CNBC, was eerie, almost like there was a real person behind that talking head after all.

* * *

Jake, Carter, and Anita, his mother, were all sitting at the small dinner table in the kitchen next to the window to eat their hamburger casserole. The table could technically fold down onto the wall by swinging a support out from under it, but that was only theoretical; the table hadn't been lowered since Carter and Anita had moved into the house fifteen years prior. Next to the window sill was a pile of penny savers left over from the last mail delivery, to be thrown away once the new one came today. With all three of their plates on the table, it was too small to hold the casserole dish, which sat steaming on top of a wire rack on the formica countertop.

“So,” Carter said between bites of casserole, “guess who I ran into today with Jake at the pond.”

Jake tensed. He had the distinct impression that his father's earlier coolness had worn off and now he was feeling uneasy about Mr. Lloyd again. To be fair, *he* had felt nervous about Mr. Lloyd before they had gotten into fishing in earnest. Those stranger danger warning bells still tinkled ever so slightly, and it was so strange to have had such a conversation with an adult who wasn't related to him, but the rest of the morning felt like a warm memory in his heart, and now he was afraid that future iterations would be taken away.

“Who?” Anita asked, looking up curiously, the dangerous implications not evident to her yet.

“Senator Lloyd, they were fishing *together*.”

Jake’s eyes went down to his plate, he heard the particular emphasis on “together” and understood the dangerous situation he was in now. His plans for future fishing trips were balanced on a see-saw, one little push could send it in either direction.

“Oh,” his mother said coolly, she had picked up what Carter was putting down. He could feel her look over at him, and he stared harder at his plate. “And how did the morning go with Mr. Lloyd?”

Still looking down at his plate, Jake said “It went good, I caught six fish after he showed me what kind of bait to use.”

A long second passed between the two of them, Carter was intently watching the exchange. He wasn’t such a fan of this development himself, but he also had been charmed in a way by the senator, and if his wife felt okay, he was ready to say yes to letting it continue. But he was equally willing to back her up if she said no.

“What else did you two do?” she asked. Jake looked up from his plate, directly into her face. He knew this was his shot, his last chance to claim that small independence he had found in his morning trip. “Just fish,” Jake said, “he was a perfect gentleman.”

Anita blinked, and moved back a fraction of an inch. Jake had found this particular ability very effective recently, adults still thought he was too young to understand certain things, and he found that stating them outright let him get away with

a lot he normally wouldn't have been able to. *Maybe this is what growing up means*, he thought, *the ability to outmaneuver your opponents, or your parents.*

Anita set her eyes directly into his again, recovering from her slight shock. She wished he didn't have to know about this "stranger danger", but everyone was talking about it, it was impossible for him not to catch on eventually. A part of her just wanted him to have the same childhood she had, without fear of going anywhere or doing anything. But things were different now, whether he knew it or not. He might have the words to catch her off guard every now and again, it was happening more and more, but did he *really* understand?

Unconsciously a quick series of calculations were going through her head, factoring in the high profile nature of Jake's new fishing buddy, the risks multiplied by scaremongering news hours, and divided by the interviews she had seen of George Lloyd herself. She turned back to Carter.

"Was it really George Lloyd? The senator?"

"Yes," Carter said, "I thought he looked familiar when I first saw him, but I knew it when he introduced himself. He really dresses down on the weekends."

"And why is he fishing... *here*," she asked, not really a question, punctuating her sentence with fresh skepticism. This was feeling iffy again, she thought, *why was he here?*

Now it was Jake's turn to jump in. "He said he used to live here," he offered. Anita turned her head back around to Jake,

and he could see the mental steps she was taking. He just hoped he was able to provide enough of a ramp.

“Hmm,” she muttered, as she stared blankly at Jake. This weirdness was balancing out the celebrity, and she wasn’t sure where it all ended up. She needed to do more research, she decided, to find out what was really going on here.

“I think I’ll call Caroline, that old bat knows everything that goes on around here,” she said, and smiled. Caroline was an elderly woman who lived three houses over and across the street, who was currently employed as chief neighborhood street watcher, by no one in particular, which she took to zealously with her high powered binoculars. Jake knew that his mom and Caroline weren’t exactly in the same social circles, even that his mom didn’t particularly like Caroline; it stemmed, he thought, from some long simmering feud from before he was born.

“I think that’s a good idea,” Carter said, and Jake knew the conversation was on hold until further notice. The see saw had been locked in place, precariously on neither side, but waiting for the final piece to come and unlock it. Jake didn’t particularly like it, it was completely out of his hands now, all up to what Caroline said, and he gathered that she wasn’t the nicest gossip around. His eyes went to the center of the table, between the three of their plates, and he tried to steel himself for the imminent removal of a recently-gotten treasure, as he had steeled himself so many times before.

Chapter 2

It was Monday morning, and Jake was waiting at the bus stop on the corner between his house and the pond. A couple of hours after their lunch of hamburger helper, after hearing his mom make her telephone call to Caroline, both she and his dad had sat him down on the couch and had given him “The Talk.” Not the sex talk, that had come years before, but it had the same gravity, and from the way they fumbled, he imagined that they were just as uncomfortable with it as he was.

Apparently whatever she had heard from Caroline was good enough, because the crux of the talk, the most important part to Jake, was that he could continue to go out in the mornings to fish, and that Mr. Lloyd seemed like a good enough guy. Unfortunately, around this central point was a whole mess of awkwardness, as his parents tried to impress upon him a formal definition of “Stranger Danger”, good touch and bad touch, and the horror of child abduction. He had pieced it all together before, from combinations of gossip at school, overheard news, and paper headlines, so nothing was new to him, but that didn’t make it any less cringey to have to listen to. He had the distinct impression that it was

ultimately swinging towards acceptance because Mr. Lloyd was famous, and, as his dad often said, they knew where he lived. After the do-you-understand's and the promises, he had been allowed to mercifully leave the couch, with the result being that on Sunday he went out at the early light hour of 6am again to the pond.

This time he had brought his light jacket, and a slim jim to snack on, but Mr. Lloyd wasn't there. He tried for a while with just a naked hook below the bobber, which surprisingly got a couple of nibbles, then with some other baits from his slim tackle box, but he didn't end up catching anything by the time the sun got hot, and he went home early. When asked, his dad said that he would bring home some waxworms from the store after work on Friday, so they would be fresh for the weekend.

The school mornings when he waited for the bus on the corner were still a bit chilly from the winter, but not like the weekend mornings with the wan ghost light of the rising sun. Jake had on his light windbreaker, blue and red with a green stripe across the chest, which rustled and swished with every movement, and his brown backpack with the leather bottom. He wasn't normally the first one there in the mornings, but the weekend had gotten him used to getting up so early, and he hadn't taken so long as usual to get out the door. As usual, his parents were already gone, and he used his single key to lock the door as he left.

Looking around every fifth second, he spotted Tommy walking down the street toward the stop, and waved. Tommy waved back, but didn't pick up his pace. As usual, he liked to take his time, wherever he was going. There had been no shortage of "Hurry up, Thomas"'s that Jake had heard through the years of elementary school, when Tommy would be lagging behind in line, holding up everyone behind him as well.

"Hey Tommy," Jake said, when he had gotten within earshot. "Hey Jimmy," Tommy shouted back.

"My name's not Jimmy, bud."

"My name's not bud, friend."

"My name's not friend, pal," Jake finished the exchange, and their false scowls broke into smiles.

"What's the news?" Tommy asked.

"I went fishing this weekend," Jake replied, "and I caught six fish." Tommy had been at his birthday party last week, along with a few other friends, where they had opened presents and bashed apart a big piñata.

"Were they big?" Tommy asked.

"...Yeah," Jake said, not knowing exactly how big bluegill were supposed to be.

"Sweet," Tommy replied.

"How about you?" Jake asked.

"I went to see the power rangers movie," Tommy said.

"Bitchin'," Jake replied. It had been out for a couple weeks, but he still hadn't convinced his parents to go to the

theater. Maybe as it got further from his birthday, he thought, he would have more luck. “How was it?”

“Bitchin’,” Tommy replied back, and they both smiled again.

A couple more kids from the grade below were making their way down the street, along with Justin and his sister Christie. Jake and Tommy waited for Justin to arrive and they moved off from the fourth graders, who gathered around the street sign.

“How’s it going?” Jake asked Justin, when they had reached their customary position next to the hedge on the corner of the street.

“My goddamn bike broke, can you believe that shit,” Justin said.

“Maybe if you laid off the twinkies,” Tommy began, and Justin punched him in the arm.

“Man, shut up,” Justin said, “And anyway, it’s the tire that’s popped, you idiot. It’s getting fixed today, hopefully.”

“Well you better, I’m tired of hauling your ass around,” Tommy said. There seemed to be perpetually something wrong with Justin’s bike; a broken chain, popped tire, seat too loose; and Justin commonly rode on the back of Tommy’s bike in these instances, which was the only one with a rear rack.

“You think I like riding on your bike? You drive like a goddamn old lady,” Justin shot back, “you got no jumps, man.”

“See, this is why your bike’s broke all the time,” Tommy said, “you have to respect your bike, like a friend.” Tommy, who Jake thought, for the record, did drive like an old lady, was always preaching the gospel of caution. Jake’s dad had said that it was because Tommy’s dad was an insurance agent, and laughed, but Jake didn’t know why.

More kids were gathered around the street sign which doubled as a bus stop now, with the faint vestiges of the early morning chill finally out of the air. Aemilia and Karen came up from the cul-de-sac side of the street and completed the three quarter circle beside the hedges.

“Did you have a good birthday weekend,” Aemilia asked Jake as they slotted themselves into the circle. These four, plus a couple more, were the kids at Jake’s birthday party after school on Thursday. A big cake, a big piñata, Jake considered it to have been a generally good time.

“I did, I had a blast,” Jake responded.

“What did you do?”

“I went fishing with my new pole twice.”

“Did you catch anything?” Karen asked at the same time as Aemilia asked “Where?” and Jake explained again about his fish and the pond, which they could all see from their position next to the hedge. Looking over at it, Jake felt a pang of nostalgia, like it would be so much easier to just walk over to the pond again, rather than stay here for the bus.

“Did you catch WWE on Sunday?” Justin asked the group. No one replied, wrestling was Justin’s schtick, but that didn’t

mean that he was going to stop from telling them all about it.

“Well anyway, the smoking guns, they’re these two cowboys, or brothers, or something, went tag team in the final match against this big Japanese dude and another one, and at the end, just when you think they’re gonna get clobbered, they both show up in the ring, and do a goddamn combo flying kick BAM! THE SHOW’S OVER!”

“Bitchin’” Tommy said low key, contrasting the volume of Justin’s previous exclamation.

“I would like you to watch your goddamn french,” Aemilia said with a feigned british accent, which Jake thought was a pretty good impression of their second period English teacher. For the last four years, four of them had all been in the same elementary homeroom, switching classes together and sitting next to each other the whole time. Karen was the recent addition, having moved from Seattle just at the beginning of the year, she and Aemilia had immediately taken to each other, and the group expanded to five.

“What’s wrestlemania,” Karen asked Justin.

“It’s just the best goddamn television program ever made by man, that’s what. Why do you ask?”

“My dad said that the wrestling in wrestlemania was fake,” Karen said, and Justin’s face got red.

“Your dad doesn’t know shit, it’s not fake, they do real ring outs and everything, real rules.”

“My dad does know shit, I was just asking a question you big idiot,” Karen shot back.

Justin's face got redder, "Hey why don't you watch what you're saying you-"

"Whoa, whoa," Jake stepped in between the two of them, facing Justin, "chill out man, no one's gotta blow a gasket." This had been a regular occurrence for the last year as well, Karen got on fine with everyone, but Justin seemed to have a bone to pick with her. Whether it was her west coast accent, the different shows she watched, or the French tutoring she had to go to after school on Wednesdays, he was always picking on her about something.

"No one's saying that wrestlemania is fake," Aemilia began.

"My dad-"

"We," Aemilia talked over Karen, "just wanted to ask the question."

"Well it isn't fake, it's as real as it gets," Justin said over Jake's shoulder.

"There you go," Aemilia said, ending what Karen started. Karen was Aemilia's friend first, and she fit in fine with everyone else, well, almost everyone else, but Aemilia still worked to smooth the rough edges of the group for her, like she did at the beginning of the year.

They all heard the high pitched squeal of the bus's air brakes before they saw it turn the corner up the street. It was regulation yellow with black lettering, "Columbia primary school" it read on the side. After the summer, they would all be picked up by the middle school bus, and Jake felt that

things would be very different then. But until that time, the same bus driver, with her same Pall Mall cigarette dangling from the hand with which she held the door open, drove the same bus, every weekday morning of their lives, and they started the school day by entering it's dark smoky interior. Justin stared ahead at the back of Karen's head as they filed in.

* * *

The same yellow bus rounded the corner, but it was afternoon now, and the sun had been heating the asphalt all day, making it a little sticky. The bus tires made a ripping sound as they stopped at the corner, and the neighbors from the fourth and third grades came off the bus first, they were seated up front. Then came Jake, Justin, Tommy, Aemilia, and Karen. The bus driver lady, with another Pall Mall in her hand, closed the door after Karen's backpack had cleared the hinges, and gunned the engine as the bus accelerated down the street to its next destination.

"Look, it's obvious that the green ranger is evil, he's being controlled by Zedd!" Tommy exclaimed.

"That doesn't make him evil," Aemilia shot back, "that makes him *manipulated*. You can tell that he's still good inside."

"Or that he's hot," Justin said in a stage whisper to Jake. Aemilia elbowed him hard in the arm, which caused him to

suck in air through his teeth.

“And *anyway*, Zordon wouldn’t let an evil person into the rangers if he wasn’t sure that deep deep down, the green ranger was good after all.”

“Why’s that,” Jake asked.

“Because Zordon’s like their parent, he’s supposed to take care of them.”

“It seems like they do an awful lot of taking care of Zordon,” Tommy said.

“Zordon’s just a floating head, he needs all the help he can get,” Aemilia said, “but he protects them with what he says to them. He’s like... their advisor, even though he can’t protect himself.”

After they got off the bus, they moved as a group down the sidewalk away from the street with the cul-de-sac. Justin’s backpack was open at the top, and Jake could see loose papers wedged in between books. Jake had binders in his which bound all of his assignments together with page protectors and snap-shut three ring bindings. None of them carried lunch boxes, they all ate the cafeteria lunch at school. Once, Karen had brought a container of strawberries and a ziploc bag of powdered sugar, which they sneakily ate between giggles at the lunch table. That was at the beginning of the year, and Jake had thought she was alright after that.

They passed the first house under construction on the left, their side of the sidewalk. Since right before winter, they had started hanging out just past the developing cul-de-sac down

the street. Sometimes they walked on the big piles of caked, light brown earth which went up higher than their heads. Other times they passed through the skeletons of houses in construction, imagining secret cubbyholes between the studs where in actuality there would just be drywall. Today, as if by some unspoken decree, they passed each house in turn, heading for the forest at the end of the street, accessible between the two terminal projects.

The sidewalk turned into hardpack dirt as they entered the dug out but not yet cemented driveway of one of the end houses, walking down past the skeleton to the line of trees. Passing under the branches, the temperature dropped ten degrees, bringing a slight chill, and Jake thought for a moment about getting his windbreaker out of his backpack, where it was wedged in under his books. He decided not to, no one else was stopping anyway.

“My dad says there are bears back here,” Tommy said, “and that they’re just about ready to come out of hibernation.”

“Your old man’s a liar,” Justin said, “there’s no bears back here. They wouldn’t come within a mile of the road, trust me.”

“Trust you?” Aemilia said, “Shit, I wouldn’t trust you as far as I could throw you.” Justin’s face turned a slight pink.

“You don’t know that,” Tommy continued, “people see bears all the time in natural parks, and that’s close to the road.”

“National parks,” Karen said.

“I bet they’re no Yogi the Bear either,” Jake said, “I saw a discovery channel show about black bears, and it said they’re over seven feet tall when they stand up, which they DO!”

“Do they walk like that?” Karen asked.

“No they don’t walk like that,” Justin interjected, “*like Yogi Bear*. They run after you on all fours, and they go as fast as a goddamn car.”

“You’d think people would be more scared of them, if they could go as fast as a car,” Tommy said skeptically.

“Well they can’t break into a car,” Justin responded, “at least while it’s driving, so you could just drive away if you see one.”

Jake was very aware of how car-less they were, walking up the path into the woods. There weren’t bears here, he thought, no way. Not like those ones he saw on the TV. Such a thing couldn’t exist here, not this close to the city. Those must be country bears, he thought. We’ve got the Bernstein Bears.

The trail, it was more like a ramp of earth up the side of the hill, curved around until they got to the top of the hill, which had been flattened and was devoid of trees. Justin had speculated that it was the site of a UFO landing, Tommy thought it was the site of future housing development, Aemilia said it was strip mining. Whatever it was, they had hung out there all the way through fall, and coming back for the first time after winter, it was unchanged. There were still

no plants growing in the soil, in some places you could almost make out tractor treads, *tank* treads was what Justin claimed, in the hard yellow ground.

Aemilia threw down her pack next to a tree stump with a splintered top, put her hands into the small of her back and stretched. Jake put his pack down beside her's, and the rest soon followed until they had a little pile of thinly bound textbooks and note paper, each one with contents almost exactly the same as the others.

Jake reached down and dislodged a hard dirt clod from the side of a supposed tank tread, stood up, and chucked it at a spot on a nearby tree. He missed, and it broke apart at the base of a tree behind it. Tommy reached down to break off the top of another tread impression in the dirt.

"You would think that something would have grown here," Karen said, "over the winter."

"Things don't grow in the winter," Justin said, as he watched Tommy's dirt clod smash into a tree. A small sideways mountain of residue was left on the bark, with a light dusting of yellow dirt around it.

"Yes they do," she said, as she walked over to the tread impressions, "plenty of things grow in the winter. Weeds, bushes..." she bent over and picked up an oblong flattish rock. Jake's instinct was that nothing grew in the winter, but Karen had put a doubt in his mind, she always sounded like she knew what she was talking about.

Karen chucked the rock at the tree with the dirt mountain on its side, and missed. The stone hit the ground and tumbled down the hill, making a clicking sound as it hit dead branches and twigs.

Aemilia was up next, with a smaller dark rock she dug out of the hard soil. She took a pitcher's stance, raised her front leg up, and let fly with an overhand throw. Her rock also missed, but hit the tree right below the target. Of all of them, she was the best at throwing, but she was on the girls' softball team, and never played with Jake in his summer baseball program.

Justin had been tossing a rock up and down in his hand while Aemilia threw hers, and now made a sidearm throw, exhaling with a hissing sound, and missed the tree wide. "Damn," he said. They had played this tossing game since before the winter started, when it became too cold to come out and fool around in the woods anymore, and one of their houses became the destination every day after school. By this point, each one of their parents knew exactly who was in their friend group from the rotation of after school hangouts.

Jake dug a smooth oblong rock out of the sidewall of a mud track and broke the outstanding dirt off its surface. The dirt caked over everything up here dried out his hands something awful, and he patted his palm against the side of his pants to knock it off. He also took up a pitcher's stance, he had only done catching and batting in practice, and let loose with a

pitch that somehow found its mark, smashing into the clod, breaking it apart in a cloud of dirt.

Somehow, they instinctively knew the rules to this unnameable game, and Tommy picked up the next clod and tossed it toward the trees, hitting nothing. Aemilia's clod stuck to the side of a tree, and they all aimed for that. As they threw the rocks and the dirt, they talked about nothing and everything, the conversation changing seemingly at random, never settling on any one thing for long. The school day was seldom discussed, in lieu of the finer points of Mexican wrestling and Power Rangers plot points.

The air had started to chill on the top of the flattened hill as the sun approached the horizon. Jake wanted to get his jacket, not much more than a windbreaker, out of the big pocket in his backpack, but a vague sense of *toughing it out* kept him away. Well past the point where he was comfortable, Aemilia, who already had a jacket on, said "It's getting late, let's head home."

"Let's blow this popsicle stand," Justin said, and Jake, Tommy, and Aemilia groaned at the reappearance of last year's stubborn catchphrase. "Not this again," Tommy said, as he slung his pack around his shoulders. "What?" Justin asked, as they walked toward the edge of the clearing, stepping down onto the sloping ramp that would take them back to the street in construction. None of them wanted to prove their bravery by making it through the wooded track

after sunset, the possibility of bears, no matter how far fetched Justin's stories usually were, was too great.

At the first intersection after the street of houses in construction, Jake and Tommy waved goodbye to Justin, Aemilia, and Karen, who split off to make their respective ways back home. For another block, Tommy and Jake walked, talking about their English assignment, which Tommy was stressing out about, before it was time for him to split off, Tommy straight, Jake going right. They waved goodbye as Tommy crossed the street, and Jake walked half a block to his house.

When Jake came in the front door, he couldn't immediately recognize the smell from the kitchen that greeted him. All of their parents had, whether they liked it or not, adjusted their schedules either consciously or unconsciously to accommodate very late dinners. Unbeknownst to Jake or any of his friends, the network of telephone calls between them kept everyone up to date on just whose house each was playing at at any time. So Jake was surprised when his mom turned around from the stovetop and asked "Did you go out to the mountaintop today?"

He chalked it up to motherly clairvoyance and said "Yeah."

It certainly couldn't be called a mountain, Anita thought, that low hill being prepared for another neighboring subdivision, but it was what her son preferred to call it, and she supposed that to him it was like a mountaintop.

“Mom,” he asked when he came back from putting his backpack in the living room, “are there bears out in those woods.”

Anita stopped stirring for a second, the thought chilling her for a tick as she thought hard. Her spoon started up again as she replied “Not this close to the neighborhood, you know, they don’t like people.”

“Hmm,” Jake said. Anita looked away from her cooking back at him, and said “But if you see one, you run. Don’t mess around with those things.” Jake was about to respond in the affirmative, but Anita suddenly started, “Oh wait..., or is it...”.

“Dad!” she yelled out. From upstairs in his office, Carter yelled down “Yeah?” “What do you do if you see a bear in Maryland?”

Carter, seated in front of his computer, working on a report for the advertising agency he worked for, paused for a few seconds. *Was it stop*, he thought, *or run?* He yelled out, “Curl up into a ball!”

“You heard your father?” she asked Jake. Jake nodded and made his way up to the second floor. He leaned on the doorframe of the place he called “computer room”, but his father called “overtime”, and asked “Why?”

“Why what?” Carter asked, reading back the report from his word processing program. He had started it at the office, but brought it home on floppy to try to get it finished up before next morning. The big glass monitor was starting to give him a headache, indicating that it would be soon time to

stop, whether he wanted to or not. He could smell a faint whiff of ozone when he leaned too close to the screen to make out inserted diagrams.

“Why do you sometimes run away from bears, and sometimes not?” The full context of the question brought him back from the report, and he leaned back and swiveled around in his rolling chair. The medium pile carpet in the room prevented it from rolling so much as its function would suggest, but it was still good for swiveling, and it swiveled around to face Jake.

“Well, a lot of bears don’t like people, that’s just how they are,” Carter began, “like foxes or deer, they’re spooked by us. So they normally like to run away if they hear you coming. The only way to get attacked by them is to surprise them, or come between a mom and a baby. That’s why you curl up into a ball, because they don’t want to get you anyway. That’s the kind of bears we have here in Maryland. But out west they have bears that are really aggressive, and would attack you, and that’s why you have to run away.”

“How far west,” Jake asked, trying to prolong the conversation. Carter thought again for a moment before responding “I think past the rocky mountains, and that’s a thousand miles away, so you don’t need to worry about it.” Jake watched his dad swivel around again to his monitor and knew their talk was over, at least until dinner. He didn’t remember his dad working so much from home, not before they bought the computer in the summer, but most nights he

would work from the time he got home until supper, and on some nights even after that.

Jake turned away from the door and went down the hall to his room. The door to his room was half closed, and Jake moved it back, pushing against the resistance from its bottom edge scraping the carpet. Jake entered his room, kicking a pile of clothes on the way to his bed. Sitting down on the bed facing the door, his red ranger poster was behind him, and he reached over and pulled out the drawer of the nearby night table. The table was made out of a light wood, and the handle had been polished with use, but the runners, which were wood on wood, ran smooth from innumerable openings and closings. Inside was a mishmash of items in no real theme, a red see-through yoyo, a couple of animal figurines, but the dominant item for size was the gameboy in the center. He hefted the heavy gray case out of the drawer and turned it over to check the back. Yep, the Space Invaders cartridge was still inserted into the slot at the top of the device, and he turned it over again. In the open drawer there were several other game cartridges scattered about which he had enjoyed at one time or another, but right now it was Space Invaders that was on his mind, and he had been making his way up the high score table.

He flipped the gray switch at the top, locking the game cartridge into the device with a plastic gate, and watched the screen come to life in green and black. The tinny arcade sound played out of the single speaker in the bottom corner and the

title screen scrolled up. Jake descended into a world of invading insectoid alien ships for a half hour.

* * *

Grilled portobello, that's what the cooking smell turned out to be, and Jake would rather have had hamburger helper again. This was a new recipe, a more refined recipe, Anita thought. She had found it in the back of a magazine and it was highly recommended, by the magazine, but the end result didn't look a lot like the pictures displayed. For one she didn't happen to have any fresh sprigs of parsley, so made do with sprinkled dried parsley flakes. And for two, it just didn't taste as good as she thought it should, that it was advertised to, even with its cheesy base sauce. She could tell that she wasn't the only one who thought this, even though Carter and Jake put up a valiant effort. Sometimes she wondered why she didn't just revert to making hotdogs and chilli every night.

Anita was a nurse at one of the nearby, but not the nearest by, hospitals. Her shift started early, she was out the door before Carter had woken up, and ended early, making her feel dangerously out of sync with the family. For a few hours after work every day, she was at home alone with nothing to do. Too early to start on dinner, she had taken alternatively watching the TV in the living room or reading thick romance paperbacks with the spines hopelessly curved back. At five she would call around the other parents to find out whose house

everyone was at, and at six Carter came home. Today they had made love in the quiet house, and afterwards he had gone into his office to work on his report; report on what, who knows; and she had felt peppy enough to try this new fanciful recipe with the unrealistic cover picture.

However, with every minute out of the oven, the portobello mushrooms were drooping and releasing their water, making the white cheese sauce gray and thin. The taste was fine, or fine enough, but the visual of the plate wasn't great. It wasn't a great recipe, she didn't think she would use recipes anymore out of the back of the reader's digest. She finished the last piece of her portobello cap and asked hopefully "Does anyone want some more?"

* * *

After dinner, she wrapped up the casserole dish of portobellos with saran wrap and put it in the fridge. She had a feeling that they wouldn't taste half so bad on a hamburger bun, and added that to the paper tear-away grocery list pad on the fridge. She and Jake were sitting on the couch watching the discovery channel. Every commercial break was an advertisement for shark week, and *didn't shark week just end*, she thought. She suddenly felt old, that feeling that comes every now and then when time passes by way too fast, and you feel like you've somehow missed the last year between shark weeks. She could remember everything that should have been

there, Christmas, New Years, Easter, but it seemed compressed, not taking up nearly as much time as it should have, or used to.

“Mom”, Jake asked during a toothpaste commercial.

“Yeah?”

“What’s Dad’s job?”

“Well his official title is program manager.” Jake sat watching the woman on TV with the impossibly white teeth for a few seconds, then asked “What does he do at work?”

“To tell you the truth, I don’t think I’m the best person to ask about that,” but Jake was still looking up at her, the light from the TV playing over half of his face, turning it carnival colors in the dark room. Anita sighed, “I think he mostly manages people in different teams in the company, making sure everyone is on schedule.”

“Oh,” Jake looked down, thinking again, “what does it mean to be a manager, at work I mean?”

Anita chuckled, “That’s a good question, sometimes I think I don’t know what it means myself, but what it’s supposed to mean is that you keep everyone working on task, make sure the projects are all getting done on time, and taking care of people getting promoted and fired, that sort of thing. I have a manager too at my job, I think most people have them.”

“Does Dad have a manager?”

“Yes,” she said, endless complaints muttered in the bedroom after dark came back to her, “he does. Only the big

boss at the company doesn't have a manager. Or, maybe the boss's manager is all of the customers, you could think of it that way."

"Hmm," Jake muttered, and looked back at the television, the program about great whites was back on. Anita thought about how different his world was from hers, or his father's. Right now all he had to worry about was getting good grades, behaving in class, and surviving the tumultuous years to come. She didn't want that to change, for him to have to pay rent, move his possessions in boxes, and worry about getting a raise. But she supposed the time would slip by, like shark week, and one day he would be out the door with his graduation cap and a diploma. She hugged Jake tight next to her as a shark leapt out of the water on the TV. At least she had this time, she thought, at least it's not over yet.

Chapter 3

The alarm clock clanged away on his bedside table, and Jake's arm shot out and slipped it under the covers, while he fumbled with the off switch. It was Saturday again, and the twilight wasn't even illuminating his room yet. It was time to fish.

Finally finding the textured slider, he flipped it down to off, and the alarm stopped. He tossed the covers back, put the alarm clock back on his nightstand, and shuffled his feet across the floor to the wall by his door. A discarded piece of clothing, no telling what it was, lodged around his left foot, but he shook it off as he made his way across the room. Finally reaching the door, he shuffled left to the wall beside it, where he found the light switch and flicked it on.

The room erupted from deep black night to startling day immediately. Last week when he had gotten up, it was already halfway toward sunrise. This time, he wanted to get in as much fishing as he could before noon, which was when all of his friends had cajoled their parents into letting them go to the Columbia mall, with Justin's mom chaperoning.

He found yesterday's pants and shirt, and pulled off his button up pajamas to put them on as quick as he could. He

turned over a few other articles of clothing on the floor until he found a suitable pair of socks, and, having fully clothed himself, grabbed the fishing rod that was lying across the top of the dresser, and his box of tackle in front of it. Every day this week he had looked at the rod when he was in his room, imagining fishing again, and today was the day.

He pulled the bedroom door open, sliding it as quietly as he could across the carpet, and made his way down the carpeted stairs to the kitchen. There, in the light from a single ceiling light, he saw that either his mom or dad had put out two granola bars for him on the table, where any goodies in addition to school lunch would normally be on a school day. He pocketed them, cinnamon apple flavor, his favorite, and pulled on the fridge door, but it was stuck. He worked his fingers into the rubber gasket on the side of the door, making it give way after a second. There, in a cleared out crisper drawer, his mother had insisted on keeping it separate from the rest of the food, was a styrofoam box, and inside he knew there were a lot of very cold, very sleepy waxworms.

He slid open the crisper drawer, making a racket with the hard plastic, grabbed the styrofoam box, and closed it again, finally closing the fridge door. He set the box and his tackle box on the counter, and leaned his pole against the wall, while he searched in the closet for his thicker fleece jacket, something warmer than the windbreaker he had started wearing again. After hauling a couple of his parents' big coats to the side, he found his tan fleece jacket, and put it on.

He walked back to the kitchen light switch, turned it off, and made his way to where he thought the front door was in almost pitch black. His outstretched hand hit the brass plated door knob, and he groped at the deadbolt above it until it turned, and he got the door open. The street was only illuminated by white and yellow porch lights, but he could see the first traces of a gray light creeping up behind the roofs. He grabbed his pole and the two boxes stacked on top of each other, and stepped out the door. The temperature felt right to him, with his jacket, and he nodded, shut the door, and locked it with his single key. Now it was time to make his way over to the pond.

He wouldn't describe the street as dark, not exactly, there were too many outside lights on the houses to say that, but the darkness closed in rapidly outside the radius of those little globes of light above doors and porches. He couldn't even see the woods behind the houses on one half of the street, just complete darkness where there would have been lights from the street over, half glimpsed through the slats of wooden fences.

He made his way down the asphalt, staying to the left side of the street, and at the corner the curb turned into a concrete sidewalk, which he took the rest of the way to the pond, where it dropped off right before the asphalt did. The gray morning light was coming on a little stronger now, illuminating a wall of mist in every direction, and he turned left at the pond's edge toward his previous fishing place. After

passing one bench by he saw another rise out of the mist, and realized, with a little pang of sadness, that the old man wasn't there. Jake hadn't admitted to himself until that moment, but he was looking forward to fishing with Mr. Lloyd again, now that he too could provide his own waxworms.

He went over to the bench and sat down on the right side, like last time, and put the tackle and styrofoam boxes beside him, and his rod's handle on the ground. The bobber and hook rig was still attached to the end of the line, from last week, and he was reaching out to unhook it from the eye of the pole when a thought came to him: Maybe Mr. Lloyd was sitting on another bench around the pond.

It didn't seem crazy, he thought, that he could be at another bench, at least worth a look anyhow. There were only benches on the side of the pond nearest to the street, the opposite side was bound by trees that Jake suspected were part of the same forest that they played in after school. Jake left the hook on the rod's eye as he got up, deciding to turn right to check the benches on the other side of the road first. He left all his fishing stuff behind, he didn't want to haul it all over the place if no one was there.

He walked along the edge of the pond, passing one bench, the road, then two more benches before coming to the spot where the trees nearly met the shore. He was feeling hot, so he unzipped the front of his jacket, and started back. Maybe George wasn't here at all, Jake thought, which would be too

bad. But he would fish anyhow, maybe Mr. Lloyd would be back again next week, and he could tell him about how many fish he caught.

Somewhere up ahead, past the road he came in on, he heard a light splashing that sounded like a big fish. Did fish splash on the water? He'd seen fishermen in boats catch big fish that jumped out of the water, like the great white, on the sports channels sometimes, but he suspected that those were the kinds of fish that Mr. Lloyd had told him weren't in this pond.

His next thought was "bear." Didn't bears eat fish? An image came to his mind of a bear, poised over a stream, catching salmon that jumped into its mouth. But were those the only kinds of fish a bear ate, or would they go into ponds and eat up the bluegill too? He stopped walking as he heard steps on the grass. It still wasn't light enough to see much, and the mist was thick, but he could barely make out the edge of the road in front of him. He could go back down the road and back home, he thought, a bear wouldn't follow him, would it? It wasn't a western bear, probably.

He heard a thick cough up ahead, a human cough, and his heart rate immediately relaxed. *It's just George*, he thought. He started walking again, fast, with the pond on his right side, and when he came up on the bench with his pole leaned up against it, he saw George on the other side, with his own pole leaned up as well.

“Hiya kiddo,” George said, and raised his hand in a wave.
“Hi Mr. Lloyd,” Jake responded.

“I thought I might see you out here again,” George said, coming around the bench and sitting down on the left side, next to his pole, “caught the bug, have ya?”

“Huh?” Jake said.

“What I meant is, you liked fishing last week.”

“Oh, yeah!” Jake said, “I really did, I’d like to come out again sooner, but I have school.”

“Ah, to be young again,” George said, “when you’re my age, a lot of things get worse, but not havin’ to go to work is one of the few perks.”

“I thought you had a job,” Jake said, sitting down on the bench beside his rod, “something in Washington?”

“Washington?”

“You know, the capital.”

“Oh,” George chuckled, “I thought you meant the state. That’s a long way from here, you know.”

“It’s over two thousand miles,” Jake recited, “the country is. Over two thousand miles wide, and Washington’s on the other side.”

“Two thousand,” George let loose a whistle, “it makes you wonder how anyone got across it, in the olden days.”

“They used covered wagons,” Jake offered, “and dysentery.”

“What?” George looked over, a shocked and amused look on his face.

“It’s in this game we play in school, in computer lab, The Oregon Trail,” Jake offered, “you have to make it all the way across the country, but everyone keeps dying of dysentery.”

“Jeez,” George said, looking back out at the pond, “isn’t that a little morbid?”

Jake shrugged. “It’s fun, you get to shoot deer for food, that’s *my* favorite part.”

“It was probably their favorite part too,” George offered, “that’s probably why people still hunt today, because it’s still the best part of all that.”

George reached around the bench and ruffled through the pockets of a dripping yellow raincoat, the rubber surface making slick squeaking noises as it rubbed together. He pulled out a styrofoam cup with a lid from the mass of yellow folds and sat it down between them on the bench. “Do you need some more waxworms?”

“I brought my own!” Jake said excitedly, and shifted the tiny styrofoam box from his right side around to the middle.

“It seems like you’ve learned the first rule of fishing,” George said with a smile, “to be self sufficient, but also to accept help when offered. A box of waxworms that big will take you a long way.”

Jake grinned and set the box down next to George’s cup. George reached to his left and picked up his rod from where it was leaning on the bench, the bobber wobbling, seemingly in space, where it was suspended between the rod end and hook. Jake also pulled over his rod and began the process of

unhooking the bobber rig and putting on a waxworm. George cast out first, interrupting the still, glassy black water with his bright red bobber, and Jake was second.

As the ripples, which caught the faint morning glow, expanded outwards from their bobbers, Jake asked, “Do you come out here every weekend?”

“As many days of the week as I can,” George said, “unless there’s something important to do at seven in the morning, which there almost never is.”

“Being a politician must be easy,” Jake said ruefully, “I always have school in the week, I don’t think I could come out before that.”

“No, school is hard,” George agreed, “I remember, so many years ago, how it seemed to take up all my time. Things change when you’re an adult, there’s more time to do what you want. In a way, *you* make the rules.”

“Then why do people spend so much time at their jobs?” Jake asked.

“Well, that’s one of the rules you don’t get to make. If you’re lucky, your job will let you start when you want to, but most jobs will make you put in a good eight hours a day, at least, before you can leave. You can get a job where you can make your own hours, but that work’s hard on a person. It’s hard to be your own boss, if you catch my drift.”

Jake thought about what George said. “It’s not much different from school then,” he said.

“I wouldn’t say that. Unless I’m mistaken, and things really have changed a lot since I was young, you don’t get to choose what school you go to?” Jake shook his head. “That’s key, I think. When you’re an adult, you get to choose most things in your life, except for death and taxes that is.”

Jake looked at him questioningly, and George saw that his joke didn’t land across the years. “Eh, what I mean is that you always have to pay taxes, no matter what, and no one gets to boss around the grim reaper, in the end.” George made a gruesome gesture across his throat, and Jake laughed.

“So what you’re saying is that the difference between you and me,” Jake said, “is choice.”

“That’s exactly what I’m saying,” George said, “and it’s surprising how important that is. I’ve never been president, and don’t often vote for the person who does get to be president, but the people in this country had a whole revolution against England, the greatest naval power in the world, just for the chance to have a little more choice in their lives. I think that can tell you all you need to know about just how important it is.”

Jake turned back to his bobber, which he had previously been watching out of the corner of his eye, and watched it float on the still water. It was hard to imagine a world of choices, choices that mattered in his life, he hadn’t had many chances to make choices about important things. His mind went to his friends, and being together in the afternoons. That was something that felt totally separate from the world

where they were constantly controlled by adults, especially now that it was warm enough to spend their time outside. He wondered if that was why they chose places to go that were out of sight of anyone else.

Jake saw his bobber dip down, and he put all his concentration on his rod, his hands tightening on the handle. A couple more nibbles came, making ever increasing rings of water around the red bobber, then the bobber jerked down, and Jake jerked up. After a brief struggle, during which George's bobber went down and he started reeling in his own fish, Jake landed his catch. That morning, Jake caught four fish total, George caught five, and peppered throughout were bits of fishing advice, where to cast, and a primer on fish psychology, *if there is such a thing*, George opined. Towards eleven thirty, Jake was checking his watch, uncomfortably strapped to his wrist, every minute.

"Do you have somewhere to be?" George asked, after noticing Jake check it again, twisting his arm too far around to catch sight of the time.

"Huh?" Jake said.

"You keep checking your watch like you're about to be late for something."

"Oh," Jake said, "me and my friends are going to the mall at noon, and I didn't want to be late."

"The mall," George said, and trailed off. "You know—" George stopped himself, he had been about to say "back in my day" without a hint of sarcasm in his voice. *Dear lord*, he

thought, *I really am an old man now. I'll have to tell Marie when I get back.*

“That seems like a fun trip,” he finished the sentence. “Do you hang out with your friends often?”

“Yeah, every day after school.”

That brought George back too, and he had to snap himself out of the memories that bubbled up. “Well that’s good, that’s one of the good things about being young, I think. It’s easier to make friends than when you’re older. I don’t know why, but it is.”

Jake checked his watch again, it was eleven thirty one. He started reeling in his pole and said, “I’ve gotta go home now for lunch.”

George looked amused, “No mall lunch?”

Jake reeled his hook and bobber out of the water and was cleaning the old soggy waxworm off the hook, “Mom says it’s too unhealthy.”

George laughed out loud, and Jake smiled. “You’re right about that, your mom has a good head on her shoulders. Have a fun time!”

Jake had hooked the hook into the rod and stood up. He turned around and said “You too,” before walking back down the edge of the pond toward the asphalt street.

George looked out at the pond. In the still air, it was a near perfect reflection of the bright blue sky. Fluffy cotton ball clouds with gray underbellies scuttled upside down under the surface of the pond. He hadn’t had a bite in half an hour, and

reeled in his own bobber, discarding the soggy waxworm on the hook. He got up, looked around the deserted pond, circled around the back of the bench, and put on the squeaky yellow raincoat. The seams groaned like mice as he buttoned up the front, and then slid the styrofoam cup of waxworms into the front pocket. He picked up his rod and walked toward the edge of the water.

* * *

The mall somehow always reminded Jake of an indoor swimming pool, with the sound of a hundred people talking echoing endlessly off the walls, and the whiff of chlorine surface cleaner. Justin's mom had come into the mall with them and told them that she would be in the dining area if they needed anything. As they left, Jake saw her open up a brightly colored magazine she took out of her purse, and start to read.

“Let's go to the game store!” Tommy suggested first, and the group moved as a unit in the direction of the East side of the mall. The mall was set up as a long corridor, with the dining area in the middle, which also served as an entrance from the large parking lot outside. The aromas of frying bourbon chicken and pretzels filled the air, causing Jake's mouth to water even with the PB&J sandwich his mom had fixed him right before. As they walked in a conglomeration, they passed kiosks of every kind set up beside the glass

balcony above the first floor. Here earrings, there sunglasses, there was even one selling cubes of glass that had pictures stuck inside of them. Jake wondered how they got them in.

As they entered the game store, the wall of multicolored blocky game cases caught their collective eye. Shifting over to that side of the store, they looked at the GameBoy cartridges lined up on display. The illustrated box art was a hopeful rendering of what the sprites on the green and black display screen were supposed to represent, and with enough illustrations in the game manuals, Jake could nearly see the articulated forms of the alien spacecraft instead of the five by three pixel blocks on his Space Invaders game.

They all had gameboys at home, but as they moved across the store, the group splintered apart. Jake, Tommy, and Aemilia went to the SNES wall to look at the new releases, Tommy had a subscription to Nintendo Power, and he always knew what good games were coming out that week. Justin and Karen gravitated over toward the Sega shelf, where they looked at whatever was going on on that game console. Justin spent a lot of time playing their SNES's when he came over to one of their houses, but Jake's brief experience playing Sonic on the Sega had weirded him out. It *should* have been just like any other game console, he told himself, but there was something very weird about the way the game looked and played. He didn't try again after the first time.

After consuming the SNES wall, they shuffled over the gray printed carpet toward the NES shelf, which had

cartridges without boxes packed together in a high-walled wooden tray. It was difficult to read from above, and anyway, what remained of the box art was on the front, so they flipped through the cartridges one by one, looking at the familiar names and illustrations that mostly didn't change between visits to the mall.

The bored teenage cashier looked on as Justin and Karen, having exhausted the sega shelf, moved over to join the rest of the group at the NES tray. Jake had an old NES, in fact most of the group had one that had been replaced by one of the newer consoles, so it was always a good bet to look in the used cartridges in case they found any gems. Their respective families had each given them a few dollars in pocket change, and at the beginning of the trip, right outside the food court, they counted up the total sum together. In rare occasions they had pooled their money to buy a single game cartridge from the game store, which would be rotated between houses which had the respective console, enjoyed by all privately or together. Today wasn't looking like one of those days though, and if nothing else caught their eye on their way around the mall, the sum would be spent in the arcade.

They exited the game store, the flashing and rotating overhead lights behind them, and stood against the glass railing on the balcony above the first floor of the mall.

“Where to now,” Tommy asked.

“Claire's!” Aemilia said, and the boys gave out their expected mock groans. Jake actually didn't mind going into

Claire's with Aemilia and Karen, and he suspected that the other boys didn't mind either, or they would put up more of a fight. There was something exciting about perusing the forbidden lair, unlike being dragged into the women's section of the JCPenny's by his mom, the smell of dusty bras and dresses nearly suffocating in the still, heated air.

Claire's was on the first floor of the mall, so they first made their way to the escalators on the side with the Macy's anchor store. This mall was sandwiched between a Macy's and a JCPenny's, with a third store in construction in the middle, on the opposite side of the parking lot. It might be a Dick's, which Jake was excited about, or a Sears, which he wasn't.

The five of them went down the escalator single file, five children in a row amongst a sea of adults and harried parents with one or two children grasped and being pulled along behind them. In the mall they felt like a rarity, the few self-sufficient kids who didn't require a chaperone anymore, at least not one who had to stay with them all the time. When they were thirteen, they could be in the mall without any supervision at all, their parents just dropping them off and picking them up in the parking lot, according to the mall rules. It wasn't much of a change, but it was greedily anticipated by each of them.

Getting off the escalator at the bottom, they circled around to the opposite side of the hallway and regrouped into their three wide phalanx, Aemilia and Karen in front, with Jake,

Tommy, and Justin bringing up the rear. In this formation they swept past pagodas selling walls of tshirts with custom prints, Jake had once asked his mom about one and she had hurried him off with a shocked expression on her face, and stations selling long tubes of powdered candy, which you could buy and keep refilling throughout the day, as if you would be able to. One tube was too much for anyone to eat.

They passed the Victoria's Secret on the other side of the hallway, and the boys side-eye stared both at the poster-sized prints of underwear-clad models as well as the tables overflowing with fancifully printed padded bras. It had been about a year since Jake had noticed the store for the first time, he had been dragged through the mall for years before that, but never spared a second look at the voluptuous images. Now, he found himself unable to keep his eyes off of certain ads in the back of his mother's magazines, and certain girls in school. He, Justin, and Tommy had begun to hesitantly talk about it amongst themselves, with the bravado of the unsure and confused, but never around Aemilia or Karen, that was too embarrassing. An outside observer would see all three of them slightly turn their heads in unison as they passed by the store on their left, never looking directly at it, but inexplicably at a second Auntie Anne's pretzels to the right of it.

Aemilia and Karen, unaware of the synchronicity their compatriots had developed behind them, bravely led the way along the mirror polished faux marble floors, past the

noxious mixed scents of the bath and soap store, and into Claire's on the right side. The giant pink cursive sign was visible from halfway along the mall in either direction, but they had all been so many times that they unconsciously knew it's exact location in relation to all the mall landmarks.

The store had big side windows on the front that showed off a couple of faceless mannequins dressed in mini skirts and halter tops, and posed in sassy, but not quite natural ways. There were hundreds upon thousands of tiny cellophane wrapped packages hanging on hooks on the walls and sides of aisles visible from the outside of the store, experience told Jake that these were the many varied types of earrings. A teenage cashier was reading a magazine at the register and chomping noisily on a piece of gum.

Aemilia and Karen had gone ahead, they were busy at the wall on the left side of the store perusing the earrings together. The boys followed inside, the cashier looked up incuriously, and back down at the magazine. Somehow Jake was scared every time he entered that he would be found out and expelled, or worse, mocked, but so far no one had ever seemed to care. Down the aisle in the middle of the store he could see a woman with a small daughter looking over a pair of glittery shoes.

As before, the three of them gravitated over to the shelf with the beanie babies. There weren't any collectors amongst them, although Justin's mom did have a few high priced ones that she would reluctantly take out and display if asked nicely

enough, that she described as “the college fund”, but Jake probably had two or three in his room, Tommy had one, a hippo, and Justin had two of his own. There was something about the many varied nature of the beanie babies, and the chance of finding some very rare one in some off the grid location, that made perusing the shelf so intoxicating. Some of the floppy animals cost as much as the new SNES games they had been looking at before. Unlike at the game store, they had never pooled their funds to buy one of these.

“Do you see any babies you like,” Aemilia asked Tommy, and he jumped back surprised, letting out a little yelp. Aemilia laughed, and Karen, who had been standing behind her, smiled. Justin and Jake turned toward the commotion as a flustered Tommy shot back, “No, do you see any *you* like?”

“I wasn’t looking at the beanie babies, that’s you. *I* was looking at the earrings, and no, there was nothing new worth getting today.”

“Oh, okay...” Tommy said, not quite knowing what to say next.

“Where should we go next?” Karen asked over Aemilia’s shoulder. There were long seconds of silence between the two groups, Jake felt oddly exposed and embarrassed by Aemilia sneaking up on them, and his brain wheeled around a bit until it landed on “the electronics store.”

“Yeah,” Justin said combatively, against no one. Aemilia considered the three of them with a smile, they had instinctively moved together, and said “Okay, but put

Tabasco back.” Justin had been handling a red bull beanie baby before they were accosted, and looked down, surprised to find it still in his hands. He gingerly placed it back on the pile as they left the beanie baby section, and then filed out of the store altogether.

Turning to the left outside the store, Jake felt a deep sense of embarrassment lingering, like a cloud following him. He looked back through the window as they passed the front of Claire’s, sure that the cashier would be watching him with glee, but no, just reading the magazine. Apparently Justin had felt the same way, because he said “You know, we were only looking at those stupid beanie babies because you made us come in.”

“I didn’t make you come in,” Aemilia said in a faux nonchalant tone over her shoulder, “you could have gone to a different store if you wanted to while we were shopping.”

Well, that was technically true, but they never split up while in the mall together, Jake thought. They always went to all the stores together, even if it was Claire’s.

“Yeah, well maybe I will,” Justin said, the words clipped with indignation. Aemilia didn’t say anything back over her shoulder as she walked, Jake wondered if she was sensing what he was sensing, some sort of separation beginning, like the tearing sound you hear when you start ripping apart two pieces of velcro.

Karen turned around on her heel, stopping in the middle of the mall floor, and looked directly at Justin. Jake and Tommy

pulled up with scuffing squeaks on the polished floor. Aemilia walked for another step before she sensed something amiss, turned her head around, and then stopped fully, looking at the scene behind her. Karen's face reflected none of the self-righteousness apparent a second ago from Aemilia, nor the anger turned to surprise from Justin, but a vulnerability that was rare to see in their group.

"I don't want you to leave," she said directly to Justin. Somehow, the sincerity of her voice, and the fact that it was coming from the usually quiet Karen, was even more shocking than the abrupt stop. Jake felt that see-saw sense again, like there was something balancing on a knife edge, swinging this way and that, about to fall in some unknown direction.

"I uh... alright," Justin said, his voice suddenly morphing into reassurance. "I won't. I was just kidding around," he said, and his mouth moved into a small smile. A matching smile came to Karen's face, and, as if suddenly aware that all of her friends were staring intently at her, she blushed crimson, turned around, and started walking down the mall corridor. Aemilia blinked, and then hurried after her speed-walking friend, and Jake and Tommy stared at the back of Justin's head, and then looked at each other. Jake felt like the see-saw had fallen, but not in a way that he expected.

The group of boys eventually caught up with Aemilia and Karen further along the crowded mall, and for a split second, before they had made their way fully through the crowd, Jake

saw Aemilia stuck somewhere between placation and comfort, and Karen looking at her angrily with tears starting in her eyes. A group passed in front of them, and when they were gone, Aemilia was waving back at them, while Karen was looking the other way further down the mall. When the two groups met up again, they started down the mall in silence, no one quite knowing how to broach what had just happened. The big red Radio Shack sign came up on their right, and they walked into the store with the girls leading the way.

The store smelled like some combination of plastic and a little bit of ozone, somewhere between the outside of a shrink-wrapped box and the smell of an RC car after it's been going for too long. To one side of the store was a display of chunky, black cell phones with flip-down number pad covers, all pinned to the wall above their respective cardboard boxes. In the back were the huge metal containers with slide-out trays which held a thousand different electronics components from small light bulbs to funnily striped wires. Jake's dad had gone straight to the back of the store a number of times to pick up replacement parts for this or that broken item around the house. But the most interesting part of the store, the part that they were all here for was the left side, which had various televisions, robots, RC cars, and helicopters.

Jake didn't know if he had imagined what he had seen before or not, but Karen looked back to normal now as she turned left to investigate a robot dog standing on top of it's

cardboard packaging. Aemilia came over and stood beside her, reading the side of the package, where features were listed. Justin went over and looked at something halfway down the same shelf, it looked like a tamagotchi. Jake and Tommy moved over to another shelf which supported a high powered RC car that ran on fuel instead of battery power.

“That was weird, right?” Tommy whispered, standing askance so he could look at Jake and Aemilia and Karen at the same time.

“Yeah, that’s for sure,” Jake said.

“Do you think Karen was really upset?”

“I mean, she seemed upset,” Jake replied, visualizing her face in the split second before the two groups reunited in the hall. “She seemed pretty upset,” he repeated.

“But why?” Tommy asked. Jake shrugged. They were used to Aemilia teasing, they did plenty of teasing back, but somehow it *did* feel different today, meaner. It was always just playful before, friendly in a way. But the stakes felt higher now, to what end he couldn’t guess. He felt grateful to Karen too, the sense of mounting pressure felt like it was letting loose, like things would go back to the way they were not five minutes before. He couldn’t have imagined that Karen would be the one who would play peacekeeper.

Jake heard a somewhat familiar voice, and turned around to whoever was addressing him, but there was no one behind him. What *was* behind him was a series of television sets, and a familiar old man addressing not him, but a crowd.

“Hey, look,” he said, grabbing Tommy’s shoulder, spinning him around and pointing to the wall of television screens, “that’s Mr. Lloyd, I just saw him this morning!”

Tommy walked closer to the television sets as Aemilia, Karen, and Justin came over in response to Jake’s exclamation. Even though there was a wall of the televisions, they all gathered around the same one, watching Mr. Lloyd, who was standing on an outdoor stage behind a podium. He was giving a speech, on what Jake didn’t know, and the broadcast audio could pick up the crowd’s cheers in response to his shouts, punctuated by fist punches into the air. He looked different without the jacket and fishing pole, fuller and more present somehow in this new black peacoat, with more energy. George’s voice sounded different somehow, over the speakers pounding out campaign promises.

“You really went fishing with him this morning?” Aemilia asked.

“Yeah...” Jake trailed off, still trying to combine the two figures in his mind.

“I can’t imagine *him* fishing,” Justin said. Jake found that he agreed with him, the animated politician on screen seemed so different from the old man this morning, whose knees cracked if he stood up too fast, who nearly hobbled when he walked over to release his catch. It didn’t look like this man on TV had ever purposefully gone within a mile of a fishing pole.

“You can’t judge a book by it’s cover,” Jake said, offering up one of his mother’s many sayings, but his heart wasn’t in it. He was upset about this dichotomy, he felt like he had been lied to. If Mr. Lloyd was also like this, then why did he seem so different at the pond? He realized he didn’t know George at least half as well as he thought he did.

After watching a few more seconds of the rally, the group decided to ditch the Radio Shack and head over to the arcade, there wasn’t anything inside that anyone was willing to part with their game money for. They exited the store and Jake looked up to the left, the arcade was on the second floor and across the hall, and he could just barely make out the angular glowing sign above the railing of the second floor. They circled around to the JCPenny’s side and went up the escalators there, crossed over to the food court side, and walked along the hall past the food court and the smell of sticky, sweet Chinese chicken, and towards the storefront through which they could see blinking lights and whirling wheels.

As they got closer, a medley of video game sounds, which sounded like the sweetest music, assaulted their ears. The slice of the inside of the arcade was growing by the second, under the big green ARCADE sign, and they could see the House of the Dead sit-down shooter, the mounted-gun Terminator game, and a million smaller ones that were either cabinet games or other mounted-guns. In the back they could hear the heavy thunking of skeet ball games and a single

basketball hoop with piston released balls. Someone was at the cash machine to the left side of the door, and as they walked up, the ringing sound of a metal waterfall drowned out sound to the side of them as what sounded like a hundred dollar bill was converted into quarters.

The lights, set into the ceiling in the front of the store, were high powered and white, making it hard to look up at the black painted ceiling. Towards the back, around the physical games, were lights on a constant programmed rotation. The group lined up behind the kid who was nervously scooping handfuls of quarters into his pants, and when he was done, they each put a few dollars into the machine and received their allotment in quarters.

Jake raked his vision across the inside of the room, which was, toward the front, divided into two different halls by a series of games set back-to-back in the middle of the floor. He spotted the House of the Dead game, it was unbelievably empty, and said “who wants to team up on House of the Dead?”

“Me!” shouted Aemilia, and they ran over to the enclosed half-SUV with gory mutilated zombies printed on the side. Justin, Karen, and Tommy walked over behind them. They were able to get there in time, Jake jumping through the black curtain covering the left door and attempting a cool slide across the bench. He only got halfway across, and scooted the rest of the way with his hands. He heard through the curtain on the right side of the game, in a voice he guessed came from

a ten year old, “Aw, fuck,” and imagined that he had gotten there just in time, justifying his cool slide after all. Aemilia slid the left curtain to the side and took her seat beside Jake. Someone slid the curtain to the side on Jake’s right and he saw Tommy looking in through the exposed door, hanging his arms from the top of the game. Justin and Karen’s faces appeared in the doorway on Aemilia’s left, and they were all ready to go.

Jake fished around in his pocket, bringing out two quarters. “Ready?” he asked as he poised the quarters in front of the glowing red plastic coin slot. He saw Aemilia’s hand already right next to his on the player 1 coin slot with her own quarters, and they shot the quarters into the red depths of the game, never to be seen again. Gunshot sounds played as each of the quarters went in, four in rapid succession, and they both moved up to hit their respective player 1 and 2 buttons on the console. Two more gunshots rang out and they each reached down in unison to unholster the clunky, heavy plastic guns mounted on the front of the dashboard, near their knees. As two old hands at the game, they quickly got down to their dirty business of killing zombies, while driving through a house in an SUV.

After Aemilia and Jake were done, Tommy and Justin wanted a turn, and the four of them traded places. Jake and Aemilia watched from the outside as Tommy and Justin came in just below their score. None of them had ever gotten onto the high score screen shown after the player’s gruesome and

untimely death, even though they had been coming to the arcade fairly regularly. Jake's jam was the game set up in the center of the arcade's front, which was styled as a feudal samurai sword fighting game. But the gimmick was that you had a sword handle that you swung in between two big poles, and in the game the onscreen blade would reflect your movements, letting you parry, stab, and slash to your heart's delight. But that game took a whole dollar to play, and after an unfortunate incident where Jake blew all his money in the first twenty minutes, now he waited until the end of the day, if he still had so much left, to play it.

Karen was fond of the old cabinet games, the ones with joysticks and buttons instead of mounted submachine guns or side-slung shotguns, and they made their way over to the right side of the arcade where a line of them was located in front of the skeet ball cabinets, after Tommy and Justin finished their House of the Dead run. They were only a quarter a play, which was nice because it was a good way to pace the bleed of cash from the four of them. For fifty cents, Karen and Justin faced off on the streetfighter 1 on 1 game. Karen was shockingly good at the game, considering she didn't have a game system at home. A couple of months ago she had found a guide to the arcade game in a bookstore, and while she had lent it around to everyone, she was the only one who bothered to memorize the move combos, which she was now destroying Justin with. Their play styles looked very different, Justin, on the left, was busy mashing the punch and

kick buttons over and over again, slamming the joystick back and forth, trying to break out of the current combo. Sometimes he did, the game responding with “COMBO BREAKER!”, but he was inevitably drawn into another series of energy blasts and leg sweeps by Karen’s deliberate single button presses and well-timed joystick moves. It was like watching someone type on the keyboard, she never went to town on a button over and over again, she never even moved her hand, each finger resting on one of the moves.

“No, no NO!” Justin yelled as his burly, shirtless character was blasted higher and higher up into the air, only to fall down to the ground with the health bar at the top of the screen finally reaching zero, and the game was over. “PLAYER TWO WINS!” the game announced in a voice that sounded like someone was trying to take a massive dump, and Karen turned around and held out her hand to Justin. Justin took it and they shook, completing the strange ritual that Karen subjected them to whenever she played a competitive game. She said it was sportsmanlike, Justin used to reply that games weren’t sports, but he had given up on that.

Tommy and Aemilia went up next on the street fighter game, and they were much more evenly matched, both wailing on the same button over and over again as they jerked the joystick this way and that. Their characters, a burly black-haired man in a headband and a woman wearing a purple sash and not much more, fainted at each other over and over, kicking at the air, sliding down in a leg sweep, but never

connecting. Jake wasn't sure if this was strategy, or if they just didn't know how to use the controls. After a longer, but less painful and embarrassing, game, Tommy won, and hissed "Yess" as he held his hands up into the air. "Shit!" Aemilia slammed the joystick to the side and stepped back, hands on her hips.

Tommy's smile slackened off a little, and his arms bent above his head. Jake felt something change again, they were all looking at Aemilia, and she looked up and around at all of them. After a second, Tommy lowered his hands and held one out to her with a smile on his face, looking exactly like Karen, who was the only one who forced this weird ritual. Aemilia looked at his hand for a second, then back at him, and she broke out in a smile, maybe a little forced, as she shook. Jake looked to his left and saw Karen still watching Aemilia. He had felt the tension break, but he couldn't see it in Karen's face.

An hour later they exited out the front of the arcade, each of them completely spent. Jake didn't even get to play the samurai game, having previously gotten too embroiled in a back and forth contest with Jake on who could get the highest score in the terminator game. They stopped directly out front, just past the change machine that was currently silent, and Tommy asked "Where to now?" Jake looked down at his feet, shuffling them from side to side, he was getting hungry for dinner, but didn't want to be the one to suggest leaving. He looked to the side and saw each of the rest of them restlessly

waiting for someone else to suggest something. Tommy apparently saw it too, because he said, “I’m getting hungry, let’s head back.”

“Alright,” Justin said, and they turned to the right and started walking the few feet back to the echoey and loud food court. A strange sadness passed over Jake, as it had time and time before, that somehow the trip *back* always seemed so much shorter than the trip *to* something. The smell of fried rice set his stomach to grumbling, as they made their way past the Chinese restaurant to what they could see of Justin’s mother’s head behind a seat back topped with waxy-looking big-leafed plants.

* * *

Jake waved at the minivan as it pulled out of his house’s driveway. He could barely see ghostly hands waving back to him from behind the tinted back windows, Tommy had already been dropped off, and she would drop the rest of them off except for Justin, who she would bring home. As the van turned the corner at the intersection, Jake started walking back to his house. The yellow grass whispered across the bottoms of his shoes as he walked, it always turned green again when the summer started for real, when school got out. Until then, it was dry and fragile, and each step made some cracking noise. His mother was always telling him to *take the walk, take the walk!*, from the driveway to the front door, but it

was soooo much farther down the driveway to turn onto it, and no one would know.

“Come on! Take the walk!” his mother shouted out of the front door that he hadn’t noticed was open. “Aw mom!” he said back, and hopped sideways twice to land on the blue slate flagstone walk.

“If you don’t like it, you can pay for the resodding young man,” she said with only a hint of displeasure on her face, “now get in here, supper’s almost ready.”

Jake’s stomach rumbling had been steadily increasing in intensity and volume since they left the mall with the smell of fresh pretzels and sweet and sour chicken, and he ran up the blue slate walk to the wooden stairs, pounding each one as he propelled himself up to the front door. Anita stepped back into the doorway, holding it open for Jake as he stampeded into the house, and rolled her eyes at the theatrics as she closed the rapidly approaching night out.

That night Anita had made beef stuffed ravioli, and hoped deep in her heart that it would turn out better than Chef Boyardee’s, who she occasionally looked to for Jake’s lunch. After Jake ripped off his shoes, letting them fall on the pile by the front door, he asked “Where’s Dad?”

“Up in the office,” Anita said, and Jake started running up the stairs. “Don’t bother him,” she called up after Jake, “he’s still working.” Jake’s headlong rush tempered down to a sullen climb as he got to the top of the stairs and turned to his own room, instead of the office. Sometimes, if his father

wasn't busy with work, he would let him play the video games on his computer: minesweeper, solitaire. He didn't really understand the rules for either even now, but the novelty of having his own computer with games at home was still high. They had the computer lab at school with a few computers for the whole class, but those were for more educational games like The Oregon Trail and Robot Odyssey, neither of which he had managed to beat in the fifteen minute classroom sessions.

Jake pushed open the half-closed door and flipped on the wall switch, lighting up his room. To the far left side, across from the foot of his bed, was his closet with a half closed door, which contained some of his clothes on hangers, and a plastic chest of toys which he used to be able to fit completely inside. The lid was propped open by a yardstick against the pressure of the clothes hanging up behind it, yesterday Jake had been looking through the depths of the box to find Donkey Kong Country, which he couldn't find anywhere in his bedside table drawer. Looking at the propped open chest, the digital music from the game started playing in his head, and he went back to it to recommence the search.

Fifteen minutes later, Anita called both Jake and Carter down for supper with a shout, and Jake took the yardstick out from under the hollow plastic lid of the chest, letting it fall down with a soft woomph as the air cushioned it before it closed completely. He was still out of luck, no Donkey Kong game. It was hard to imagine where it could be, he usually

kept all of his games either in the drawer, or in a big plastic clear case that could fit his GameBoy in one side and two stacks of games in the other, if he was taking it outside to play with his friends. Actually...

Jake went over to his bedside table and fished in the area under the drawer until his hand made contact with a smooth rectangular plastic case, which he pulled out. He had already searched his GameBoy case for the game once. Now he opened up the side drawer and took his GameBoy out, putting the heavy brick of plastic, electronics, and batteries in it's slot in the case, and closed it. He would bring it to the woods tomorrow, which is where they had all agreed to meet in the morning. He put the translucent case on his bed and stood up. It was funny how, with its separate compartments and clear plastic, it looked so similar to his tackle box.

He and his dad met in the hallway as they were going down for dinner. Carter reached out and ruffled his hair. "How was the mall?"

"It was fun," Jake said, as they started descending the stairs, with him in front.

"Did you get anything exciting?" Carter asked.

"No, all the games were the same," Jake responded over his shoulder.

"That's too bad," Carter said. He knew that the money, then, had gone to the arcade, and he wasn't upset about it, but he did sometimes enjoy playing the Super Nintendo games that his son brought home. In a fighting game, with a

name he couldn't recall, he had been amused to find the high score in game memory was for "ASS", and since he specifically remembered buying the game new, it could have been none other than Jake who set it. Or Anita, he supposed.

They rounded the bannister at the bottom of the stairs to Anita setting the casserole dish of ravioli down on a wire rack on the table, a bowl of spinach and another of broccoli were on the counter, the table was already crowded. A third bowl of red sauce must be the marinara, Carter thought.

"Go ahead and sit down," she said, motioning to the table. There were three places set, two plates with silverware and a glass of water on one side, and a third on the other with a glass of milk. This was their usual seating arrangement for dinner, lunch was usually more ad hoc, without a central serving area set up. Jake pulled out his chair and sat down, scooting the whole thing forward with seated jumps, which made a terrible scraping sound.

Anita pointed a finger at him. "Scoot in right," she warned, "don't scrape." Jake narrowed his eyes and grabbed the bottom of his chair, lifting it and moving it the last half inch to the table. "That wasn't so hard," Anita said, not recognizing, or ignoring, the annoyed look in Jake's face.

They all served themselves from each of the dishes, and after a further admonition, Jake doubled his paltry self-serving of spinach. After reading an article on iron deficiency in the third world, Anita had worried herself if Jake was getting exactly what he needed for his next growth spurt, and

had been on an iron kick for the last two weeks. Spinach here, beans there, and more beef, which Carter and Jake certainly didn't mind, put her mind more at ease. That, and her most recent purchase at the supermarket that morning.

Anita pointed at the table beside Jake's plate. He looked and noticed two light brown capsules that blended in with the wood. "What are these," he asked, picking one up and holding it up to the light.

"Vitamins," Anita said.

"But I hate vitamins," Jake whined.

"They're good for you, and you need them for what's coming, young man. You don't want to end up shorter than everyone else, do you?"

That hit the spot, and she could see it in Jake's face. Jake wasn't the shortest in his group of friends, that special place was reserved for Justin, but he wished he was taller. Aemilia was the tallest, and Tommy came up second. He could guess that in his class he was around medium height for the boys, but he didn't want to be left behind like Justin had, who had been the tallest in their group up to a year ago.

He took the slightly squishy translucent pill and pushed it into his mouth, following it up with a mouthful of milk. After getting that down, Anita was still pointing at the other pill on the table, and he performed the same procedure with the second one. At the end he let out a big gasp and huffed air.

"Oh please," Anita said with a smile, and started cutting up her ravioli.

The dinnertime conversation settled into the normal, with Carter explaining what was going wrong with his current project, and how he had to make up the work this weekend or this or that would happen next week. Anita asked *what about this* and Carter responded with *there isn't enough time*. It flowed over Jake like water over a rock, and he thought back to the mall with his friends while his parents talked shop.

"...television." Jake overheard, and he remembered the Radio Shack.

"I saw Mr. Lloyd on TV today!" he said excitedly, and both of his parents looked over.

"Where did you watch TV? I thought you were at the mall." Anita asked.

"The Radio Shack," Jake responded.

"Oh, Mr. Lloyd was on TV?" she asked.

"Yeah, he was giving a speech," Jake said, and pumped his fist in the air like George had been.

"He announced his presidential run yesterday," Carter offered, "I saved the clipping from the morning paper."

"Oh," she said again, the bundle of spinach on her fork forgotten. She looked at Jake and said "You know, with everything that's going on, Mr. Lloyd might not be able to go fishing anymore," she said carefully.

"Why not?"

"Well, there's just a lot of work to do to run for office. And there's all that extra security that he'll have now, you can't

just let anyone get close to a presidential candidate you know. And he'll have to travel, to do rallies..." she trailed off.

"Oh," Jake said, looking down at his plate, stirring around the strands of spinach. He didn't think that this morning was the last time he would see the old man, and he felt a sense of loss. He had unexpectedly grown to enjoy his company, and yesterday had hoped he would show up, which he did. He began to feel angry as well, an anger that came from a lack of control, just like Mr. Lloyd had said.

"Okay." Jake said, setting his mouth in a thin line. Carter and Anita looked at each other.

"Jake," Carter said, trying to bring up the other side of the issue, "it's not for certain though, he may still be there next week. Hell," his lips sucked into his mouth and his eyes widened at the slipped curse, but he decided to go on, "he's a senator now, maybe nothing will change. We don't know, we just want you to be prepared... emotionally."

Jake knew that this was a naked attempt to cheer him up, and despite himself, he did feel a little better. "I really liked Mr. Lloyd," Jake said, feeling the sadness bubble up dangerously close to the surface, making his throat thick.

"I know you do," Carter said, deliberately changing the tense of the verb, "how about I go down with you tomorrow, you can show me how to really catch fish."

Jake shook his head, "I'm playing with Tommy and Justin and the others tomorrow." Carter smiled, amused at the

sudden idea that his son had a schedule he had to pencil him into.

“How about Saturday then,” Carter said. Jake nodded at his dad, and smiled a little. “I’d like that,” Jake said, and Carter smiled back.

* * *

Jake slept in until 11 AM the next day, and Anita made him a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, cut corner-to-corner, for a light lunch before he headed out to wherever he went with his friends. She told him to be careful, and playfully added to watch out for bears, as he left the house. Things had somehow changed slowly, but steadily, over the years, and her little boy who had been with them every minute of the day was now having his own life outside of the house, where who knows what was happening. She could see the shape of his face changing from month to month, he was losing that babyish look, and soon all that would be left would be the gaunt face of a rapidly growing adolescent. Sometimes the feeling hit her harder than others, she had gotten used to it over the years, as the seasons passed and he transformed over and over again. She spun the plastic bread bag and clipped it with the thin plastic clamp it came with. Carter was working upstairs on his report, but as she mounted the steps, she wondered if she could pull him away, at least for a few minutes.

Jake, unlike Anita, did know where he was going with his friends. He walked down the street, moved onto the sidewalk, and approached the construction site for the next cul-de-sac.

He cut past the construction between the wooden skeletons of two houses and slipped into the treeline past the backyard of one. There was a trail here, a faint one, that they followed, he wondered if it was here last summer when they found the top of the hill in the forest, or if they'd made it with their frequent journeys. The ground was still wet from last night's rain, and the fallen leaves from last fall were still being trampled into the ground, making a squishing sound with a faint acidic smell as he stepped through them.

At noontime the sun bled through the canopy of trees above, lighting the forest up more than he was used to, when they usually entered after school. The trees, oaks he supposed, but of what kind he wasn't sure, were spaced apart with green ferns curling their way up along the bases. He found the base of the hill, the cut out ramp that he supposed was for construction equipment, and began to climb. He heard his friends' voices coming from the top.

"I'm just saying, that's why your parents don't let you stay out past nightfall, it's why mine don't either." Jake could hear Justin say as he crested the dirt ramp, bringing the four of them into view.

"Bullshit," Aemilia said, throwing a rock into the woods, a hollow thunk came back a second later. "There are no bears in here, the streets would be crawling with them!"

“That’s not true,” Justin replied, taking up his familiar refrain, ”bears are scared of people.”

“Then why do you always have to keep your food up high when you camp, hmm?” Aemilia shot back.

“That’s not the same, that’s if the bear is hungry.”

“Then what’s to stop them from getting into the trash on trash day? Those cans sit out there all morning and nary a bear I’ve seen.”

“That’s because they don’t like walking on the asphalt, it hurts their paws.”

“You’re full of it,” she said, waving him off with her hand. Jake was jogging up to the group and stopped beside Tommy.

“They’re arguing about bears again?” Jake asked.

“What else do they do,” Tommy asked. Justin had been on about bears since the winter, when he’d seen a TV special about them. Ever since then he was adamant that there were bears in the woods behind the neighborhood, and for whatever reason, Aemilia had made it her personal mission to prove him wrong, for short stretches at a time anyway, it was hard to argue with that level of zealotry.

“What took you so long?” Justin turned around and asked Jake.

“Mom made me a sandwich for lunch,” Jake said, and shrugged his shoulders in a what-can-you-do pose.

“Was it a *goooooooood* sandwich?” Tommy teased.

“Yes, for your information, it was a *goooooooood* sandwich,” Jake said back, stretching out the gooey o’s just as

long as Tommy did. They both smiled.

“Did you bring the food?” Aemilia asked Jake. He unslung his backpack and opened up the main pocket. His GameBoy case was half buried in a nest of nutri-grain bars, and he pulled one out to show her. He had been tasked with bringing the survival food, as Aemilia had termed it, since his mom was the biggest fan of bar shaped snacks. Justin had a pile of long sticks piled up on the ground, their walking sticks, that he had found in the woods and collected during their many trips. Karen had been tasked with getting water, and from the size of the backpack at her feet, she had brought enough for days of exploration.

“Alright, then let’s get going,” she said, and pointed toward the opposite side of the flattened hill from the dirt ramp they came up on. Justin picked up the bundle of sticks, and handed one to her as she passed by, holding the rest of the bundle upright for each person that came after, like a sergeant handing out rifles. Karen picked up her big pack with a grunt, shouldered it forward, and walked up to Justin. “Here,” he said, handing the shortest, and straightest, stick in the pack to her. “Thanks,” she said, taking the stick and walking on.

“I brought the GameBoy,” Jake whispered to Tommy as he passed by. “Nice,” he said back, and he walked up to Justin. After a second, he stamped his foot on the ground, and Justin jerked back around to attention, and thrust one of the sticks into Tommy’s hands. Tommy smiled in a mocking way at

him, and walked on, Justin following him with an annoyed expression. Jake walked up and received one of the last two sticks, Justin taking the other one, and they brought up the rear of the column embarking out on a grand quest.

Well, it wasn't so much a grand quest, as it was an expedition to see how far they could walk in a quarter of a day, and what they could see. How far did this forest in their backyard really go, was there anything hidden in it, these were the questions that they sought to answer. Tommy was the only one in their group who had read *The Fellowship of the Ring*, and the combination of his description and Aemilia's determination had spawned this adventure.

Jake passed a tree with a bright new pink plastic ribbon tied around it, and knew that this was Aemilia's additional contribution to the trip. He had seen that same shade of hot pink ribbon at her birthday party during the winter, she must have snagged it from the present supply closet in her house. Every house had one, he assumed his was in his parents' bedroom because he never saw any of the wrapping paper or ribbons that they used for Christmas or birthdays in any of the other closets.

They walked on, Justin beside him watching the forest closer than any of them, and Jake saw another pink ribbon tied around a tree. "Do you think it's okay to leave these ribbons here?" he asked up to Justin. Justin shrugged in response, keeping his eyes locked on the horizon, or at least as far as they could see in the thicket of trees. The wet acidic

smell of half-mulched, fresh thawed fallen leaves assaulted them, it was heavy in the air with the rising temperature of the afternoon.

Seeing another ribbon pass by, he was glad that Aemilia thought to leave them behind, because he was pretty sure that she wasn't following any trail at all, and he wasn't sure how he would get back without them. He looked back, suddenly scared that something was undoing their shoestring bows behind him, but there was no such serial unknotter, just a brief flash of pink among the dark brown trees.

Half an hour passed that way, walking through the carpet of sodden fallen leaves with drops of green tinted light falling all around, passing a pink ribbon every minute, when Aemilia called out, "The trees are thinning out!"

Jake looked up excitedly, noticing everyone in front craning their necks around to try to see ahead, and it was true, the trees *were* spreading out, with the color of the sky ahead indicating a large clear patch. Jake ran up, past Tommy, up to Karen, and Aemilia held her hand up and shot back, "Hold your horses, we can't just go plunging into the great unknown, let me mark our way." Jake saw her unspool pink ribbon off of a cocoon-like bundle, snip it, wrap it around the tree beside her, and tie a shoestring bow. Then she dashed off ahead, completing the ruse, and everyone started running after her. Tommy was laughing at the subterfuge.

They broke out of the treeline on the shore of a clear blue pond, the sky reflected perfectly on the surface of the deep. A

mirror line of trees went down into the water on the other side of the pond, with a mirror set of clouds lazily scuttling across the baby blue sky.

Aemilia laughed. “Can you believe it, a hidden pond out here in the middle of the woods. I wonder if we’re the first ones to see it?” she walked over to a tree at the edge of the clearing and tied a pink ribbon around it, marking their way back into the forest. “Maybe settlers camped here, or it’s an ancient Indian-”

Aemilia cut off when she saw Justin pointing to something on the left edge of the pond. A line of black structures, conspicuous in their perfectly even spacing, stood out against the thin treeline on that side. Jake thought he could see a straight line behind the trees on the left side, the top of a roof?

“This is the pond where I go fishing!” Jake said out loud. He recognized the spaced structures all at once, the four benches set up on either side of the road leading into the pond. He could barely see a lighter patch of dirt between them, leading further back past the heaped up bank to an asphalt road, not more than a ten minute walk from his house.

He could see Aemilia visibly deflate, the excitement of finding a long lost ancient pond leaving her. She looked at the reflective surface with something between anger and disgust. Karen was the one to step in.

“Let’s go around,” she said to the group, but mostly to Aemilia, “and continue on the other side.” She swept her arm around the left side of the pond, past the benches, and across, to the line of trees with their reflections mirroring up from the roots.

“Mmm, yeah,” Aemilia said, not as bright as she had been a moment before. Jake could understand what she was feeling, he had felt both excitement at recognition, and disappointment at the discovery that they had walked so long on a grand journey only to end up ten minutes away from his house.

Karen and Aemilia walked up front, turning left at the waterline and walking on the strip of ground between the trees and the water, followed by Justin, Tommy, and Jake brought up the rear. Tommy turned back, “How far is this away from your house,” he asked under his breath.

“About ten minutes,” Jake whispered back. Tommy chuckled, “Figures.” Up ahead, Justin was stooping against his walking stick every few steps and picking up rocks on the shore. He took a step toward the pond and let one rip, it skipped three times across the pond before it took a nosedive into the water. He turned and jogged up with the group, stooping again to pick up another ideally shaped rock.

As they approached the benches, the illusion of grand adventure fell away completely, they could hear the sound of cars passing down the road, and Jake felt a strong callback to fishing yesterday. He figured they better get out of here quick,

or Aemilia's mood would take an unrecoverable nosedive, and the journey would be off. He wondered if Aemilia and Karen sensed this too, as by either easier footing, or emotional distress, they were booking it at the head of the column. Jake took up a fast walk, and Justin tried to sidearm the rest of the rocks he had collected across the surface of the pond.

They had passed the fourth bench, and the beaten path was rapidly diminishing under their feet, the sense of adventure was coming back, slowly, as long as Jake didn't look back. The head of the column had slowed down again, now that there was only a narrow strip of shore between the trees and the lake, and Justin picked up a rock and shot it at a mass of brown algae. The rock smacked the algae and disappeared under the surface with a light splash.

Justin blinked and Jake furrowed his brow. That wasn't the sound he was expecting the rock to make, he had gotten used to either the sound of splashes, or wipe outs which were signified with a deep plopping sound, but not a wipeout with a splish. Justin was confused too, and he took another of the rocks he had gathered and threw it directly down into the brown mass, which was a couple of feet off the shore beside them.

The rock splished again, disappearing completely under the algae. Weird. Jake was turning away when a second splish came from the patch, and he looked over just in time to see the rock rise a few inches from the surface of the pond, pause in midair, and go back down again near the edge of the algae.

“Haha, what?” Justin said, looking confused as the rock went down again, and in a second made another appearance at the surface, this time bobbing on top of the water. Justin’s exclamation made the rest of the group ahead turn around, as Justin knelt down to pick up some more rocks.

“What is it?” Tommy asked, as he walked back towards Justin, who was bending up at the waist now with a handful of gravelly rocks in his hands.

“I don’t know, something funny,” was all Jake could get out to describe it, as he pointed at the brown patch in the pond. Tommy squinted his eyes, trying to get a better look at the undulating patch of water, while Aemilia and Karen walked up behind him.

“What is it?” Karen repeated Tommy’s question, and Justin said “watch.” He jumped up into the air, with a mass of rocks in one hand, and a single pebble the size of a large marble in his right, and slammed the rock as hard as it could go into the surface of the water, at the near edge of the brown patch. He landed with his knees bent, staring intently into the water.

Aemilia held up her hands to either side and said “So?”

“Just watch,” Jake said, who was also staring intently at the place where the rock disappeared.

The rock broke through the surface toward the far end of the patch and rose ten feet in the air, hung for a split second, and then fell down into the water past the patch with a deep plopping sound.

“That’s sick!” Tommy said, a wild grin breaking out on his face.

“You’re goddamn right it is!” Justin shouted, and laughed.

“What is it?” Karen asked, a second time. Justin turned back to her and shrugged, “Beats me.”

Tommy was leaning over the water, trying to get as close a look at it as he could without getting his shoes wet.

“What is it?” Jake called over, feeling very much like a broken record. Tommy was staring deeply into it, waved his hand above it, looked up at the sky, then back down at the patch, and then leaned back from the water.

“I don’t know, it doesn’t look like there’s anything in the water,” he said.

“Bullshit,” Justin said, and pointed at the brown patch.

“Then why don’t you take a look yourself, smartass” Tommy shot back. Justin’s eyes widened in surprise, everyone’s did, including Tommy’s. “Ah,” he said, suddenly bashful, “it’s just so weird.”

Justin moved his backpack off his shoulders and set it down on the gravelly shore, unzipping it and reaching inside. He brought out two oversized green rubber boots, with raggedy tops, like they were cut off of some larger thing. He shook them at Tommy, but Tommy said, “No, you can, if you want.”

“Okay,” Justin said, and walked back a few feet to sit in the green undergrowth while he changed out his shoes, instead of the gravel. Karen and Aemilia were now leaning over the

shore, staring into the brown patch as best they could from their vantage point, holding onto each other for support.

Justin, with his oversized rubber boots seated as firmly as possible, which was not very, onto his much smaller feet, stomped over from the forest edge, through the gravel, and splashed into the water. Aemilia and Karen leaned back, even though the water was only a few inches deep, no one wanted to get their shoes all wet and soggy, like Justin did last summer when he jumped directly in a puddle that ended up being deeper than he thought.

Jake and Tommy sidestepped left to meet up with Aemilia and Karen on the gravel, and the four of them stood together watching Tommy splash over to, and then stop, at the edge of the brown patch. He crouched down and experimentally put his fingers into the patch, swishing them back and forth. Then he put his hand deeper, up to the wrist, and moved it quickly side to side.

“Is there anything in there?” Tommy called out louder than necessary, since Justin was only a couple feet away. With his boots and experimentation, he seemed like an astronaut.

“No,” Justin said back, “there’s nothing under the surface. It feels weird though.”

“Weird how?” It was Karen’s turn to ask.

Justin took a few more seconds, waving his hand back and forth under the water, which made small splishing noises. They could see the muscles of his forearm working, he was waving his fingers and hand around under the surface.

“It’s like there’s really nothing there,” he said, and withdrew his hand. He wiggled his fingers in the air in front of his face. “And it’s cold.”

“Cold?” Tommy said, and turned to Jake, Karen, and Aemilia with a confused look on his face. “The water should be warmer than the air,” Karen said, “at this time of year.”

Justin was leaning over the water, staring down into it. He waved his hand over the surface, turned to the right, and waved his hand over the water next to the brown patch.

“What is it?” Aemilia finally asked, as much as she had been wanting to get to the edge of the forest and continue the adventure, she was curious now.

Justin bent at the waist over the brown patch and then craned his neck to the side, trying to look up into the sky. “There’s no cloud-AH!”

Justin overbalanced and fell headfirst into the water. Jake, Tommy, Karen, and Amilia all started laughing, Tommy doubled over and his face started getting red. After all his preparation, Jake thought as a new bout of laughter seized him, after bringing those boots in his pack, he still ended up getting wet. They were laughing at the present as well as the past, when Justin, less than a year ago, swore up a blue streak all the way back home after getting his shoes completely waterlogged.

Tommy’s laughter trailed off first, then stopped completely, as he realized something was wrong. Justin was splashing around in the water, his arm would come up, then

his leg, then somehow the whole bottom half of him would stick halfway up before going down again, followed by his head, which was shouting, not in anger, but fear. The water should only be a foot deep, Jake thought as he stopped laughing too, Justin shouldn't even be able to roll around like that.

Tommy dashed the two steps into the water, sending up big circular waves from his sneakers, and leaned over, grabbing whatever he could of Justin, which was somehow inexplicably what looked like his left leg. He slipped, his right leg going out from under him and into the brown area, and he sat down hard in the waist-high water. He worked his leg once, twice, and suddenly Aemilia was there hauling on the back of his jacket. With Aemilia pulling and Tommy pushing with his left leg, they both exerted enough force to haul Justin over the edge of the brown puddle and into normal water, where he immediately got to his feet, once Tommy let go. Justin and Aemilia helped Tommy up, and they all stumbled back through the ankle deep water to the shore, looking back at the brown patch.

Jake and Karen, who had been looking on with horror at what was unfolding, pulled both sides of the returning group of three onto land, where Justin stumbled again and went down on his hands and knees, breathing heavily. Tommy sat down beside him on the gravel, his backside making a squelching sound as the water was driven out of it. Aemilia

was pacing left and right on the shore, her shoes making a wet squishing sound with each step.

“What the hell,” she said, her voice mingled fear and anger, “what the hell, Justin, that water’s only a foot deep.”

“No,” Tommy said, still looking out at the brown patch from his sitting position, “it wasn’t. It’s like a hole or something. My foot fell in.”

“Can’t you swim for Chrissakes?” she shot back at Justin.

He whipped his head around. “Yes, I can swim!” he yelled, the shout nearly covering up the quaver newly added to his voice. “But,…”

“But what?” Karen softly asked. Jake looked up and he saw her holding Aemilia’s hand, and staring frightfully down at Justin.

“But, there’s something wrong with that water,” he said. “I couldn’t figure out which way was what. It felt like I was falling.”

“I felt something too,” Tommy said, and they all looked at him. “It was cold.”

* * *

They were all sitting back past the edge of the forest on a felled tree with a clean-cut end, sometimes looking at the section of water that they could barely tell was different from this distance. Tommy was waiting for his butt to dry, but there was little chance of that, given how soaked he was.

Justin however, was nearly dry already, his boots had had an inch of water in them when he took them off, and his lower legs were soaked, but for flopping around in a pond for ten seconds, he was remarkably well off. Aemilia was bouncing her heel off a nearby rock, making a periodic squelching sound as drop after drop of water was expelled.

Justin threw another moss-covered stone into the pond. It skipped once, hit the brown patch, and disappeared under the water.

“I think it’s special water,” Tommy said. This was the latest in a long line of speculations, “like rubbing alcohol, it’s lighter than normal water, and it’s cold when you get it on your hands.”

“Can you swim in rubbing alcohol?” Justin asked.

“If the density of it was really low, I don’t think you would be able to,” Karen replied. “I watched a show about the bermuda triangle, and they showed how if bubbles come up all around a ship, it’ll just sink even though it’s in water.”

Jake wanted to call bullshit, that didn’t seem possible, but he had watched Justin flounder around in a foot of water like it was the open ocean, so he wasn’t sure about *that* anymore.

“What if there’s a big pocket of air down there,” Jake said, “like a diving bell.”

“Or one of those spiders,” Tommy said, thinking about the ones that take their air down below the water.

“I don’t think you could enter those from the top,” Karen replied, “or else all the air would just come out.”

“Well,” Aemilia added, “maybe those bubbles are why you can’t swim in it.”

“It could be,” Karen thought, “some sort of natural air pocket. Do you think the pond is full of them?”

“It could be,” Tommy said, “what if there are frogs and birds and all that, just living on the bottom of the pond, and no one knows about it.”

“Wild,” Jake said, imagining an underwater squirrel.

“What do you want to do now?” Aemilia asked.

“I want to experiment!” Tommy said, “Let’s run some experiments on it. Maybe there really are underwater birds.”

“What kind of experiments?” Karen asked.

Tommy thought, looking at the brown patch barely visible from this distance. He flexed his hand unconsciously, then looked down at it.

“Can I have one of your water bottles?” he asked her.

“Sure,” she said, and unzipped her backpack. After some shuffling around, she pulled one out and handed it over to Tommy. Jake saw, as it passed in front of him, that it had “Tommy” sharpied on the side. *Lord help us*, he thought, *she’s even labelled the water bottles.*

Tommy unscrewed the cap, took a long drink, and then started dumping the water out onto the ground in front of the fallen tree.

“Hey!” Karen shouted, beginning to stand up. Tommy held his hand up, warding her off, “It’s for science.” She sat back down.

After the last of the water poured out through the nozzle, he shook the bottle to get any remaining drops out, and then capped it again. "Can I borrow your boots?" he asked Justin.

"Sure," Justin replied, and kicked off the boots, reaching into his pack to get his shoes again. Tommy took off his shoes, placed them carefully on the fallen tree, and reached down to retrieve the discarded boots laying on the damp loam. After he put the boots on, he stood up and kicked each heel with the other toe, firmly seating his feet.

"Alright," he said, and looked around, first to the left, then to the right, searching for something. He looked down at his walking stick, thought for a moment, and then reached down and picked it up. "I don't want to end up drowning like Justin," he said.

"Hey!" Justin shouted.

"What? It's true, and I bet it happened because you, and anyone else, can't really swim in that water," he said, and Justin sat back down from his half-risen position, conciliated. "Aemilia, Justin, would you mind holding this end of the stick, once I get down to the water, to pull me back in if I fall in? I'll keep hold of this end, it'll be like a life saver."

"The candy?" Jake said, as Aemilia got up and Justin tied his shoe laces.

"No, you know... a life preserver," Tommy corrected, "like at the pool."

"Ah," Jake said, as Justin got up and walked over to Aemilia.

“Alright, let’s go down to the water,” Tommy said, and started walking out of the edge of the forest. First one, then five sets of feet crunched on the gravel as they walked to the edge of the pond, with the brown area hovering a couple of feet off. Jake noticed that on either side of the brown patch he could see the bottom of the pond, barely, through the glare of the sun, but not inside it.

Tommy raised the walking stick up in his left hand and thrust it out at Justin and Aemilia, who both caught the end. He tightened his grip on the end and walked the couple of steps out into the water that brought him within a few inches of the brown patch. He struggled for a moment trying to open the bottle cap with one hand, then decided to wedge the bottle under the arm holding the other end of the stick, and turn the cap off that way. He put the cap in his pocket, grabbed the bottle by the neck with his hand over the opening, looked back at everyone on shore, and plunged it into the brown patch. His knuckles were white on the stick as he held it in a death grip. Aemilia and Jake were holding the stick with both hands, their feet planted in the gravel, ready to pull.

After about ten seconds, which felt like an eternity, Tommy brought the bottle out of the water, held it up in front of his face to look through it, and backed away from the brown patch. Aemilia and Jake backed up first from the shore, still gripping the stick, but once Tommy was out of the water, they laid it on the ground, and Tommy laid his end down too.

They all moved around Tommy and his enigmatic bottle, trying to divine what secrets it held. Tommy grabbed the body of the bottle with his other hand and ceremoniously turned it upside down, where nothing poured out.

“What does it mean?” Karen asked.

“I held this bottle under the water, with my hand off the top, for at least a few seconds, and no water got in. I think it means that there really is an air pocket down there, which explains why it’s impossible to swim.”

“What’s it like?” Justin asked.

“I don’t know. I waved the bottle around some, but I couldn’t feel the bottom of the pond. There might be some sort of hole too, underneath, that’s trapping all the air” Tommy said.

“I wanna see what it looks like,” Justin said, “is there some way we can do that?”

“Perhaps,” Tommy said, thinking, “we could get a camera, push it through, and then take a picture. That would show us what it was like.” Tommy and Justin turned to Jake, who felt a rock drop into his stomach.

* * *

Carter and Anita were lying in bed when their nap was interrupted by the sound of the door opening and quick footsteps up the staircase. It sounded like Jake, Carter thought, but what could he be doing back so early? He ran

down the hall, halfway to the bedroom, and then opened a door. The office, Carter thought. He heard the door close again and Jake ran down the stairs, then out the front door. “I wonder what that was all about,” Anita said, turning her head to him. “Beats me,” he replied.

* * *

The four of them were waiting outside the house when Jake ran out the door with his father’s polaroid in one hand, and a ziploc bag in the other. He ran up to the pavement where they were all standing, and Tommy asked “Does it have film?”

Jake shrugged his shoulders. “Let me see it,” Tommy said, and Jake handed the black plastic cube over to him. Tommy looked at the back of the contraption and peered into a little square cutout near the button to take the picture. It said 5 in the window. He handed it back to Jake.

“We have five shots left in it,” he said, “so I guess we can’t waste any.” Tommy turned around and started walking back to the pond, along the road, and the rest followed behind him.

When they got to the pond entrance again, they walked to the left after hitting the shore, past the furthest bench, until they spotted the brown patch hovering in the water. Jake was afraid that the patch would have disappeared while they were gone. Tommy had planted one of their walking sticks in the gravel, directly across from the patch, in case it was hard to find again, but they didn’t need it.

Tommy got on Justin's boots again, placing his shoes on top of the fallen tree, and opened the front of the black polaroid camera. He checked the back for a green light, indicating flash, and then turned it around so that the lens faced him. He moved the brightness slider to the middle, the default setting, and pushed a little clear indicator all the way to the right, to a picture of a flower. The legend under it, 4ft, would be too long if he were just taking a picture of the pond bottom under the water, which was about a foot under the surface, but he suspected that there was some kind of hole under it that his foot slipped into when he was rescuing Justin, so he hoped that it was about four feet deep. He couldn't imagine it being much deeper.

"Bag," he said, and Jake handed over the gallon sized ziploc bag to Tommy. Tommy carefully placed the camera into the bag with the front still opened, and pressed out all the air he could, before sealing up the end.

"Alright," he said, "this'll keep the camera dry until we take the picture, then we pull it out and look at it." He looked around at their faces, Karen and Justin were nodding.

"What do you think it'll show?" Aemilia asked as Tommy took hold of the end of the walking stick planted in the ground, pulling it up.

"I don't know, maybe just the pond bottom," he said, "this could be a completely natural occurrence, maybe ponds just get like this sometimes." He shrugged, and tipped the

gravely side of the stick over to Aemilia, who caught it, and Justin came over and grabbed on as well.

“Wish me luck,” he said, and he stepped into the water at the end of the stick.

“Good luck,” Karen said, then embarrassedly covered her mouth and looked sideways at Jake. “I thought we were all saying it,” she whispered. Jake smiled, and to a retreating Tommy he said “Good luck.”

Tommy planted his feet in the soft pond bottom so that his toes were a couple of inches back from the edge of the brown patch and leaned over, using the stick for support. It was hard to see anything in the patch, even his reflection was barely visible, ghostly and desaturated in the brown water.

He pushed the polaroid against his side to get his hand aligned with the button, then, when he had a good grip on it, he thrust it through the water and smashed the flash charger button all the way down, triggering the flash and the picture. He left his hand in the water, feeling the slight ripples lap against his jacket arm, confused at why he didn't see the flash reflect back up from the bottom, when he felt the motor pushing out the film, and he quickly pulled the camera back up through the wet boundary.

He stepped backwards to shore, and when his feet were both on dry gravel, he dropped the end of the stick and hastily opened the mouth of the ziploc bag. The film was stuck out through the front of the polaroid like a blue tongue, and Tommy grabbed the body of the camera through the bag as he

reached his hand in and pulled the image out. Everyone else crowded around him, trying to see the picture as it developed, and he took the opportunity to hand the wet ziploc bag back to Jake.

The film was still blue, so Tommy began waving it back and forth by the fat white edge at the bottom of the print. After ten seconds, he looked at it again, and it had started turning light brown, similar to the color of the patch. They all huddled over the picture in the sunlight as it developed further eventually evening out to a blurry orange and darker orange.

“It’s blurry,” Justin said. Tommy was surprised, it shouldn’t be blurry with the flash, that should have provided enough light to get a good exposure. These didn’t look like motion blurs to Tommy though, as he looked more and more at them, they looked like focus blur.

“I think the focus was wrong,” he said, motioning Jake for the camera. Jake handed it to Tommy, still in the clear plastic bag, and Tommy turned it around so that the front was facing him. He unstuck the little clear knob from the right side of the slider, where it said 4ft, and let it spring back to the left side, where there was an infinity symbol. A little clear lens sprang back from over the central lens of the camera. Tommy was confused about what it could mean, what could be down there so far away?

“Alright, let’s go back,” he said, as he pressed the air out of the ziploc bag, sealing the front again. The rest of the

group followed behind him, he hurriedly picked up the end of the walking stick, and dragged it into the pond. Aemilia and Justin ran forward and grabbed the other end, holding it up from the gravel, feet braced, ready to pull. Tommy stood above the brown patch again, peering down into it. He could make out shapes, just barely, under the surface, but they were all mixed up with the half reflections he got of himself and the sky above.

He thrust the camera back down, mentally checked his aim so that it was straight down, and depressed the plunger all the way. This time he could see the outline of the plastic bag light up, but not whatever was at the bottom of the hole. He pulled the camera back up and was walking backward to shore when he felt the motor start to push the print out.

Aemilia and Justin dropped their end of the walking stick as everyone crowded around Tommy again. He flapped the blue film polaroid back and forth in this left hand, still holding the camera in the opened bag in his right. He looked at the picture, pausing his flapping for a moment, and saw that an orange hue was beginning to come into frame. They all bent over the picture in the sunlight on the gravel beach as it further developed, steadily transitioning from blue to a mottled series of oranges and browns. The image increased in sharpness over time, until they were looking at what appeared to be orange cauliflower tops.

“What is it?” asked Justin. A light orange swirl was pictured against a darker orange background, like a careless

sweep with a paintbrush. Beside it were a series of light orange bulbous shapes, varying in color from one lobe to another. There was an illusion of depth, like the objects were really far away, and they were looking at vast orange shapes under the surface.

Tommy looked out at the brown patch on the surface of the pond, and the gravel settled under his rain boot with a squishing sound. A familiar shape caught his eye on the horizon, and he looked up at a series of high clouds against the deep blue sky.

“It’s clouds,” Tommy said, looking back down at the picture and feeling a sense of wonder at this image, “it’s a picture of clouds.”

“Like a reflection... of the sky?” Aemilia asked.

“No,” Tommy shook his head, “the camera was under the water, so it shouldn’t be a reflection from that, and look, you can’t see me in it either, so it can’t be a reflection from the bottom of whatever hole is down there. This is a picture of the... a sky.”

Karen strained her eyes and turned her head, trying to see in the picture what Tommy was saying. “Then why is it orange, shouldn’t it be blue?”

Tommy shrugged, “your guess is as good as mine, but I don’t think that the camera is messing up, this is the same orange color that I saw when I looked down into it.”

“Do you think it’s like, Mars?” Justin said. Tommy looked back down at the picture, and tried to remember if there were

clouds on Mars. “It could be, but why would Mars be in this pond?”

Aemilia straightened up, declaring “I wanna see it.” She motioned down at Tommy’s feet and said “I need those boots.”

“Um,” Tommy stammered, “I don’t think that’s such a good idea.”

“Oh give me a break, *Mom*, Justin splashed around in that water for a minute and he’s fine. I just want to take a look.”

“Like, through the water?” Tommy asked, relaxing.

“Yeah,” Aemilia said.

“Okay, but we should use the stick again,” Tommy said, as he squished up the gravel beach to the fallen tree. He sat down and took off the boots, Aemilia sat down next to him and flipped off her shoes, trading them for the boots.

Suddenly she was up and walking to the edge of the water, pointing at Karen and Jake, “you two are on stick duty.” They hurriedly bent down and grabbed the other end of the stick that Aemilia had just picked up. She splashed into the shallow water at the shore, like she was on a mission, and walked right up to the side of the brown patch.

She white-knuckled the stick in her left hand and pulled all her hair around to the side, holding it with her right hand. Apparently after-school gymnastics was going well, because she pivoted at the waist and swung her whole body down, Tommy looking on shocked from the fallen tree, as her face broke the surface of the water.

“Ahh!” he yelled, completely caught off guard, and ran down the beach to the water’s edge with only one shoe on, the other flopping at the end of his foot. He stopped at the shore and stared out, Aemilia still submerged face deep, moving her head a little this way and that, apparently getting a look around, Karen and Jake, looking just as shocked, tensed and ready to pull back on the stick.

With an equal swiftness, Aemilia jackknifed up to a standing position and did the same awkward backward walk as Tommy had as she backed away from the brown patch, Karen and Jake hurrying to keep up with her at the end of the safety stick. They ran up onto shore, Aemilia dropped the end of the stick, and everyone gathered around her, even Tommy with his one flopping shoe.

“What was it like?” Justin was the first to ask.

There was silence as Aemilia thought for a moment, wiped her face, then said “it looked just like the pictures, it’s like there’s a place with a red sky, and it’s just under the water there.”

She paused for a moment and then added, “and it smelled a little smoky, like someone had the fireplace going.”

“Was there anything around,” Tommy asked, “around the water I mean?”

“Yeah,” she said, “I think I saw trees, just a little bit away,” she pointed over to the opposite shore, “like that far. They were dark trees.”

“Where was it?” Karen asked.

“I don’t know,” Aemilia said, “I couldn’t turn my head a lot or I would go under the water again, so I couldn’t really look around.”

Jake was amazed. He had been here for many hours over the last two weeks, and little did he know that just a few feet away down the shore *this* was here. He also looked out at the brown patch, seemingly not so strange looking at all, just sitting on the water like a mass of algae.

Jake turned back to Aemilia, “how much water is there, between I mean?”

Aemilia thought for a second, then said, “it’s very thin, barely anything.”

“I want to go out next,” Jake said.

“I don’t think that’s such a good idea,” Tommy began, but Jake shot back, “Oh don’t be such a worry wart, and anyway I’m going to use the camera.”

Jake went to the fallen tree and performed the same operation as the other two, swapping his shoes for Aemilia’s, but really Justin’s, boots. He walked over to Tommy, who was sealing up the camera in the bag again.

“Do you know how to use this?” he asked. A moment of pride made Jake want to answer yes, but the possible embarrassment of standing out in the water being unable to take a picture of any kind overwhelmed him and he let out a sheepish “nope.”

Tommy sighed a little, and proceeded to show Jake the main operation of the camera. “You can grab it around here

with one hand, and still have a good grip. This button is the flash and the picture, just press it all the way down until you feel it click, and the picture's done."

"Do I need to slide anything, or..." Jake trailed off, not knowing exactly what it was that Tommy had done to the camera between pictures to make the second one sharper.

"No, I've already got it all set up for far away pictures," Tommy replied.

"Thanks," Jake said, taking the halfway shrinkwrapped camera from Tommy.

Tommy and Justin were Jake's safetymen, and he waded out the two feet into the pond to the edge of the brown patch with them on the edge of the water, gripping the safety stick. Jake gripped the camera and looked down at it, rotating his wrist around to explore his range of motion, and possible angles to get his imagined shot.

He leaned down toward the water and looked into what appeared to be a red, muddy reflection of the sky above, except that his own reflection was a ghostly image on it, where he could see the clouds through himself. Mentally reorienting, it made more sense when he viewed it as looking at an upside-down sky through a thin layer of water.

He plunged the camera, the action still made him nervous, even with the plastic bag, into the water, cocked his wrist back, and took a picture. He pulled the camera back up through the water, and for a split second he saw the orange sky as clear as it was in Tommy's picture. Getting an idea, he

wedged the camera, which was rolling out the film now, under his arm holding the end of the safety stick, and violently swished the water back and forth over the patch with his right hand. Great rips opened up in the surface of the water through which he could see the orange sky beyond, clear and bright, and then closed up as the water ran over them again. The effect was very eerie, and he kept getting the feeling that he was watching an impossible thing, like seeing a ball roll uphill.

He walked backwards, like the rest, to the shore, not wanting to risk a misstep into the patch like Justin had done, and took the camera out from under his arm. He opened the bag, closed down the front of the camera, with the flash and lens, and took out the picture that was sticking out of the front, and began waving it around like Tommy.

“What did you take a picture of?” Tommy asked as he came up to Jake.

“The opposite shore,” Jake said, and pointed to the other side of the pond with the picture in his hand, “if such a thing exists over there,” and began flapping it again.

He moved the image into the middle of the gathered circle and they could see the orange sky develop on the bottom of the picture. Then dark stripes began bleeding down from the top edge of the picture, tapering off halfway down to jagged points.

Jake looked at it confusedly, wrinkling his forehead as he tried to figure out what exactly he was seeing. The dark

stripes were resolving themselves into dark, many branching-

Inspiration hit Jake and he rotated the picture upside down in his hand. Karen said a soft “ohh” as the previously uninterpretable picture became an obvious picture of trees at the water’s edge. The clouds were developing in the orange sky now, and a lot of the detail was fleshed out. The picture had a thin bar across the bottom which held a reflection of the trees above, which must be the surface of the water leading up to them. The trees stood a little bit off the shore, how far was hard to tell because it was nearly as far away as the other shore of the pond in real life, and the camera was so low to the water’s surface when the picture was taken. They looked like the trees that everyone was familiar with, not the same exact ones on the other side of the pond, but the same type. The bottoms of orange rain clouds touched the tips of the trees as they swept across the sky.

Tommy was looking at the picture when he said “that’s a long way away, right?”

Justin replied, “it looks like it, as wide as this pond.”

“It would be a lot of swimming,” Tommy concluded. He looked up at Jake again, who was still looking down at the alien image, “can I take another picture.”

Jake looked down at the camera and mentally counted off the number of pictures left in it. “Ehhh,” he said nervously, doing the parental punishment calculus, “just one, I need one left in there.”

“All I need is one,” Tommy said with a grin, and Jake handed the camera over. Tommy opened up the camera’s front again, zipped up the bag, exchanged boots, and waded over with Jake and Justin as his safeties. He stood at the edge of the patch with a contemplative look imagining the picture he wanted, then moved the camera around in his right hand to a weird grip, with his thumb on the picture button. He plunged his arm down, took the picture, then retreated backwards to the shore again, dropping the stick while he was still in the water, to free up his hands to open the bag and extract the rolling image.

This time they all gathered around the picture without any image-shaking fanfare. It was light blue, but it was developing that orange hue as they watched.

“What did you take the picture of,” asked Jake.

“This shore,” Tommy said, and smiled, “so don’t blame me if you all see orange versions of yourself.”

As the picture was developing, it was immediately clear that there weren’t orange people in it. However, what Tommy hoped for came true, and they saw the image of a gravel shore, the mirror of the one they were standing on, not a foot away from the camera. Further back was the edge of a forest filled with dark trees, but noticeably missing was the fallen tree they had been using to change their shoes.

Karen looked backward at the treeline, and Tommy held the photo up to it. No matter how he moved it side to side, the

trees in the picture didn't line up with the trees on land, they were all different widths and in different places.

“So it's not like a mirror,” said Tommy thoughtfully, “because things aren't exactly the same.”

Karen, who had come around the group to look at the picture from behind as Tommy held it up, said “It almost is though, the pond ends here, just like on the other side, and maybe it's as long across as this one is.”

“Same pond, two places,” Jake said, and Justin incredulously began “are we really saying that there's a whole other pond over under the water? A whole other world?”

“I wouldn't say it's ‘under the water’,” Jake said, “it's almost like it's just there, but upside down or something. It seems like *we* might be under the water on that other side, since gravity is reversed.”

“How do you know that,” Justin said back.

“Because the lake isn't falling into the sky,” Jake said.

“This is the strangest thing I've ever seen,” Aemilia said, a hint of wonder on her face, “have you ever heard of anything like this?” She looked around to the group.

“A portal between worlds, a mirror dimension?” Tommy began, and Aemilia looked at him hopefully. “Only in books. *Fiction* books.” The hopeful look on Aemilia's face disappeared.

“Do you think there are orange houses over there,” Justin asked, “and orange people just like us? Could there be orange

versions of us over there?”

“I don’t think everything is actually orange,” Tommy said, “I think that the sky is, and that light makes everything look orange.”

“Well I think you’re full of it,” Justin said, “why wouldn’t everything be a different color over there, it’s a mirror of this side, like an orange mirror.”

Tommy sighed, “I guess it’s possible.”

“We could bring something back and check,” Karen said, and they all turned around to look at her at the back of the group. She was standing on the edge of the pond, furthest back from the picture, in between them and the brown patch. “We could go through, go onto land, and bring something from the other side back.”

“We don’t even know if we can breathe the air there,” Tommy said.

“Actually,” Aemilia broke in, defending Karen, “I do. It smelled smoky, but I could breathe it just fine on the other side.”

“Okay, but what if someone got trapped on the other side,” Tommy interjected, “what would we do then.”

“How could you get trapped, it’s right there,” Justin said, pointing to the brown patch behind Karen.

“What if it disappears,” Tommy said.

“Maybe it doesn’t,” Jake said, his mind filling up with the adventurous possibilities. The first explorer of a new world,

unheard of to man. What could be over there, in this orange land, this orange planet. Only he, Jake Tower, could tell.

“I want to go,” Karen said.

“Oh hell no,” Jake shot back, “I want to go! It’s my pond.”

“It’s everyone’s pond!” Karen said, fighting back about a hundred times more than Jake would have expected, “you don’t have any more right to it than anyone else just because you fish here.”

“Oh, um,” Jake sputtered, surprised. “Well, okay. Maybe we should both go,” he looked over to the group, who were mostly staring at Karen’s outburst, to see if anyone objected, “you know, for safety.” The truth was, he couldn’t come up with a rebuttal fast enough, and this way he still got to live his fantasy.

“I don’t think it’s *safe*,” Tommy said.

“Beans on that,” Justin said, “I want to find out what’s over there. I support this expedition.”

“What would we need?” Aemilia asked.

“Rope,” Karen began listing off, “to pull us back through, in case something happens. Baggies, to get samples from the shore. Raincoats, and boots, to go through,” she thought for a minute, “I think that would be it.”

“I’ve got rope,” Justin said, “in my dad’s shed. And raincoats.”

“I’ve got another pair of boots,” Aemilia said, “that’ll probably fit you better, Karen.”

“I can use Justin’s boots,” Jake half said, half asked, and Justin replied with a thumbs up.

“What about baggies,” Karen asked, “we need to bag up samples, like the astronauts on the moon walk.”

“I can get a roll of sandwich baggies,” Justin said, “while I’m getting the other things.”

“Then that’s everything,” Jake said, looking from Justin to Aemilia, “I’ll go with Justin.”

“Me too,” Tommy said.

“I’ll go with Aemilia,” Karen said, “and meet back here in ten minutes?”

They walked back down the shoreline toward the asphalt road, Tommy still wearing Justin’s boots, his shoes abandoned at the fallen tree, and split apart into two groups at the street intersection up the road. Tommy, Justin, and Jake went left toward Justin’s house, which was just up the street from the pond, closer than Jake’s house.

“Do you think gravity *will* be the same?” Justin asked Tommy.

“It might be,” Tommy responded, “the ponds are so similar, it makes me wonder what other things are going to be the same on the other side that you might not expect. Like, you wouldn’t expect two ponds to be the same, but if they had benches in exactly the same place, and were the same shape, maybe they also had the same depth as well.”

“Could there be aliens?” Jake asked.

Tommy thought about that for a while as they walked, then said, “maybe.”

“Ugh,” Justin groaned, “then I’m getting the baseball bat too, just in case.”

They walked up to the front of Justin’s house, which was a single story construction with a blue roof and white facade, with his mom’s minivan parked in the driveway. The path went from the mauve front door to intersect with the driveway, so they walked up the drive and on the path to reach the concrete pad which served as a stepping stone, and Justin reached out to open the door.

The door opened on a sea of light blue, the color of the tight-piled carpet which was beginning to darken at the front door, in the face of Justin’s mom’s most valiant efforts. A hallway led from the door to the living room on the right, the kitchen on the left, and they could hear the television going in the living room. A low wall with pillars reaching up to the ceiling separated the kitchen from the dining room, directly on the right when they entered the house. They heard a recliner squeak and Justin’s mom walked around the edge of the living room with a magazine in her hand, spotting them in the hallway.

“Well hey Tommy, Jake, I wasn’t expecting you all back so early,” she said.

“We’ve come to get supplies,” Justin said in an authoritative tone.

“Well go on then,” she said, smiling, “don’t let me hold you up.” She waved the bundle of glossy magazine pages to the right and then turned around, heading back to the living room. They continued on, rounding the corner and going down the hallway to where the bedrooms and bathrooms were.

Entering the first door on the right, they were in Justin’s room, which was very, unmistakably Justin. His room looked like a bomb had gone off in a normally disorganized room, throwing it into complete chaos. Clothes were hanging off of dressers, things that should be on top of dressers were on the floor. Transformers of various stripes and factions were either posed artfully on desks, or discarded on the ground, and a mecha Godzilla was on its side in the corner.

Justin artfully jumped from patch to patch of clean floor, making his way to his closet, Jake and Tommy just stayed at the door, it was always an ordeal to extricate yourself from Justin’s room once you entered. Justin opened the closet door and pitched headfirst into it, rummaging around what sounded like a pile of objects as high as him, of which they could see various unknown pieces rotate in and out of view as he pushed and pulled at the edges of the mountain.

“Ah!” he said, and pulled out a black case, sitting it on the ground beside the door, and dove back in again to the closet. In a second, he leaned his head out, pulling on a light wood handle. The rest of the baseball bat, tee-ball sized and painted black, popped out of the closet, and he picked up the black

case and hopped over to the door again, leaving the closet open. With the sound of objects still tumbling down the pile in the background, he jumped into the hallway and held up the black case.

“Walkie talkies,” he said, “what do you think?”

“Good idea,” Tommy said.

“Awesome, what else did we need to get?”

“Rope, raincoats, baggies,” Tommy said, his eyes lifted up to the ceiling as he listed items off.

“Alright,” Justin said, and handed Tommy the case of walkie talkies, and Jake the tee ball bat. He led the way down the hallway, with the other two in tow, and turned a right, then a sharp left, into the kitchen, making a beeline for the row of drawers under the counter.

He opened one after the other, peering in, then slamming them shut, on his search for the baggies, and his mom looked up from her celebrity magazine to watch him, half alert and half curious.

Justin opened a cabinet at his knees and said “Aha,” pulling out a blue and green cardboard tube of sandwich baggies. They started to make their way out of the kitchen when his mom called out.

“Justin, you put that box back,” she said. Justin jumped, not aware that his mom was watching him.

“But mom,” he pleaded, “we need them.”

“What for?” she asked.

“An experiment.”

She rolled her eyes in her head. *That could mean anything*, she thought. “You can’t take the whole box,” she said, knowing that it had a good chance of never coming back if it left the house, “you can have three.”

Justin looked to Tommy, and Tommy nodded. Justin opened the top of the box, pulled out three baggies, and put the box on the counter.

“Back where you got it,” his mom said, and it was Justin’s turn to roll his eyes and audibly groan as he bent down and replaced it in the cabinet at his knees.

“You boys have fun,” she said, as they rounded the corner to the door. *Lord knows what they’re up to*, she thought, *but at least it isn’t in the house*. She tilted the bent back magazine up again and continued reading a story about the film *Braveheart*, quickly glancing back and forth from the extra large image of Mel Gibson at the top.

Jake opened the closet next to the front door, rummaged around between the coats, and brought out a red raincoat, his size, and a plaid raincoat, much larger. “Don’t lose this,” he warned Jake in a whisper, “it’s my dad’s.” Jake nodded, crunched both raincoats under his arm, and they went out the front door.

Justin led them around the back of the house to a small shed standing at the back of their short yard. The door was secured with a black-enamled dial combination lock, which Justin quickly spun this way and that, and unlocked. He opened the door a crack and hung the lock with reverence

from one half of the bolt, and then opened the doors the rest of the way onto a space absolutely glutted with tools. There were lines of hooks on the walls that held tools from their handles, a lawn mower, leaf blower, and a small table saw cluttered up the floor. It was impossible to see any inside surface of the shed with how packed it was.

There was a big steel crowbar with a toothed jaw on one end hanging up from two hooks in the wall, and Tommy was reaching out to touch it when Justin said “Hands off!”

Tommy’s hand jerked back and Justin continued, “this is all my dad’s stuff, no touching.” He reached up and to the left, unhooking a coil of light blue braided plastic rope from the wall and handing it to Tommy.

“We have to bring this back, he said, and turned to Jake. “No matter what, don’t you hurt this rope.”

“I won’t,” Jake said, surprised by Justin’s seriousness.

“Okay,” Justin said, and stepped back from the shed, closing and locking the doors with a solemnity you would only expect to see in a monastery. “Let’s head back.”

They left the shed and crossed through the back yard, into the front, and then onto the sidewalk, heading left toward the pond. As the intersection to the pond came around the bend in the road, they could just see Karen and Aemilia disappear into the street heading for the pond.

“Come on,” Jake called out, and they started running toward the intersection, Justin making a rubbery squelching noise with every step from the two raincoats he carried under

his arm. They rounded the corner, but Aemilia and Karen had already taken the left along the shore and were out of sight.

Winded from their sprint, they walked the rest of the way, Tommy favoring his right leg where the heavy walkie talkie case had banged up against it over and over during their all-out run. Jake looked right and left as they got to the pond shore, but no one was here, it was too late in the day for the goose feeders.

They could spot Aemilia and Karen far off, past the last bench, turning into the woods to sit down on the fallen tree, and they made their way along the shore, their three footsteps crunching off-tempo in the gravel.

“Did you bring the kitchen sink too,” asked Aemilia as they walked up to the fallen tree.

“What?” Justin asked, not getting the jab.

“Nothing.”

“We got some extra stuff,” Tommy said, laying down the walkie talkie case and reaching into his front left pocket where he had stuffed the plastic baggies. Jake set down the coil of blue plastic rope and the tee ball bat on the loam floor. Justin kept a hold of the raincoats.

The extra pair of rainboots were sitting on the fallen tree next to Tommy’s shoes, and Aemilia picked up the tee ball bat and asked, “What’s this for?”

“Well you know,” Justin said, “in case they run into trouble.”

“What kind of trouble,” she asked, swinging it down in an arc, supposedly on something’s head.

“Any kind,” Justin said, “no one goes on an expedition without a goddamn weapon.”

“What’s that,” Karen asked, pointing to the black case on the ground.

“Ah,” Justin said, and pushed the two raincoats into Tommy’s arms. Tommy stumbled back a bit, trying to get a hold of the bundle that was now entirely his as Justin was already squatting down to the ground to unsnap the big plastic buckles on the front of the case.

Justin opened the case and inside there were two white and black plastic handsets, with what looked like black rubber gripping on the sides and a black plastic antenna sticking out of the left side of the top, arranged in a mirror-like fashion with each one turned toward the other, to save space. He picked both of them up out of the plastic casing, his fingernails hitting the backboard gave a hollow plastic sound.

“Walkie talkies!” he exclaimed. “We’ll be able to keep in touch, you know,” he motioned to the brown patch, still off the shore, “while you’re on the other side.”

“That’s a really great idea!” Karen said excitedly, and Justin blushed.

“Well, you know, I’ve had them for forever, and never really used them before, now’s their time to shine.”

A few seconds passed in silence, with Justin looking embarrassedly down at the pair of walkie talkies in his hands,

when Tommy broke in “Should we get suited up?”

“Yeah,” Jake responded, wanting to call attention away from Justin, but still excited about the upcoming journey all the same, “let’s do it.”

Tommy and Jake exchanged rain boots, Tommy putting his old shoes back on, while Aemilia helped Karen get hers on. Each one of them had their own team of preppers, Tommy and Justin both helping Jake get his raincoat on and buttoning it up, and it wasn’t lost on Jake that this felt very much like a space expedition.

“How do you want the rope?” Justin asked Jake and Karen, standing side by side in their mismatched rubberized suits.

“I think Jake should tie it around his waist,” Tommy said, “then, if he makes it through to the other side, Karen can just climb it through.”

“How *will* I make it to the other side?” Jake asked, not quite being able to visualize going through the patch.

Tommy shrugged, and looking around, no one else seemed to have any suggestions. “I guess i’ll just figure that out when the time comes,” he said.

“And take this in first,” Justin said, and held the tee ball bat out to him, “just in case.”

“Justin case,” Jake repeated, which elicited a nervous chuckle from the group, and he took the bat.

Justin unraveled the blue rope from the coil and knotted it around Jake as best he could, getting into an argument with Tommy halfway through on what the best knot would be. In

the end, there was a solid three inches of confusing knot holding together a loop that Jake was pretty sure he could just step out of if he wanted to.

“The walkie talkies,” Jake said, suddenly feeling very alone in what felt more and more like a tight rubber coffin. Justin brought them up from the case and turned each one on, giving one to Jake. Justin walked twenty feet away and turned around.

“Test test, this is buckin’ bronco, do you read,” the handset said in a clipped version of Justin’s voice. Jake looked around the handset for a second, then found a black rubber button on the side with the icon of a person’s mouth talking, pressed it down and said “roger that buckin’ bronco, the eagle has landed.”

Justin brought the handset down from in front of his face and even from twenty feet away they could see his huge grin. He walked back over and said “I guess they do still work.”

Jake, still holding the walkie talkie in his hand, looked over to the patch of water, and back down at it. “Do you think water will hurt it,” he asked Justin.

Justin frowned, thinking. “How about you keep it in the case,” he said, bending down and grabbing the black plastic case, “and the case in your backpack?”

“That sounds good to me,” Jake said, and Justin started throwing the food bars out of his pack beside the fallen tree. “Leave a couple in there,” Jake said, “you know, for survival.”

Justin nodded, and put two back in, which he followed up with the black case containing the still-on walkie talkie, and held his hand out to Tommy. Tommy looked confused. “The baggies,” Justin said, and Tommy reached into his pocket and extracted the crumpled up baggies, handing them to Justin, who stuffed them into the pack and zipped it up again.

Justin brought the pack over to Jake, who held his arms down to let Justin slip it on. “And this,” Justin said, and pulled the dangling ends of the straps around the front and tied them in a knot, “just for safe measure.”

Tommy picked up the tee ball bat and held it out to Jake, who took it, completing his ensemble. He looked over at Karen, who was only wearing the rubber set of rainclothes, and swore internally. Somehow he had been made the pack mule.

He stepped out onto the gravel shore, an inch in front of the water of the pond, which was very still, and looked back at the group. Justin, Tommy, and Aemilia were standing further back, with Justin holding the rope loosely in his hands, Karen was standing closer, but to the side, out of the way of the rope.

“Well I guess this is it,” Jake said, “wish me luck.” He paused for a moment, then said “And you be sure to pull me back in if I say so.”

Justin nodded and spread his grip further apart on the rope, as if in preparation for a sharp tug. Tommy took up the strand behind Justin, and Aemilia moved back and grabbed

the rope behind Tommy. To Jake they looked like a tug of war team ready to yank, which suited him just fine.

With the tee ball bat in his right hand, he walked forward the two feet into the pond, feeling the rope play out behind him with the slightest resistance from everyone's hands. He was standing at the edge of the brown spot, and leaning over, he could see what really did appear to be clouds across the water. He moved the bat down and poked it through the water, into what was still hard for him to believe was the other side, and swished it from side to side. The water made a high pitched splishing sound, like the sound you'd expect from a skim of water, and a brighter patch of orange, not brown, trailed his bat, where he could see what, from the pictures, looked like the true color of the sky on the other side.

He tried to work out in his mind how he would get across the boundary, but nothing clever came to him. Finally he decided to bite the bullet, and, taking a deep breath, he jumped feet first into the patch.

Like some sort of horror movie, in slow motion he saw himself plunging deeper and deeper into the water that was supposed to only be three inches deep, with no resistance at all to stop him. He was, for a split second, reminded of quicksand in movies, and he felt like he had made a terrible mistake. The surface of the patch was rapidly approaching his face, and he shut his eyes hard against the oncoming rush of water.

But for whatever reason, he didn't feel a splash of water on his face as he went through. He opened his eyes and for an amazed second, he saw an inverted world. The surface of the water was right above his head, making a watery orange ceiling, which led off to an upside down strand of dark trees. He was overcome with wonder, it really was here, but in the next second, he was overcome with an insane fear: he was falling, he was going to fall right into that orange sky.

His inner ear told him that he was in freefall, and he spun his arms and legs wildly around as he began falling again, but this time to the other side of the pond. His right arm, with the bat, splashed down into water, and he flung his left arm over to where he felt solid material, gravity suddenly reasserting itself, halting the falling feeling. His legs were weirdly floating behind him, coming to rest half-way under the surface of the water, and he let in a gasp of air as he tried to claw his way up onto what soil he could reach. The air was smoky smelling, like Aemilia said, and paradoxically called comforting memories of walking down the street in the winter time to the smell of woodsmoke coming out of chimneys.

He scrambled onto the soggy pond bottom on his elbows, like a recruit at basic training under a barbed wire fence, kicking his legs savagely behind him, but they connected with nothing. He finally got half his body onto "solid" land, and hauled himself out of the strange depthless, but weightless,

patch of water, planting his feet under a few inches of water in the soft wet dirt.

He stood up and looked around him, suddenly alert for danger, and held up the tee ball bat in front. The orange sky cast a strange light over everything, and in the distance he could see that same line of dark trees, but right side up this time. The pond reflected the light of the orange sky, but a faint breeze kept it from mirroring the sight. He looked up and could see lighter orange clouds against the background, some in the distance, over the trees, looked like they could bring rain. He looked down behind him and was surprised to see a light blue patch in the water, which seemed to be glowing slightly, that the blue rope behind him, which now looked dark purple, led down into.

Somehow comforted by the presence of the patch behind him, he realized in the back of his mind that he had been worried that it would close up after him, he walked around the side of it, surveying his surroundings. The plain of water narrowed down and came to a stop on the other side of the patch, where there was a similar graveley shore, familiar looking from the picture they had taken of it. He lifted his feet out of the mud that they were slightly sinking into and splashed his way around the patch and to the shore, feeling infinitely grateful to have solid land under him again.

He sat down hard on the shore and looked at the dark rope which led from his waist, to the edge of the slightly luminescent blue patch, and down into it, imagining that on

the other side it would look the same, but with different colors. He heard a squawking coming from his backpack, and hurriedly tried to undo the straps knotted at his waist. Unfortunately it was a signature Justin knot, so he threw the straps off his shoulders and wiggled the backpack up over the top of his head. He was pleased to find that, even though the front of his pants embarrassingly felt very wet from his crawl, his backpack instead felt completely dry, at least to his dripping fingers.

Ripping open the zipper, he pulled the black plastic case out of the backpack, scattering a couple of ziploc bags on the gravel as he did so, and quickly undid the buckles on the front.

“-okay, over.” He heard the walkie talkie say before the voice clicked off on the other side, and he picked up the black device, brought it to his mouth, and pressed the talk button.

“The eagle has landed, I repeat, the eagle has landed... over.”

“What’s it like over there,” Justin’s voice said clearly over the radio. It was eerie hearing his friend’s voice through the walkie talkie, when for all he could see he was alone in the world. Somehow it seemed like he should be completely cut off in this orange tinted land, not like he was only a few feet away from his friends. In fact...

“It’s very orange,” he said, getting on his knees and looking around, trying to line himself up with the blue patch, “it feels normal, normal gravity” he started digging with his

left hand in the gravel, holding the walkie talkie up to his face, “the air smells a little smoky.”

“Is everything right side up?” Justin asked. Jake had dug down a foot or so with his hand, down to a depth that, considering the patch, he should have dug straight up underneath his friends. *I really am in a different place*, he thought, *completely different*.

“Yeah,” he said, getting to his feet and kicking the gravel back into the hole, embarrassed at his hopeful experiment, “it looks right side up from here, but I guess I’m upside down? It doesn’t feel like it.”

“What was it like going through?” Justin asked.

“Not so bad,” Jake said, then pulled up the hem of his raincoat and looked down at the darker front of his pants, “a little wet though.”

“What-” then the speech was garbled in what sounded like a fight for the walkie talkie. He could hear shouting on the other side, then Karen’s voice came through.

“Is it safe?” she asked.

Jake looked around again. There was something farther off down the lake, something dark sticking out of the ground, but he couldn’t tell quite what it was in the low orange light. Whatever it was though didn’t look alive, it was too still and stiff. He swiveled around and looked into the woods, but the gloom made it almost impossible to see past the first row of trees. He listened hard, but he couldn’t hear anything but the slight breeze blowing at his back. Every now and again a faint

swooshing sound came from beyond the trees, but that just might be the wind too.

“Seems safe to me,” he said into the walkie talkie.

“Oops,” he said out loud, realizing he didn’t press the button.

“Seems safe to me,” he said again, this time with the button down.

“Okay,” Karen’s voice came over again, “can I come over on the rope?”

Jake looked down at the rope leading into the faintly glowing water, then back at the rest of the gravel shore, and imagined how one would use the rope to help themselves across. He pulled out a little more rope from the patch, sat down on the gravel shore, and dug his heels into the shifting rocks as best he could.

With one hand on the rope, he held the walkie talkie up to his mouth with the other and said “I’m all ready over here, proceed with caution, over.”

“Okay, I’m coming over,” Karen’s voice said through the walkie talkie, and then it cut off. A second later it crackled on again and he heard Justin’s voice.

“Justin Lewis here again, reporting on the second great expedition into the unknown.” *Was this what he was yelling about*, Jake thought, when his backpack was squawking after he went through. He rolled his eyes.

“The astronaut approaches the portal carefully, gripping the lifeline in her hands, she surely must be thinking about

her family, and the thousands of great men and women who made this day possible.” There was a scattering of other voices in the background, in what sounded a lot like protestation, Jake assumed that the others were trying to get him to quit it.

Nevertheless, he persisted. “On the precipice of the unknown, the brave astronaut is doubtless making many thousands of calculations as to OH JESUS, THERE SHE GOES!”

A movement caught his eye and Jake looked up in time to see Karen, donned in a raincoat, rise out of the patch, pivoting by her feet on the edge of the blue water. She hastily grabbed the rope, hand over hand, reeling it in as fast as she could. The rope snapped up from the shore and the top of the water, vibrating as Jake felt it pull him forward, and he leaned back against it, pushing with his heels in the gravel. She kept pulling on the rope, and then she was all the way up, and the rope slackened off.

She took an unsteady step forward, still holding the rope in both hands, and looked behind her, taking in the pond vista. She looked down at the blue water and stepped back, still looking down at its surface. She turned around again and Jake waved his arm above his head, and she followed with a wave.

“Did she make it!? Is she with you!?” Justin shouted through the walkie talkie on the ground. Jake had dropped it during the struggle pulling her up, and picked it up again in one hand, using the other to knock off some wet bits of sand.

“Yeah, she made it,” Jake said, “she’s coming over now.” Karen walked up the gravel beach and over to Jake, and he stood up from the hollow that had formed under his struggling body.

“Thanks for helping me through,” she said, “I can’t believe it.” She looked around at the trees again, and up at the sky.

“It doesn’t seem possible, does it,” Jake asked, looking around again. A series of snaps and crackles came over the walkie talkie, and Jake heard the words “-give me-” in one of them. He assumed there was another struggle.

“Karen are you there?” Aemilia said, Jake could hear shouting in the background. Jake handed the walkie talkie over to Karen, and she depressed the button on the side.

“I’m here,” she said, “I made it.”

“Thank God,” Aemilia said.

Karen looked back at the luminous patch of water, and then followed the rope back to Jake’s waist.

“Oh, let’s tie this off somewhere,” she said.

Jake pushed the rope down his waist, easily slipping it off and stepping out of it. “We’re tying the rope off on this side,” Karen said into the walkie, “let us have some slack.”

They pulled the rope over to one of the dark trees on the edge of the treeline. This one was smaller, and they pulled the loop of rope around the outside of it. Karen bent down and picked up a stick in the loam, shoving it through the loop in the rope, fastening it to the trailing end.

“Okay, we’ve got it tied off on this end,” Karen said into the walkie talkie.

“We’re getting it tied off on this end,” Tommy’s voice responded, “but I can’t vouch for the strength of the knot.” They heard the beginning of Justin’s voice say *hey* before the transmission cut off, and they both smiled.

“Do you want to start collecting samples?” Karen asked.

“Sure,” Jake said, and then remembered pulling the walkie talkie case out of his backpack, “oh shit!”

He looked to his backpack, and he saw one baggie sitting in the gravel beside it, a little mound having fallen on it during the struggle, but the other one that fell out wasn’t there.

“The baggies fell out,” he said to Karen, “when I was getting the walkie talkie out. I think one’s blown away.”

They both swiveled their heads around, but Jake immediately spotted it about ten feet down the shore. “Oh, there it is,” he said, and he cautiously began walking over.

Every step in this weird orange light felt strange, he thought, not like there was anything wrong with how walking felt, but the different colored light made everything feel alien and disconcerting, like a familiar television show you turn on, just to see that all of the expected actors have been replaced.

Jake bent down and picked up the baggie, wagging in the breeze, and then straightened back up, but something caught his eye in the process. The trees at the edge of this dark forest seemed to move at different rates further down the shore,

much further. It might be a gap, he thought, a gap in the forest.

He walked back over to Karen, who was already scooping gravel into one of the baggies. The walkie talkie on the shore beside her was saying “-and leaves, and bark, and twigs-”.

“I got it,” Jake said, waving the baggie back and forth, and then stuffing it in the backpack on the ground. “What’s going on?”

“Oh, Justin’s listing out what we should get,” she said, “but I don’t think we have enough baggies.”

“No,” Jake chuckled, as the voice continued to drone on, listing noun after noun. “I think there may be a break in the trees,” he said, and Karen looked up, “down there.”

“Where those black things are?” she asked.

“No, closer than them,” he said, and motioned with his arm, but now he couldn’t see where he thought the break was anymore. “Want to go check it out?” he asked.

“Yeah,” she said, sealing up the baggie of gravel and putting it in the open backpack, “lets go.”

Jake picked up the backpack and put it on, keeping the impossibly knotted straps behind him, and Karen picked up the tee ball bat and the walkie talkie, looking to Jake like some kind of post apocalyptic road warrior.

They walked off a few steps and both of them turned to look back at the same time. Yes, Jake thought, the rope was still very visible from this distance, thank God. Karen,

apparently satisfied as well, turned back to walking forward, and Jake followed up behind.

“We’re going to check out a break in the trees, over,” Karen said into the walkie talkie.

“What kind of break in the trees?” Tommy’s voice came through the walkie talkie.

“I don’t know, we haven’t gotten there yet,” Karen said. As they walked along the shore, he could see the treeline move differently again, and the break became clear. The trees passed on their right hand side like dark sentinels guarding a forbidden forest, and the dark orange clouds above were approaching across the lake, looking for all the world like a rusty rain was about to come down.

As they got closer to the gap in the trees, a dark patch of ground, black against the orange gravel, resolved itself, looking eerily familiar. A few more feet forward, Jake could see that the demarcation between it and the gravel was fuzzy toward the pond, but on the far side of it, perpendicular to the lake, it was a sharp line, and he suddenly knew what it was.

“Holy shit,” he said, jogging a couple steps up beside Karen, “that’s a street.”

Karen didn’t say anything at first, but a few steps later she responded, “wow, it is a street.”

Then the familiarity hit home for him, and he looked back at the dark line of blue rope against the gravel, judging the distance of it, and said “this is the same street that comes in on the other side,” pointing down to refer to their world.

“Is it really?” Karen asked, as they walked up directly in front of the gap in the trees, in front of the tapering off asphalt, if that was what it was.

“The distance looks right to me,” Jake said, and then he looked further down the lake at the stationary black shapes, “and those are benches, just like on our side. But we also have benches on this side of the street, remember?”

Karen paused a second, “I think so.”

Jake could hear a swooshing sound growing from down the street, but before he could say anything to Karen about hiding, a movement came from the side and he froze. What looked to all the world like a normal car drove in across the intersection, barely hidden by some kind of haze, and in front of it, where it’s headlights touched, the asphalt returned to its regular black color.

Jake stayed frozen, but slowly turned his head to Karen, who was looking at him with arched eyebrows. The look in her face was of mingled fear and excitement, as he assumed it must be on his.

“Was that a car?” Karen asked.

“I think so,” Jake responded, “it must have been, right?”

“Does that mean there are... people,” Karen asked, “down here?”

“I mean,” and Jake looked to the left, toward the benches, and motioned in front, to the asphalt, “these are certainly people things, why would they be here.”

“I kinda thought this was a copy or something of our world,” Karen said, “but a bad copy, like Mrs. Goodman’s grammar exercises.”

Jake thought of those pieces of paper with the black lines running across, the characters of text bleeding in every direction into each other, and he could see the similarity to this world, with its orange sky and smoky air.

“Maybe it is a copy,” Jake said, “but the people are copied over too.”

Karen shuddered. “What if they’re wrong,” she motioned around at the sky, “like this.”

An image flashed to Jake’s mind of a person with one eyeball melted halfway down their face, and a nose like a pig’s snout, and he tried to force it out of his head.

“What’s going on now?” the handset crackled with Justin’s voice. It was getting more distorted now, the further they went from the patch. Jake thought they would probably only be able to take it to the intersection ahead before it cut out completely.

Karen raised the walkie talkie up in front of her face and squinted her eyes at the top dials, trying to find the volume control. She twisted one, and the slight crackling sound went down, then depressed the side button and said “There’s cars over here.”

“Cars!?” Justin’s voice shot out, and Karen’s hand jumped up to the top of the walkie talkie to twist the knob lower.

“Yes, ssssh,” she said into the receiver, “it was driving down the road. There must have been someone in it, so keep your voice down.”

“So there are upside down people,” Justin’s voice said, and Jake could almost make out a sense of amazement through the static.

“They’re not upside down here,” Karen said back, “they’re right side up. You’re upside down.”

“I’m not upside down!” Justin shouted back through the handset, and Jake could see Karen’s eyes visibly roll around in the orange light.

“I know, I’m just saying that everything looks right side up here.”

“Are there people?” the receiver asked.

“We haven’t seen any,” Karen said into the handset, and looked over at Jake. Jake nodded at her, grabbing the backpack straps around his shoulders, “but we’re going to go up and investigate. Wait for us to call you back before you say anything, okay?”

“Okay, be careful,” Justin’s voice said, and Karen looked down at the receiver for a couple more seconds before she looked up again and started walking forward.

Jake followed behind her, the transition from gravel to asphalt having that same weird alien familiarity in the orange light. He tried to keep his footsteps soft on the street, but the boots kept making a ker-plunk sound every time he set them

down. Karen seemed to be attempting the same, but with as little success as he had.

Halfway up the street to the intersection, Karen raised her arm up to the side of her head, her hand spread apart, and crouched a little. Jake stopped and crouched too, listening hard to the slight breeze blowing past them. Then he could hear a muffled sound that reminded him of nights in bed hearing the sounds of his parents talking without being able to make out their words through the walls.

Oh shit, it really is people, Jake thought, as Karen turned back to him with wide fearful eyes. Jake pointed to the line of trees to their right, and they ran as fast as they could to the treeline, making an awful cacophony of rubberized clomping noises along the way.

Karen passed a couple of trees ahead, her boots snapping small branches underneath, and then she crouched all the way down, kneeling in the dark loam. “Down, down,” she whispered, grabbing the side of Jake’s raincoat and pulling. He kneeled down in the loam beside her, they could see slivers of the intersection through the trees ahead of them, and, surprisingly, to the right of them they could see slivers of the street that continued on past the intersection.

The muffled voices seemed to have disappeared, but a few seconds later Jake could pick up the noises again, and scanning around, he surmised that they were probably coming from the left side of the intersection. They had a call

and response pattern, and he guessed that there were at least two people in the group, not just one talking to itself.

Jake could feel the wet loam penetrating through his knee, re-wetting the area, and he was about to shift position when he caught movement through the trees and recommitted himself to his statuary pose.

The people had walked into the intersection now, and were crossing the street, their voices getting louder, but still more muffled than he would have suspected, considering that nothing seemed weird with the sound of this place, as it was with the light. He tried to make out the sounds they were making, the cadence was very familiar, was it English?

“-and I said ‘You can take those copies and put them where the sun don’t shine’”

“You didn’t!”

“No, but I wish I could’ve. I swear Maureen if Peter wasn’t still in school I would quit this job so fast it would make your head spin.”

The women, Jake could tell that there were two of them, finished crossing the street, and continued onto the other street. He strained his eyes through the trees to try to get a glimpse of them, one of the voices sounded strangely familiar. As they passed by, bright flashes of orange kept showing up at head level, and Jake thought they might have something over their faces. Maybe those *were* their faces.

The conversation retreated into unintelligible sounds, and then after a few more seconds, it was gone entirely. Jake

looked over to Karen, “Did you see them?”

“Only a little,” Karen said, “did either of them sound familiar to you?”

“Yeah,” Jake said, “but I couldn’t tell who.”

“I think it was the front desk lady,” she said.

“At school?” Jake asked, but suddenly the voice fell into place, “the one who does the announcements.”

“Yeah,” Karen said, “you think so too?”

“It did sound like her, but it was hard to tell, don’t you think? Did you see their faces at all?”

“No,” Karen said, “I didn’t.”

“I think I caught a flash. There’s something on them.”

“Do you think,” Karen began, swallowed, and then continued, “Do you really think that it’s a copy of a person? Couldn’t it really be the front desk lady?”

“Do you think the front desk lady took a little swim in the pond and decided to stay over here?” Jake asked.

“No,” Karen said, then smiled, “she doesn’t seem the type.”

“Hey guys” the walkie talkie erupted from Karen’s right hand. Karen and Jake both jumped in the underbrush, Jake falling back on his butt in the loam.

Karen angrily pushed the button on the side. “What did I say about using the walkie talkie,” she hissed into the handset, but when she let go the handset continued “-our turn?”

“What?” she asked into the handset.

“I said, when’s it our turn,” Jake had thought it was Justin’s voice at first, the static was so bad, but the attitude definitely belonged to Aemilia.

“We’re coming back now,” Karen said into the handset, and looked up at Jake. Jake nodded, and she continued, “be over in a couple minutes.”

Karen turned the knob on the top of the walkie talkie all the way to the left until it clicked, and the little red light on the front turned off. Jake let out a long breath that he had apparently been holding through the whole conversation, and listened to the forest again. He couldn’t hear anything unnatural over the tinkling sounds of the naked tree branches touching each other in the breeze.

“Okay,” he said, and stood up. Karen followed behind him, and they slowly made their way out of the line of trees onto the asphalt road leading to the pond. Jake looked to his right down to the intersection, didn’t see anyone, and turned his head to look left to the pond, still empty. He started jogging down to the pond, and he could hear Karen’s boots clomping behind him.

After they turned the corner, with the road hidden from sight behind the line of trees, Jake’s anxiety began to melt away. There was no telling what was over there, Jake thought, was it the same neighborhood on the other side, was his house down the street? A horrifying idea sprang to mind, quickly discarded, of an orange version of him sitting in an orange bedroom at this very moment, or going through the

dark woods with his orange friends, ready to pop out onto the same patch of water that they had earlier today. He looked behind him, slowing to a walk, and saw Karen close by. Looking past her to the tree line where they had all come out earlier today, on the other side, he couldn't see a group of orange people emerging from the dark forest.

They reached the dark line leading from the trees into the slightly glowing water.

“Do you want to go first?” Jake asked.

“No, you go first,” Karen said, “you haven't used the rope before.”

Jake remembered splashing around in the pond and felt a bit embarrassed. “It looked a lot easier for you.”

“Just fall through,” she said, “and pull yourself up once you reach the other side. Like tug of war.”

“Right...” Jake said. “Should I take the bat back too, or the walkie talkie?”

“I'll keep them over here,” she said, “and give them to the next ones who come through.”

“Okay cool,” Jake said, and he unslung his backpack. Sitting it down on the gravel, he opened the top and pulled out the black plastic case for the walkie talkie again, and set it on the ground. “For whoever brings it back,” he said.

He zipped up and put the backpack back on, walked over to the blue line on the ground and picked it up. He felt a tension in it between the tree they had tied it off to and the edge of the puddle.

“Wish me luck,” he said, hoping he wouldn’t embarrass himself again in the water.

“Good luck,” she said, and he walked to the edge of the blue patch, with the rope held in his hand. He pulled the rope against the edge of the patch, it seemed to hit some kind of slightly yielding resistance at the edge.

Jake picked up one leg and threw it over the rope, now standing astride it, held his breath, looked down into the blue water, and saw a white cloud passing at the bottom of an infinitely deep hole. He moved his head side to side and the cloud didn’t change perspective, it really was high up in the sky, in another sky. He loosened his hands on the tight rope, put his right foot out, and felt himself pitch over into the water.

His eyes were closed at the moment he broke through, and every instinct in his body told him that he would now be laid out on the surface of the pond, but he continued to rotate up further than he would have expected, feeling no further rush of water against his face. He opened his eyes and tried to stamp down with his right foot, catching a bank of soft pond mud with his boot. He clamped down on the rope between his hands and took a gasp of breath in, when he realized that the world was all wrong.

Everything was cast in shades of green. The gravel bank was light and dark green, Justin, Tommy, and Karen, standing on the bank around the rope, all were tinted green, and he almost let go of the rope in fear. But the fear of

drowning in an infinite water hole was greater, and he pulled, hand over hand on the rope, and brought his left leg out of the patch and onto the pond mud too.

He looked left and right, everything really was tinted green, except for the sky, which was a light blue with white clouds. He heard a snapping sound from the bank, and jerked his head around, ready for some kind of attack, but saw instead that the three of them were clapping. Nothing was wrong with their faces, the air smelled fresh and clean, notably absent of smoke. He stood with the rope in his hands, a few inches away from what was now a brown patch, and blinked once, twice, and each time he blinked the world came back into its right color, and he realized that he wasn't in some kind of alternate green world at all.

He broke out into a smile and dropped the blue rope, walking to the shore. Justin held up the handset and said "He just got over."

"Good," Karen's voice sounded out from the receiver, "send someone else over quick, it's creepy over here."

"You want this stuff?" Jake asked Justin, and Justin enthusiastically replied "Yeah!"

Jake stripped off his backpack, then the raincoat, and handed the raincoat to Justin, dropping the backpack in the gravel, then walked over to the fallen tree where his shoes were still sitting. He sat down, switched out his shoes for boots, then held them up for Justin, who was coming over to switch out his shoes.

“What was it like?” asked Tommy, who had come over with Aemilia.

“It was weird,” Jake said, “everything was orange, which, of course, we knew beforehand, but it’s weird to walk around in that orange world. And then when the people walked by-”

“People!?” Aemilia asked, and her eyebrows shot up. Tommy looked similarly shocked, and Justin swiveled around on the log to face Jake.

“Yeah,” Jake said, “oh yeah, I guess we didn’t say anything, we saw people walk by the intersection.”

“The intersection?” Tommy asked. He was beginning to sound like some kind of weird parrot.

“Yeah, there’s a street leading to the pond and an intersection right afterwards over there, just like here. That’s where the people walked by.”

“Wicked,” Justin said, and almost as if he had forgotten he was suiting up for the same adventure until this very second, he slammed his foot home in the boot and shot up. “I’m ready!”

“Okay,” Jake tied his laces and led Justin down to the water’s edge. “Hold this rope all the way through, and when you get to the edge, you sort of step off with one foot and fall in, and pull yourself up with the rope on the other side.”

Justin’s eyes had taken on a glassy look while receiving this instruction, and Jake knew that the apparent geometries involved, as confusing as they were to him, were impossible to explain to a person who hadn’t already gone through it.

“Just pull yourself through with the rope if you get into a bind,” Jake finished, and Justin nodded. Jake clapped him on his rubberized shoulder and said “Good luck.”

Justin turned back to the group and said “See you on the other side.” He bent down, picked up the rope, and splashed the two feet over to the floating patch. Jake had a weird sense of deja vu, almost like he was watching himself do it again.

Justin was staring down into the patch with the rope held in his hand, and then suddenly he was pitching over, then broke through the surface, and then began struggling. His legs shot straight up in the air, and it somehow looked like he was synchronized swimming in the inches deep water. Yes, Jake thought, this was exactly like watching himself go in.

After a few seconds of thrashing around, and what he assumed was shouted help from Karen on the other side, Justin’s legs disappeared in two sharp tugs, whether from his own pulling on the rope, or with an assist from Karen, he didn’t know. Aemilia, who had the handset now, waited a couple seconds after Justin’s rain boot disappeared into the puddle before she asked “Did Justin make it over okay?”

“Yeah,” Karen said, with the distinct sound of being winded in her voice. In the background Jake could barely hear Justin yell “Goddamn!”

“Yeah he’s fine,” Karen continued, “let me give him the low down, and then I’ll come back.” The transmission cut off.

It was a very strange feeling being back on the blue side, as Jake had come to mentally identify it. Somehow, the unreality

of the orange side had caused an equal feeling of unreality over here, almost like things were too perfect. But this feeling was fading fast with every breath of clean air and glance at the blue and white sky.

“What did the people look like,” Tommy asked beside Jake.

“I couldn’t really see, we were hiding in the forest,” Jake looked down, imagining looking through the ground, then looked back up and to the trees hiding the asphalt drive, “over there, but on the other side,” he pointed at the trees down the pond’s edge.

“But one of the people kind of sounded like the desk lady at school.”

“The one that sits in front of the principal’s office?” Aemilia asked.

“Yeah,” Jake said.

“That’s Mrs. McKenzie,” Aemilia said, “she lives in this neighborhood.”

“Really?” Jake asked.

“I’m sure of it,” Aemilia replied, “does she... you know... cross over too?”

“Karen thought that maybe in the same way the pond and the street is over there, maybe copies of everyone are over there too. Me, you, our houses, everything.”

Aemilia shuddered, “I don’t like the thought of that.”

“Why?” Jake asked, as the radio crackled.

“Okay, I’m ready to come back over,” Karen said through the handset. “Justin’ll keep the handset after this.”

Jake had a thought and reached out, pressing his finger over Aemilia's on the talk button. "Karen, before you come over, things look green as soon as you get on the other side, but I think it's just some kind of optical illusion."

A few seconds passed before Karen's voice came over again, "that makes sense, if we got red light fatigue."

"What fatigue?" Jake asked. Aemilia had handed the handset over to him.

"I'll explain when I get over, but that seems normal after we were over here for a bit is what I'm saying."

"Okay," Jake said, and handed the handset back over to Aemilia. *Shows me, I guess*, he thought.

"Alright," Karen said, "I'm coming over now. Tell them when I go through."

Jake was confused for a second, then the radio crackled again and he heard Justin say, "she's getting ready, and..."

Jake saw the weird splash upwards through the water, and Karen was hauling herself with her hands on the rope, and stepping out of the puddle at the same time. It was over in half a second, and Jake felt a bit jealous at such a graceful re-entry.

"...she's through." Justin said.

"We see her," Aemilia said into the handset, as Karen walked up to the shore again, dropping the rope at the last bit.

"Welcome back," Jake said, and Karen smiled, "It's good to be back."

"Who wants to go next," she asked the group.

“Me,” Aemilia said, “and besides, we only have one pair of boy’s boots, and one pair of girl’s boots.”

Tommy shrugged, “That’s fine with me, I’ll go next.”

While Karen and Aemilia exchanged rain gear, Karen had come over without the tee ball bat or the walkie talkie, Jake led Tommy down the gravel shore, retracing his steps with Karen on the other side.

“These weren’t here,” Jake said, as they passed the two benches, “but around here is where I noticed the trees down there were parted-”

“Was everything on the right side,” Tommy interrupted.

“What?” Jake asked.

“I mean, did you come around on this side of the pond, with the pond on your left, the trees on your right, and then over here was the break in the trees.”

“Yeah,” Jake said, confused, “that’s how it was.”

“Interesting, I thought it might be mirrored or something,” Tommy said.

“How do you mean?”

“Well, think of it this way, if this other world were directly beneath ours, and everything matched up,” Tommy put his left hand in the air, palm down, with the fingers pointed to the right, then matched up his right hand on the bottom side of it, palm up, “then when you went over, even though everything was exactly lined up, it would look backwards,” he flipped his hands over, so the right one was on top this time,

but the fingers were all pointed to the left. “Does that make sense?”

“Uhh, kinda,” Jake said.

“Nevermind,” Tommy said, and waved the issue away, “I’ve just been trying to figure out what’s going on between the two sides. I thought maybe that world was just buried under this one or something.”

“Oh, I thought of that too!” Jake said. “I dug a hole right on the shore, in the gravel, just to see if I would break through on this side, like it does in the water, but I never did.”

“Interesting,” Tommy said, “so it’s not that simple.”

“Simple?” Jake asked, “What could be simple about this at all, I have no idea what’s going on here. You think you know what’s up in the world and what’s down, then it turns out there’s a whole other world where up and down are switched but nothing’s backwards.”

“You said it,” Tommy said, “I wonder if there’s anyone who’s found anything like this before, I might try to suss it out,” Tommy said, the understanding already coming between the two of them that this was not something to be shared outside their friend group.

Jake continued the walk along the shore, showing Tommy where they stood when the car went by, where they hid, the forest being much lighter on this side, when they heard voices, where they passed and what direction they went in. They turned to head back, but saw only one person on the shore.

They jogged up and Tommy said “Hey, did she already go through?”

“Yeah,” Karen said, “what were you two doing over there?”

“I was just showing him where we went and what happened,” Jake said, “on the other side.”

The walkie talkie clicked. “I’m through,” it said in Aemilia’s voice. “I think we’ll walk around some, over.”

“Okay, over,” Karen said into the receiver. She looked back up at Jake and asked, “Do you want to take a look at our samples?”

“Oh shit,” Jake said, and a smile lit up his face, “I completely forgot!” He ran the three steps over to his backpack in the gravel and unzipped it, pulling out the three baggies full of gravel, leaves, and it looked like the third one was full of water.

“I got a water sample,” Karen said, “I thought it might be useful.”

Jake barely registered what she said, he was staring down at the sample baggies. At the *very normal looking* sample baggies. They looked so normal when he pulled them out, at first he didn’t realize what was wrong, but then he remembered what they looked like on the other side. But in these bags were normal grey gravel, normal dark brown and black leaves and twigs, and normal clear, if a little murky, water. Nothing was bright orange, like he imagined Martian dirt to be.

He turned around to Tommy and Karen, holding two baggies in one hand and the third in the other, and walked over. He handed the leaves baggies to Tommy and the water baggie to Karen, and said “I thought they would be orange.”

“I suspected as much,” Karen said.

“Did you?” Jake asked, suddenly feeling very slow.

“Well, I thought it might be possible, after we saw the car go by. Do you remember seeing the headlights on the car?”

“Yeah, it was weird,” he remembered, the pavement changing to black in front of the car as it drove past.

“The car headlights were shining normal headlight color,” Karen said, “which is white or yellow, probably, and that lit up the pavement, which means that the pavement is normal colored pavement too, it’s just the light that’s all orange.”

“But why would the light be all orange and nothing else is,” Jake asked.

“I don’t know,” Karen said, “maybe something’s wrong with their sun?”

Jake blinked twice. He hadn’t even thought of the idea that this other world could have a sun. “Do you think they have one, like, a sun and a whole universe and all that?”

“Probably,” Tommy broke in, “the Earth is only the way it is because the solar system is set up in a very particular way. If our moon wasn’t here, things would be very different. The same goes for the Sun. They think even Jupiter does something like sweep up all the asteroids that would

normally hit Earth, so if that wasn't there, it would be asteroid impacts all the time."

"And things were almost the same over there," Jake said to himself.

"What *were* the differences," Tommy asked, "anything you can remember?" He looked at both of them.

"Well, the benches on this side of the pond were gone," Jake said.

"The light was all orange," Karen said.

"The patch, in the water, was blue, and a little glowy," Jake said.

They both thought for a second, then Karen said "The people that walked by, I think they might have had something on their faces."

"Or something wrong with their faces," Jake said, the idea of a pig-snouted person coming back to him from some forgotten television program.

"Or that," Karen said, "but there was *something* going on, I could tell, because their voices sounded all muffled," she put her hands over her mouth and nose, "like this."

Karen mentioning the muffled voices brought back the sense memory of hiding from them in the woods so strongly that Jake suddenly remembered something else.

"The air," he said, "it smelled a little smokey."

"Yeah," Karen said, "like a campfire, or your clothes after being near a campfire. Not like the air was full of smoke."

“Hmm, interesting,” Tommy said, “and it was smokey the whole time?”

“As far as I can remember,” Jake said. Karen nodded.

“Well that could explain the muffled voices, they could have been wearing masks,” Tommy said, then shrugged, throwing his hands up, “but I don’t know.”

“Do you think it’s safe for us, for them to be over there,” Karen asked.

“You said the smell wasn’t very strong, I can only assume it’s safe? But maybe it isn’t safe to breathe all the time, like they would if they had to live over there.”

“If we wanted to explore further,” Jake said to himself, “we would probably have to get masks of our own, to disguise ourselves.”

Karen and Tommy both looked at him. “Do you mean further down the street?” Karen asked.

“I mean further into the neighborhood,” Jake said, “assuming there is one, that is. It’s still hard to believe that there could be a whole rest of the world out there.”

“I have masks,” Tommy said, his face looked introspective, “at home. Dad brings all kinds of stuff back home from the hospital, I swear there’s a box of blue doctor’s masks at the top of the closet.” He gave it a second’s more thought, then said, “I think I’ll run home and get some real quick. Don’t leave if they come back, I want to go through and explore too.”

With that, Tommy took off toward the break in the trees without a look back, they barely had time to wave to him before he was around the bend.

“Huh,” Jake said to Karen, “I guess he really wants to go through.”

“Can you blame him,” Karen said, “everyone else has.”

They eventually made their way over to the fallen tree, where they received check-ins from Justin and Aemilia, who were exploring the shore of the pond at the radio’s limit. Through crackling static they told them that, indeed, the dark shapes further down the shore were benches, just like on this side. Sometimes Jake looked up to the pond shore further off and felt like he should see them somehow over there, but they weren’t. In a way, they were very far away indeed.

Ten minutes later, Tommy rounded the corner and, after surveying the scene, ran over to them at the fallen tree. Out of breath, he said “I got ‘em,” and patted his backpack, which had been bouncing wildly behind him on the way over.

“What’s been going on,” he asked, sitting down on the log, catching his breath.

“Not much, they’re heading back now,” Karen said, “so you can go over in a minute.”

“Okay, good,” Tommy said, but a bit of a worried look crossed his face for half a second.

“Justin’s about to cross,” Aemilia’s voice said out of the receiver, much clearer now, and not a second later they

watched as Jake rose up through the water and, with only one stumble, walked up onto the pond bottom.

Justin walked over to the group at the fallen tree, letting the line fall from his hand, and said “That’s a goddamn trip.”

“How was it?” Tommy asked.

“It’s weird, real weird,” Justin said, blinking his eyes over and over again, “I swear the orange gets to you. I feel like my brain’s full of it now.”

“Is anyone else coming over,” Aemilia asked through the walkie talkie, “or should I pack up.”

Karen picked up the handset and said, “Tommy’s coming over in just a second.”

“Oh good,” Justin said, “well here you go,” and started stripping off the raincoat.

After they exchanged raincoats and boots, Tommy splashed the two feet over to the patch and looked back at Jake, Justin, and Karen on the shore. Jake mimed pulling the rope, in reference to the guide they had given him on how to make it across, and Tommy nodded, then looked back down at the patch of brown. His strange humped silhouette, from putting the raincoat over his backpack, fell over into the water, and after a kick of feet on this side, he was through.

A few seconds later, Aemilia’s voice came through, “Okay, I’m heading back now.”

“Wait, wait,” they could hear Tommy’s voice far off through the walkie talkie, “you’re going back?”

“Yeah,” Aemilia answered, “It’s eerie, and I kind of want to be back where everything is the right color again.”

“But um,” Tommy said, “don’t you think we should have two people on this side, you know, for safety.”

Aemilia’s voice, now louder from speaking directly into the handset, said “Does anyone else want to come over again?”

Justin, Jake, and Karen looked at each other. “I was just over,” Justin said.

Jake understood Justin’s reticence, it was nice to be back in the world where you knew what should be going on. It was almost like you were prepped for danger every second on the other side. Looking at Karen, he knew she wouldn’t speak up either.

“I’ll go,” Jake said, not really loving the idea. Tommy had been his longest friend, his best friend, and he could remember the handful of times that Tommy had freaked out when he thought he was lost, or alone. Once, during a camping trip with Tommy’s dad, they had found him bawling in the undergrowth a few feet away from where he had gone to pee, he hadn’t been sure how to get back and thought he was lost forever.

“Anyone, hello?” Aemilia asked through the handset, and Karen said back “Jake said he would go.”

“Okay good, I’ll be right over,” she said through the handset, and not ten seconds later she splashed up through

the patch, landing on one foot, and walked over to the group without missing a beat. She almost made it look easy.

Aemilia took off her raincoat and handed it to Jake, and he looked confusedly at it.

“It’s a girl’s raincoat,” Karen said, the fact dawning on her again that they had brought one set of boy’s rain gear, and one set of girl’s.

“Oh,” Aemilia said, with feigned surprise in her voice. Jake could see in his mind’s eye how she’d thought of this on the other side, and just hadn’t cared.

“That’s fine,” Jake growled, and hurriedly put the raincoat on. Aemilia, a little surprised look on her face, kicked off the rain boots, and handed them over to Jake too, which he stuffed his feet into. Now, clad in many colored polka dots, he stomped out into the pond, feeling a fool, feeling like he was going to kill Tommy when he got over there.

Jake picked up the line by his feet and tried to emulate Aemilia’s graceful transition. With one foot on the edge of the patch, he put one foot out, loosened his hand on the rope, and pitched forward. As he splashed through to the other side, he kicked his leg down into the soft pond mud and gripped onto the rope, levering himself against his stiff leg to make it out all the way without falling back in.

This time, he checked, his pants weren’t any wetter than their already dampened state, and he felt confident that next time he would be able to keep a dry pair the whole day. He looked up in the orange twilight, if it was twilight, and saw

Tommy turn from pacing to watch him emerge out of the water. He was gripping the handset in both hands.

Jake dropped the rope and walked over to the shore. “Hey,” he said, and Tommy visibly untensed.

“It’s good to see you,” Tommy said, “it’s so weird over here, I don’t think I could stay alone.”

“No, I think it’s a good idea to stay in twos,” Jake said, giving Tommy an easy out, “safer that way.”

“Yeah,” Tommy said. Jake started taking off his raincoat, and Tommy followed, not having removed it since he got over. They threw them both in a pile, then Tommy took off his backpack and set it on the gravel beside the black walkie talkie case, and kneeled in front of it.

“I brought these,” Tommy said, and held up a dark blue, almost purple, piece of cloth with strings to Jake, “doctor’s masks.”

Jake took the cloth, which felt more like paper, and asked, “how do I put this on?”

“Like this,” and Tommy demonstrated how to tie the strings behind his head to cover up his mouth and nose. Jake followed suit, and they were both masked up with the dark squares.

“I also brought this,” Tommy said, his voice muffled through the mask, and took out a thin, handheld flashlight. He turned it on and where the beam struck the ground, everything was turned back into its normal color.

“Oh man,” Jake said, “you have no idea how good that feels.”

“Oh, I know,” Tommy said, and clicked off the flashlight. “It’s good to know that some things are normal over here after all. It might just be these clouds,” he motioned up, “or something, that’s making the light like this.”

“Could the sun be burning out?” Jake asked, which was a theory he had been thinking up over the past few minutes.

Tommy thought a moment and then said, “maybe, maybe.”

“So what’s your crazy plan,” Jake asked.

“I thought we would go over there,” he motioned to the break in the trees with the floppy walkie talkie antenna, “and then we could walk up the street, and see what we can see. I think we should only go as far as we can remember though, in case this neighborhood is different than the one on the other side, so we won’t get lost.”

“Okay,” Jake said, not liking one part of the idea, “but that isn’t going to work past the treeline.” He pointed to the walkie talkie in Tommy’s hand.

“Yeah, well, if we go to the right at the intersection, we may be able to get some more distance out of it, since we’ll be coming closer to the…” Tommy paused, “the gate?”

“Portal?” Jake suggested.

“No, that sounds too magical,” Tommy responded, “the… hole.”

“The hole?” Jake asked skeptically.

“Yeah, why not?”

“Well, it’s brown on that side, so...”

“Oh ew,” Tommy said, and they both laughed. “Well whatever it is, we’ll be closer to it, so maybe we can still get signal for a bit.”

“Okay, okay,” Jake said. His main objection, he realized, had been exploring more in this place at all, but after their break in seriousness, it didn’t seem so bad anymore to be over here again. “Let’s head out.”

They walked over to the gap in the trees, for Jake his second time, and stood on the side of the road, looking at the intersection. “It really does look just like real life, doesn’t it?” Tommy asked.

“It does,” Jake said.

Tommy lifted the handset up to his face and pressed the button, “we’re going to walk down the street, to the right of the intersection. The signal may cut out, so don’t be alarmed.”

“Okay,” Karen’s voice came back over the receiver, “stay safe you two.”

Jake and Tommy looked at each other, their mouths covered by the dark blue square masks, and both started walking on the road to the intersection. The air didn’t smell as smokey under the mask to Jake, and as his eyes got more and more used to the orange light. He started to feel like this place wasn’t so different to the other side after all.

They crept up to the right side of the tree line and peered around a trunk, down the street. It looked amazingly gloomy, the red light solidifying into a red mist as the street went on, reminding Jake a little of the mist in the early morning when he went fishing. On the left side of the street were a line of houses, exactly where houses were on the normal side.

As prepared as he thought he was for signs of human habitation, after seeing the car drive by and the supposed people walk by, it was still a shock to him to see the houses. Somehow it seemed like people shouldn't permanently live here, that people should only ever pass through, not set up residence.

"Are those the same houses as on the other side," Tommy asked in his muffled voice beside him.

"I don't know," Jake said, "there *are* houses there, but I don't know if they're the same ones."

Tommy looked up across the intersection, and Jake followed his eye line to a street sign, the normally green placards looking nearly black in the orange light, mounted on the same square metal pole drilled with holes that they used on the other side.

"I'll be right back," Tommy said, then, looking left and right down the intersection, he ran over to the street sign and looked up at it.

As Tommy was squinting up at the sign to try and make out what the words were in the red gloom, he registered a rushing sound coming from the left side of the intersection.

He and Jake both looked down the intersection at the same time and saw a car approaching, the headlights making the asphalt turn back to black in front of it. Jake had just enough time to look back up at Tommy, who had frozen in place, before he moved into the trees to his back to hide from the car. Jake watched in horrid fascination, unable to help, as the car approached the intersection, with Tommy frozen in fear on the other side.

The stop sign was on the cross-street of the intersection, and the car just rolled on through. They heard the sound of its engine and tires on asphalt for a few more seconds more as it disappeared into the red mist down the street, then it was completely gone. Jake stepped over a branch and out of the woods, letting go of a breath he didn't know he'd been holding. Tommy walked back across the intersection.

"That scared the bejesus out of me," Tommy confided when walked onto the thin grass at the side of the road.

"Me too," Jake said.

"But I got the streets, Wilcox and Lakeview, the same as on the other side. Which means that these *are* the houses on Wilcox, somehow," Tommy said.

"Do you think that... the same people live in them? After what Karen heard?" Jake asked.

"I'm not sure, not everything's the same, right?" and he waved his hands around, indicating the red sky.

"Yeah, not everything," Jake responded, "want to start?"

“Yes,” Tommy said, and they walked up a couple of feet to the intersection and then turned onto the sidewalk leading right on Wilcox.

The red mist seemed to retreat in front of them, a hundred feet up the street or so, as they advanced, revealing new houses as they went. Jake thought that the air didn’t smell wet and misty, it smelled very dry, smoky, and he wondered if the mist was more like a thin smoke. With each new house revealed, he tried to remember the look of them on the other side, but couldn’t. Either because of the eerie orangeness, or because they really *were* different, nothing looked familiar to him.

They reached an intersection and Jake took the turn automatically. While they had been walking, they hadn’t thought to check the radio, and by the time they were down the street on the second turn, they couldn’t get a response from the group on the other side. “Let’s not stay out of contact for more than ten minutes,” Tommy said, checking his chunky plastic digital watch.

A vague familiarity settled on Jake as he walked further down the street, and only when thinking back to their last turn did he realize that he had unconsciously taken the turn that would take him home. “This is my street,” he said to Tommy.

“I know, didn’t you mean to come here?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” Jake replied, suddenly frightened to run into some other version of his parents or, God forbid, himself.

“Do you think it’s safe?”

“Can’t hurt to take a look,” Tommy said, way more nonchalantly than Jake felt.

The house numbers counted down beside them as they advanced, and then, without any fanfare, they were at 132 Pineview Court, Jake’s house. He knew the cul de sac would be further down the street, but he couldn’t see it through the mist, or smoke. He took in the house in front of him. It looked half familiar, half not. Half familiar because it was a house with the number 132 on the front, on the right street, with all the normal trappings of a house. But half not because it could have been any other house, there was no path from the front door to the driveway for his mom to yell at him about, the siding was a different texture and, he supposed, a different color too. Different style front door, and he had never seen *that* car in the driveway before.

“It’s not the same,” Jake said to Tommy, and Tommy nodded back. Tommy, who had been to Jake’s house a million times in his youth, could also tell that it was a completely different house.

“Let’s go back,” Jake said, feeling the clammy touch of unreality on his shoulder. The color wasn’t right, the smell wasn’t right, and now his house wasn’t right. He craved normality again, he wanted to just go home, to a place where his home really existed. He had the vague terror on him that if he got trapped on this side, he wouldn’t have a home to go back to.

“Yeah, I think we’ve found out what we wanted,” Tommy said as he turned around.

“What’s that,” asked Jake, turning around and beginning to walk with Tommy back down the street.

“How different, or the same, things are between sides,” said Tommy, “like, the streets have the same names, but the houses, or at least your house, look different. I would wager that all of the houses look different though. If you think about how a neighborhood sprouts up-”

“How *does* a neighborhood start?” Jake asked. He’d never thought of it before.

“My aunt’s looking for a house nearby, in another neighborhood, and my dad and I went with her a few weeks ago,” Jake said, “it’s the weirdest thing, there’s just empty streets with flat lots along the side, each one staked out with its dimensions and number. Some houses are built in the beginning, to attract people who just want to live in the place, but a lot of lots are set aside for people who want to build their own houses.”

“What’s that got to do with our neighborhood though,” Jake asked as they turned the first corner back to the pond.

“Well you can think of it in those two stages. Stage one, some company comes in, buys up all the land, cuts the roads and names them. Maybe they even dig out the ponds too, who knows. Then stage two, each person comes in and builds their own unique house in the neighborhood, or moves into one that’s already built. Clearly stage one happened over here the

same, since there's a neighborhood at all, but also since it has the same streets. But somewhere between stage one and stage two, things went different, and your house looks completely different than it does on the other side. Maybe the orange version of your parents and you don't even live there, maybe it's some other family, and you all live somewhere else in the neighborhood, or a different neighborhood entirely."

"Do we know *if* there's an orange copy of me though?" Jake asked.

"There might not be, I wouldn't know how to tell," Tommy said, as they rounded the corner and began walking down the street which tapered off to the pond.

"We could use a phone book," Jake said.

"Where are we gonna get a phone book from this side," Tommy asked.

"The library," Jake responded.

This got Tommy thinking, and he noodled it as they walked down the gravel shore. Tommy was still silent as Jake handed him a raincoat, and they both suited up, Jake picking up the tee ball bat and Tommy kneeling down with the walkie talkie in his hand, about to put it back in the black plastic case. He looked up.

"It's possible," he said, "it would mean talking to people, people on this side. What if we ran into ourselves there?"

"We could go at a time that we wouldn't normally go," Jake said, a new excitement in his eyes.

“It’s not like we really go that often even now...” Tommy trailed off.

He looked down at the walkie talkie and then pressed the button on the side, “we’re about to come back over now,” he said.

“Thank God, you guys almost gave me a goddamn heart attack,” Justin’s voice shouted from the speaker. “Where were you!? We’ve been trying to get in touch.”

“We walked down to Jake’s house, er, the place where Jake’s house should be,” Tommy said.

“What did you find?” Justin’s voice suddenly sounded intrigued, and much less irritated.

“We’ll tell you when we get back over,” Tommy said.

“Okay, just be sure to bring the rope,” Justin said.

“Will do,” and Tommy turned the dial at the top of the receiver and put it back in the plastic case, snapping the bulky plastic snaps on the lid and sliding it into his backpack. After he zipped it up and put it on over his raincoat, he turned back to Jake.

“It would answer a lot of questions,” he said, “they probably have newspapers there too.”

“It would be very informative,” Jake said, “but what if they really do look different, like, when we take off our masks, they can tell that we aren’t from there?”

“We’ll just do some reconnaissance,” Tommy said, “before we go in. They have those windows, you know.”

“Yeah,” Jake said. He walked over to the tree that they had tied the blue rope around and removed the stick from the bundle of lines, letting it unravel from the trunk. He carried the blue tangle back to Tommy at the pond’s edge, the line slackened in the water.

“You go first,” he said to Tommy, “and I’ll come right after.”

“Okay,” Tommy said, then “thanks, for coming over again. It was way scarier than I thought it was gonna be.”

“No problem,” Jake said, clapping Tommy on the arm. Tommy smiled, then turned toward the patch and walked to it. Grabbing the rope in both hands, he said out in front of him “see you on the other side,” and then took one step forward and fell into the patch.

Jake waited a few seconds, then walked over to the patch again. It almost felt familiar now, staring into another world below him, holding the rope, ready to dive in. It was funny, he thought, how he could get used to something so strange. He stepped out with one foot and rotated through the patch, grabbing the rope on the other side as it slipped through his hands, and used it to pull himself the rest of the way up. After he was balanced on the edge of the slightly green tinted world, he pulled the rest of the blue rope through the puddle and coiled it in his hands.

“Thanks,” Justin said as Jake handed him the coil of blue rope. Tommy was already telling the group about the same-named streets on the other side, making his way through the

story to where Jake assumed it would end at his extant, but different, house. Jake pulled the blue mask off of his face, crumpled it up, and stuffed it in his front pocket, and then traced the line of blue rope into the treeline with his eyes. It seemed to disappear into the bush, so he picked it up and tugged on it, following the straight line it made all the way to a metal stake at the base of a tree.

Jake looked at the stake with his eyebrows bunched up, confused by its presence. It was pitted and rusty, the blue rope going around it had already rubbed the deep red rust to a light orange on its base. It was angled back toward the tree, directly away from the patch in the water, making it an optimal anchor for their rope. After Jake loosened the slip knot and pulled it over the top of the stake, he grabbed the metal and tried to move it side to side. Nothing. *It must be planted deep in the ground*, he thought.

As Jake was trying to move the stake, he noticed a black band around the base of it. He touched the band, and it felt almost like cloth. Grabbing some foliage, he pulled the vines and leaves back from it, moving some of the loam with his hands. The band had a knot in it on the side facing the pond. Jake reached down to touch the knot, and realized that it continued toward the pond in a rope of the cloth stuff, less than the thickness of his pinky. He pulled the rope up, and the loam on the treeline pulled up too, continuing to the gravel. He walked the rope, pulling up as he went, the gravel bunched up and then broke in front of him, revealing more line buried

on the shore. Tommy's story had been interrupted right before he reached Jake's orange house, and they all watched Jake pull up more and more of the cord as he made his way to the pond's edge. At the edge, he gave a great yank up, and the black cord shot up from the mud in a line, pointing directly to the edge of the brown puddle.

“What the fuck is this?” Jake asked, turning around to look at the group, who were just as amazed as he.

Chapter 4

The discovery of the black line that led into the brown patch shook them all up, it meant, they thought, that they weren't the first ones to cross over. But from what direction they didn't know, all the line told them was that someone else was crossing. Was it another kid on their street? Was it an adult? Tommy suggested a government agency, but Jake didn't think so. He thought that if the government was involved, hell, if any adults were involved at all, this whole place would be roped off and under some big building.

Shortly afterward the sun got low on the horizon and it was nearly time to go home. They didn't continue on Aemilia's hike into the woods, even Aemilia knew real adventure when she stumbled upon it, even if it wasn't exactly what she was looking for. They sat on the downed log, side by side, discussing possibilities, trading notes on each of their experiences, until it was nearly dark.

"I think we should keep this secret," Tommy said, and the group readily agreed. They knew what would happen if anyone else got involved in it: it would cease to be their discovery, to be rapidly co-opted and taken over by someone else. The five of them swore a pinky promise, with a massive

wriggling set of pinkies in the middle of their circle, not to tell another soul about the patch, and only to enter it together. This last bit was tacked on by Aemilia, who sensed Justin's excitement to go again, and didn't trust him not to pull himself through after school one day when no one was around, since they found the black line.

They reburied the black line as best they could, putting loam and bush branches on top of it in the treeline, and patting the gravel down above it on the shore. As they got up to start walking away, Jake looked back over his shoulder at the patch, which was now invisible in the darkening light. He wondered how long it had been there, if there had been other groups of kids who had discovered it through the years. Did everyone know about stuff like this? Sometimes he was surprised by things, what others would recognize as common knowledge, but surprises of that kind were getting rarer as he got older. He remembered his last surprise like that, a couple years ago someone said the word illegal aliens, and he thought that he had somehow missed the arrival of extraterrestrial beings, only to be swiftly disappointed by an explanation of immigration enforcement.

* * *

Thoughts of the patch, and what was on the other side, seemed to come back to him when he least expected it. As the week wore on, he found himself daydreaming about his

expedition in class, imagining future ones to buildings, to meet the people in the orange land, research into the difference between the two places and what might have made the patch between them. The idea that it was made by magic was enticing to him, he had read books where wizards made portals between worlds before, maybe this was one of them. Maybe over there the cars were powered by magic, not gasoline. This was one of the many things he needed to find out about the other place.

Every day after school, the group invariably drifted over to the pond, instead of to the half-finished construction site with the flattened hill behind it. They spent their time sitting on the fallen log, walking around the edge of the forest, and all the while keeping the patch in eyesight. If he was put to a point by one of the others, Jake would say that he felt like he was guarding the patch, but deeper down, he was hoping to see someone come through from the other side. But with all of their hours of waiting, they never caught one traveler between worlds. What they did come up with, though, was a plan, a plan for a great expedition.

The seed of it was the insinuation that there might be a library over there, like there was a library here about a fifteen minute walk from the pond. They had each been to the library a number of times alone, and as a group a few times as well, and knew that you didn't need any kind of ID to browse the shelves, look at the newspapers, or read through a few books, as long as you didn't take them out. Their plan was, if that

was the case on the other side, they could buckle down and do some serious research on that world using the books *from* that world. There would be no home team this time, they all planned to go through the pond together, using the black cord left over by who knows who.

“What time should we start,” Aemilia asked on Thursday, sitting on the fallen tree. Tommy was sitting next to her on the log with a thick textbook from his backpack on his lap, with a piece of paper on the cover. The paper had a neat list of items written on it, the supply list they would need to all cross over together on their trip.

“We should go early in the morning,” Justin said, “that way we can be over as long as possible.”

“I can’t go early in the morning,” Jake said, “I’m.. I’ll actually be here, fishing with my dad.”

“Wait, here?” Tommy looked up.

“Not right here,” Jake said, “on that bench over there is where I usually fish.” He pointed down the shore to the closest freestanding bench.

“Can’t you move it,” Aemilia asked, “you sure fish an awful lot.”

“I fish a normal amount,” Jake said defensively, “and no, I can’t move it. Besides, even if I didn’t go, Mr. Lloyd might be here anyway, and that’s too close.”

“Right,” Aemilia said, “your senator friend.” Jake looked at her and his eyebrows crumpled in an annoyed expression.

“I have piano practice,” Karen said, “on Saturday mornings, so I can’t go either then.”

“Well we can’t go on Sunday,” Tommy said, “the library’s closed then.”

“What about Saturday afternoon,” Jake suggested, “Mr. Lloyd says that the fishing is no good after noon, so he’ll probably be gone by then.”

“I couldn’t imagine we’d need more than a few hours at the library,” said Tommy, “if we stay that long at all. I think the afternoon’s good, but we should start early, at like 1.”

“That’s fine for me,” Jake said, “Karen?”

“Me too,” Karen said, “I’ll be finished by then, and we can all meet here?”

“Let’s meet at that bench,” Tommy said, and pointed to the bench that Jake was used to fishing on, “just in case we have to call off at the last minute.”

“Well, now we have plenty of time for the next part of the plan,” Tommy continued.

“What next part of the plan,” asked Justin.

“If we’re going to compare worlds, then we’ve got to find out what’s going on in this world on that same morning, for starters,” he said, “we’ll do some other research too, flipping through history books, other books we’re each familiar with, but a significant section of time should be spent on the newspapers. That’ll show us the largest differences, I think.”

“Okay?” Justin said, not getting the point yet.

“So, on Saturday morning, some of us, but I think as many as possible, should go to *our* library and read the newspapers, taking as many notes as we can, to compare the other newspapers with.”

“Oh... aww man!” Justin exclaimed, feeling the full weight of the boredom of newspaper research descend on him. He thought that he’d be tinkering around with futuristic gadgets or something from the other world, not doing bookwork.

“Don’t we already do enough of that in social studies?” Justin whined.

“It’s exactly because we *do* do it in social studies that we should do it here, we already know how to skim papers for important headlines and take notes on the articles. Come on, it’s a good plan.”

No one would speak against it, but no one was nearly as excited about it as Tommy was. Even Karen didn’t look super thrilled at a day of doing homework, even if it *was* in the other world.

“Justin, Aemilia, can you meet at the library at 9?” Tommy asked.

“Ehhhh, ummm,” Justin muttered.

“Don’t shortchange me, can you or can’t you?”

“Fine, yes,” Justin said.

“Yes for me too,” Aemilia said, then under her breath, “if this isn’t the lamest expedition...”

“Okay, then we’ll break for lunch, and be there,” he pointed at the bench, “at 1.” He wrote these instructions

down on the same page as the list. Tommy planned to split up the supply list and notes for the expedition among the group, and imagined himself spending that night making copies of these, one for each person. He couldn't have been happier.

“Do you think it'll still be open by then?” Karen asked, looking over at the patch. Over the last few days, the brown color had faded to a gray, and it was almost indistinguishable from the surrounding water. Only orientation by the fallen tree and careful inspection of the water revealed it's slightly different ripple pattern.

Justin reached down and picked up one of the larger rocks in the loam, about the size of a golf ball, and threw it at the patch. The rock struck the surface with a high pitched splish sound and disappeared completely. Now that they had all passed through the weirdness of the patch, they could each imagine the rock on the other side, shooting up through the puddle, continuing on it's arc to the far side of the pond, and splashing down outside of the edge.

“I think it's the weather,” Tommy said, in response to Karen's unasked question. “I think the smoke or whatever it was that we smelled on the other side, might be clearing up, which would make the light different again, which would make the patch nearly invisible on the water. Maybe that's how it hasn't been discovered yet.”

“Well,” Jake said, and they all sensed his allusion to the black line buried under the gravel.

“Discovered by more people, I guess,” Tommy continued.

“If it’s not here anymore, we’ll just continue the hike,” Justin said, hoping that it wouldn’t turn out that way, “thataway,” he pointed to the left, on the opposite side of the pond from where they entered from the treeline on Sunday.

“I keep thinking it was all a dream,” Karen said, “like it can’t be real, that this just isn’t something that happens in real life. At least I don’t think it does. I keep expecting it to disappear, and there’ll be no proof of it ever having happened.”

“Oh, it happened alright,” Tommy said, “maybe it won’t be here forever, maybe it’s like weather or something, here today, gone tomorrow, but what we saw, what we experienced, it happened.”

Karen nodded, looking out at the water and trying to see the edges of the puddle. It was barely visible from her sitting position. She still couldn’t believe, in her heart, that they would all be able to cross over together that weekend.

The school week ended, they all sat next to the patch one final time on Friday, where Tommy handed each of them a bundle of papers. On the front sheet was an itemized supply list that each of them was personally responsible for. After some objections, Tommy shuffled items from some lists onto others, crossing out lines here, adding them there, until each person felt confident that they could procure the entire list, if not by daylight then secretly by moonlight after their parents went to bed. On the next page was a hand drawn map of the neighborhood, or at least enough of it to outline the traced

route from the puddle to the library, with intersecting streets and landmarks labeled. Below that was a step by step guide to get to the library and then get back.

Finally, on the third sheet, was a research schedule for each of them. This included, for some of them, pre-trip research at the library, and for all of them, a list of newspapers, magazines, and books to tackle, in order, followed up by “supplementary research”, which represented them trying to find whatever books they were familiar with enough from this side that they might notice any differences on the other side. Karen took great issue with this list, and most of their time on Friday at the pond was spent watching the arguments spin out between Karen and Tommy about which subjects were more important, which would give them a greater chance of finding differences, and what order they should be in. Finally, Tommy took each of their packets back and they both made corrections to every packet, crossing out the old lists and writing up the new schedules on the back. The last few sheets of paper in the stapled packet were for research notes.

Each of them took their packets and put them in their backpacks, which were loaded with the homework assignments each had accrued on Friday, due, of course, on Monday. As the sun began to set that afternoon, they headed off toward the place where the asphalt road disappeared into the gravel of the pond. Jake looked back after a few steps, but the patch was entirely hidden due to its recent change of hue.

When he got home, after eating a dinner of spaghetti and meatballs, Jake went up to his room and dumped out all the school items in his backpack onto his bed, he would need the entire volume for supplies. He moved a couple books around and pulled out the stapled expedition packet. As he read item by item, he went to different parts of his room, pulling out objects and putting them in the pack. After a while it became impossible to remember what items he had already put in there and which ones he still had to get, so he got a pencil out of his bedside drawer and started crossing off items.

The next up on the list was “snack bars (10)”. Under his bedside drawer was an empty cubby hole, normally stuffed with random odds and ends, but since last weekend it had the remaining pile of Nutrigrain bars, and he counted ten, leaving two, and stuffed them into his backpack. The remains of the list would have to wait until his parents were asleep, his mother wouldn’t take kindly to him pillaging the kitchen supplies.

After some shared TV time and playing his GameBoy, his parents eventually headed off to bed, and since this wasn’t a school night, they let him set his own bedtime, with a reminder from his dad that they’d be going out in the morning, so not to stay up too late. The rest of the supply list was easy to procure once they were out of the picture, and Jake tried to go to sleep after, but imaginings of their expedition kept flashing through his head; orange skies, smoky air, and a house not quite like his.

The next morning, Jake's alarm rang at an ungodly hour, but instead of groaning in the next room, he heard his father get out of bed too and start shuffling around. They dressed in tandem and met soon afterward in the upstairs hallway, Jake carrying his pole from his room, where his dad put a finger to his lips for quiet, and they both tiptoed down the stairs to the first floor. After they put on their shoes and jackets, Jake got the waxworm container out of the crisper drawer and they headed out through the front door.

Carter wasn't used to waking up this early and not going to work. His morning routines switched between early up and to work, and late up for the weekend, with no crossover between, so he couldn't remember the last time he'd appreciated the morning without being in a rush.

Well, appreciate isn't the right word, he thought as he put his hands in his jacket pockets against the chill. He couldn't believe that Jake had gone out here every Saturday morning for the last three weeks. *He must really love fishing*, Carter thought. Maybe this is something I should invest more time in.

The mist lay heavy on the street as they made their way down the middle of the pavement, then turned at the intersection and walked to the place where the asphalt gave way to native gravel shore. Carter was intrigued, looking out on the pond, at how the mist rose like steam from the water, and wondered if it was any warmer than the cold air, but hated the idea of getting his hand wet in this weather to find

out. He imagined grabbing a fish out of the water, and shuddered involuntarily.

They walked to the left, against the shore, and out of the gloom ahead appeared a dark bench, and a figure in a jacket seated on it, with a yellow raincoat draped over the back.

“Mr. Lloyd!” Jake shouted, and waved his hand above his head. George lifted his hand and waved back. Carter couldn’t believe it, a real presidential candidate, just sitting here on this bench fishing. He could see the thin black line of the rod between George’s hands, pointed up toward the pond, and looked side to side for secret service agents. *Maybe they’re in the trees*, he wondered.

“Senator,” Carter said, and George got up and shook his hand. “I’m a little surprised to see you here, after your announcement.”

“Well I’ve been coming here a very long time,” George said, “have you come to discover the joys of fishing with your boy here?”

“That’s right,” Carter said, “he can’t get enough of it, and I thank you for the company you’ve been giving him. Lord knows I couldn’t have taught him anything about it.”

“Nonsense, did you fish when you were a kid?” George asked. Jake was getting set up on the bench, sitting smack in the middle, and unhooking the small hook from the eye on the pole.

“Only a little, with my brothers,” Carter said, going back in his mind to those days when they fished in the farm pond,

his oldest brother finally giving him a chance with the rod.

“Well, nothing’s changed,” George said, and chuckled, “you pick it up easily enough again. There were years when I didn’t fish, as a younger man, but I seem to have gotten back into it over time.”

“Well I would certainly enjoy seeing Jake reel in a few today,” Carter said, and sat down to the right of Jake.

“I think we’ll have a good day,” George said, and sat back down on the left, “it just feels like one of those days.”

Jake opened the styrofoam container and looked into it, puzzled for a moment at the lack of movement. He fished his fingers around inside, turning up a few of the waxworms, but they were all still. George looked over and saw his puzzled look at the still box.

“Are those the same ones from last week,” he asked.

“Yeah,” Jake answered.

“Keeping them in the fridge will make ‘em last longer, but I’d be surprised if they made it a week in there. They’ll work just fine still though, fish don’t care. But don’t put ‘em back in the fridge today, they’ll stink up a storm.”

Jake nodded and picked up one of the slightly curled worms, which looked like a skinny cashew in the wan light, now that it wasn’t moving, and threaded it onto the hook. Carter watched, journeying back in his mind to those hot summer days of his youth.

That morning Jake caught five bluegill, and Carter even caught one when he asked Jake for a turn with the pole. As the

sun got higher and the mist burned off, the fish slowed down, then stopped completely, and by eleven in the morning, when they hadn't gotten a bite in twenty minutes, Jake suggested they pack it up. Carter, who had already stripped off his jacket and laid it on the back of the bench, was relieved, the day was fixing up to be a hot one. When they left the pond, they both waved at George, who was still sitting on the bench, and he waved back.

Without Carter to wake her up, it was impossible for him to truly sleep in, even on the weekend, Anita had gotten a late start to the morning. If tradition served, she thought they would be coming in at about eleven thirty, maybe earlier given the forecast for heat today, and she started fixing up breakfast for lunch. Jake and Carter entered the house to the sound and smell of bacon and eggs frying away in the kitchen, and they all sat down and had breakfast together. Anita noticed that Jake kept checking the time, and asked him "Do you have somewhere to be?"

"Me and the gang were going to meet at one," Jake said.

Anita, inwardly amused at his usage of that holdover phrase from Scooby-Doo, looked at the clock again for the time. It was noon.

"I think you have plenty of time," she said, bringing her cup of coffee to her lips to conceal her smile. This instinct for punctuality had been peeking through for the last few months, a little here, a little there, and seemed to be getting stronger over time. What at first was amusing caused a chill

in her stomach, *this is what it feels like to watch your child grow up*, she thought. She had thought that thought again and again through the years, and it never got any easier.

A couple minutes later, with a restless tattoo of leg jiggling from Jake, he excused himself from the table and ran upstairs, where they could hear him rummaging around in his room.

“Do you know where they’re going today?” Carter asked.

Anita shrugged, “I’ll call Carol, see if she’s driving them anywhere.”

Jake had stuffed all his supplies into his backpack, which was now fit to burst, and came down the stairs. The pack made a strange rubbery squeak with every step, from the raincoat and rainboots inside. Anita, recently informed by Carol that, as far as she knew, they were going on some type of trip in the woods, heard Jake open the closet door, get out his shoes, and then stomp each one on. She walked over to the door and looked at her son with the giant backpack.

“Where are you all going,” she asked.

“Oh, just hanging out, you know.”

Anita opened the front door for him. “Well be safe,” she said.

“I’m always safe,” Jake replied, as he ran out the door.

“Mmm hmm,” she said to the back of her secretive child.

* * *

Jake was the first one to get to the pond, partly out of fear that the group would stumble on George and somehow get so embroiled in a conversation that he'd never go away. But rounding the corner, he could see that George wasn't at the bench anymore, and made his way over to that same bench to sit and wait for the others.

Karen came next, and after recognizing that it was Jake who was sitting in that agreed-upon meeting place, she made her way over and sat down next to him. She too was carrying a large backpack that squeaked at every step.

"How was your piano," Jake asked.

"Good, how was your fishing," she responded.

"I caught a lot, my dad even caught a couple, which seems crazy, because I don't think he likes fishing."

"You were right here?" Karen asked.

"Yeah, on this bench," Jake responded, "it seems weird, like two different worlds—" and then caught himself, and smiled.

Karen laughed, "Yeah, I guess it would, wouldn't it." Then she looked over past Jake toward the water and asked, "have you seen it yet?"

"No, want to go?" Jake asked. Karen nodded, and they got up, leaving their backpacks on the bench seat. There were a few other people at the pond, on the other side, feeding ducks or just sitting. Jake thought they were far enough away to not think it strange that two kids were going over to investigate a patch of water for seemingly no reason.

Jake looked out into the water but couldn't see any disturbance. He turned his head to the left and saw the fallen log coming up on the side. Looking out again, he still couldn't see anything. They stopped in front of the fallen log, and Jake looked hard at the surface of the water, a couple feet off the waterline, where the patch had been before. At first he thought it wasn't there, that Karen's fear had come true and the doorway had closed. But then, barely discernible to the eye, he could see a faint outline of different small ripples that were almost travelling in a different direction from the rest.

He pointed to the patch, "I see it, you have to look at the ripples."

Karen stepped forward to the edge of the water and peered hard at the surface, then said "Yeah," with a sigh of relief.

They walked back to the bench and sat down, watching the people on the other side of the pond. One by one, as the sun got higher, they left, some scattering the rest of their breadcrumbs on the water for the ducks and geese. With the departure of the last stranger, Jake felt a sense of relief wash over him.

"Do you think there will be people like that on the other side," Karen asked. This was the first time that Jake imagined the people on the other side might be similarly easygoing to the people on this side, and he said "I don't know, maybe we'll have to look before going through."

At that moment they both caught a group of people moving toward them out of the corner of their eye and they

turned to see Tommy, Aemilia, and Justin walking in from the break in the trees, with Tommy in front waving. He seemed to be in high spirits, especially compared to the other two trailing behind, who looked like they just got out of history class.

The group approached Jake and Karen on the bench. "I was a little worried that there would be people here," Tommy said, looking from each side of the pond to the other.

"I think it's too hot," Justin said, shading his eyes and looking up at the bright blue sky above.

"Is it still there?" asked Aemilia.

Jake took them over to the waterline and pointed out the boundary of the puddle, and how you could barely see it when the ripples from the breeze on our side hit the ripples on its surface.

"Interesting," Tommy said, "it blends in almost completely. This must be what it looks like normally, no one would see it, I think."

"I think so too," Karen said, "did you get the research you wanted?"

"We did," Tommy said, "I think we'll be well prepared for whatever we find on the other side this time, even though some of us came in late," and he shot a pointed look at Justin.

"S not my fault" Justin said.

"Mmm hmm," Tommy replied, "anyway, we're all here early, wanna get ready now?"

“Sure,” Jake said, and they moved off, each one with their backpack full of supplies, to the treeline, where they took up respective spots on the fallen log and started pulling out and putting on their rain clothes. Justin had to pull out half his pack just to get to his boots, but eventually repacked everything with his shoes on top. They each packed their shoes into their packs, judging by the color of the patch they thought it might look inconspicuous if they were traipsing around in rain clothes on a bright spring day.

Tommy looked around and, judging everyone almost done with their suiting up, unzipped a pocket on the side of his backpack, a monstrosity from the swiss army knife company with too many pockets all over, and pulled out a green plastic tube with curved bits at either end.

“I’m going to check if the coast is clear,” he said, and walked out of the tree line and to the water line. He looked right and left before walking the two steps over to the edge of the patch, and leaned down, scraping the pond mud with his fingertips. After a second, he found the cord still there, buried in the mud, and lifted it up so it would sit on top. He swished his hand around in the water to clean it off, then he took off the top curved bit of his plastic pipe.

It was a toy periscope he had gotten for his birthday a year back, which had been good for a couple days of peeking around corners and over hedges, but then had fallen to the wayside to make room for other toys. This, however, was its time to shine. He squatted at the edge of the patch, extended

the telescopic joint, put the uncapped end of the periscope to his eye, and dipped the other curved end into the patch. He rotated it a little left, a little right, getting a hang of the flipped image in his mind, and then swiveled it around in a circle, taking in the whole upside-down pond.

Standing up, Tommy said, “the coast is clear.” He swung his pack around to his side, collapsed the tube, capped the uncovered end, and put it back in the side pocket. He turned around and, satisfied that everyone was coming out of the tree line, waved his hand, bent over, picked up the line again, and took his step over the threshold to the other side.

“Oh, I guess we’re going now,” Karen said, and Justin marched up to the edge of the patch, picked up the line, and was over too. In two minutes, all five of them had made it over, and Jake, standing on the water’s edge of the other side, was surprised at just how much it looked like their native side of the puddle.

The sun was likewise shining down hot from a light blue sky, and white clouds scuttled overhead. After seeing it twice already, his initial fear that they would forget which side they were on was allayed by the missing two benches on this side of the pond. He could still see the slight depression in the gravel where he had taken a sample last week, now sitting inert on his bedroom dresser top in a ziploc baggie.

While there was no fallen tree for them all to share on this side, back a little ways from the treeline, now not so dark at all in the normal light, was a big rock, and they each took

turns, two by two, in switching out their rain boots for their normal shoes, and stuffing the boots and raincoats back into their packs. Curious, Jake kicked around in the loam at the edge of the rock, and eventually found a metal stake, which, exploring with his fingers deep in the moldy leaves, also had a thin cord wrapped around it.

The five of them gathered in the light on the gravel shore and Tommy handed out blue surgeon's masks to each of them. "Let's wear these until we spot someone who isn't wearing a mask," Tommy said, "if that is what they were wearing. It might make us stand out less."

Each took their mask and tied the straps around the top of their heads and the back of their necks, then they set out across the shore. Turning onto the road that lead to the pond, Tommy had the route already memorized both ways. They walked down streets, taking turns at his direction with him double checking signs to ensure the accuracy of the drawn map. No streets were named differently though, and after several turns and around fifteen minutes, they were walking on the final street, with the library visible on the side ahead.

As they were walking a few houses ahead of the library, they saw a person exit, look out at the street, and turn away from them before walking away. "Masks off," Tommy said over his shoulder, and each of them untied the straps, Justin having an especially difficult time undoing his knots. From what Tommy could see that far away, it didn't look like the person had a mask on, probably because the sky was normal

colored, whatever that meant, or that the air didn't smell like smoke. *Maybe they're connected*, he thought. Something to find out.

They approached the library doors as a group, with Tommy in front. He put his hand on the handle and could see people milling around inside. He looked back at the group and said "here we go."

Jake and Aemilia nodded, and Tommy opened the door, crossed the vestibule and opened the second door to the main library. For a nightmare moment Jake thought he saw the faces inside warp and shift into pig noses, but that was just the glass distortion, and as he forced himself to continue walking nonchalantly into the library; he saw that everyone looked normal. It smelled normal too inside, like the smell of old books and cleaner, just like the library they had all been to so often on their side.

Tommy led them over to one of the group work tables, a circular table with six rolling chairs around the perimeter, and put his backpack on the surface. They each followed in kind and he whispered "get your packets out." With some difficulty, each of them pulled their packets out, in various states of crumpled-ness, Jake's a little wet on the corner from contact with his raincoat, and zipped up again.

Tommy leaned in conspiratorially, and they all followed suit. "Okay, you all have your assigned topics, we're looking for differences between here and... there, so write down anything that looks even the least bit suspicious, because we

can cross-check it later on. And make sure to list the book it's in too." They each nodded around the table, and he said, "Okay, break!"

Jake initially followed Tommy, Aemilia, and Justin toward the side of the library with the newspapers, which, funnily enough, was the same side as on their library. But as he passed by the bored looking woman scanning returned books, he couldn't quite tell if she was familiar or not. He veered off at the last moment to the oceanography section, his first assignment was anything having to do with the discovery of the Titanic wreckage, with which he was only passingly familiar. He picked up a book that seemed like it would be useful, "The sea remembers: shipwrecks and archaeology from Antikythera to the rediscovery of the Titanic." From the title, he flipped to the back half of the book and started turning pages, looking for any full color photographs of the rusted handrails and red stalagmites that he was so used to seeing. After a bit, he realized that this wasn't that kind of book, and resigned himself to reading the bold chapter headers as they came up.

Finally, he got to the section on the discovery of the wreckage of the Titanic, but skimming through the chapter he couldn't catch anything that seemed off from how he remembered it from the special he had watched on TV years ago. He wrote down the title of the book in his notes sheet, closed the book, replaced it, and moved on to the next topic, which was Ancient Greek History.

Every so often, looking up from the book he was perusing, he would find Karen or Justin in the same aisle as him, and they would wave, then each go back to their research. After what felt like hours of topics, crossing off each one in turn, he had discovered only a handful of irregularities, if they were that at all, between the notes that Tommy had written and what he had found in books. For example, in a book about the rise and fall of rigid body airships, in which he was looking for references to the Hindenburg disaster of 1937, as per Tommy's notes, he instead found that the popular consensus was the airship era was ended in the burning of the Graf Zeppelin in 1937. He could find no mention of a Hindenburg ship, except for the Hindenburg class of airships.

At about this time, while he was sitting in the aisle writing down the title of the book on airships on his note paper, a woman's voice behind him said "Can I help you with anything?"

Startled, Jake turned around to see a woman with a smiling face leaning over behind him. He recognized her as one of the people behind the front desk as he had come in, she must work at the library, he thought.

"Oh no, I'm doing alright," Jake said, suddenly nervous at giving himself away as a sort of spy.

"What are you working on?" the woman asked.

Now really nervous that he would be found out, he made up a fib at lightning speed, "Uh, school project. History class..."

“I remember those days,” the woman said, with a look about as fond as he would imagine he might have looking back on school assignments from the future. “Well if you need any help finding anything, feel free to ask at the front desk, or use the terminals to the side.”

“Oh, thanks,” Jake said, and tried out his biggest smile. Luckily, she smiled back, and walked over to the end of the aisle. Terminals, Jake thought, closing the book on airships and replacing it upside down on the shelf. He walked to the end of the aisle, the side across from the front desk, looked left at the entrance, and then right. There was a cutout in the wall leading to a room that he was unfamiliar with from the library on the other side.

He walked toward the front desk, then around the right side and saw a room whose walls were lined with computers, maybe twelve in total across the three walls of the room. Tommy and Karen were already at one of the computers, staring into the big curved screen which lit up their faces, Tommy pecking out letters on the keyboard one by one.

Karen heard Jake approach, and turned with a look of fear on her face, but recognizing him, she waved him over. Tommy didn't, he had a set of headphones on, and as Jake got closer, he could see that Tommy was engrossed in watching a video on the TV. No, computer screen. But computers didn't play videos, the best you could get was the blocky animations in games like Oregon Trail, right?

He moved beside Karen and they watched the soundless video that Tommy had just pulled up, what appeared to be some kind of program outlining how Oreos are made. Jake tapped Tommy on the back and Tommy nearly jumped out of his seat, barely holding back a scream.

Tommy took the headphones off, “Hey, what’s up?”

“What’s this?” Jake said, engrossed in the images flashing across the screen. It really was like a small TV program inside the larger monitor.

Tommy turned back and hit the space bar, which made the TV program pause, which in turn made Jake’s eyes get even wider. “It’s YouTube,” Tommy responded.

“You Tube?” Jake said, then thought for a second and said, “TV for... you?”

“Yeah, looks like it,” Tommy said, turning back to the screen and motioning Jake over, “but you can choose what to watch, look,” and he pointed to the side of the screen, where there were several images of TV programs lined up vertically.

“I can click any of these and it plays,” Tommy said, and clicked one seemingly at random on the side. The screen went white, and then loaded up again, this time with a black rectangle in the middle, which started playing the new program.

“That’s sick,” Jake said, and then, remembering where they were, asked “is this... new?”

“Definitely new,” Tommy said, and whispering “I’ve never seen something like this before, have you?”

“Nothing like it,” Jake said, leaning down conspiratorially.

“And that’s not even the weirdest thing,” Jake said, and he took the mouse and moved it up to the top of the screen, where there were other buttons with text in them. He clicked on one and the content of the screen was quickly replaced with a bunch of text, with a weird puzzle sphere in the top left corner.

“There’s an online encyclopedia,” Tommy said.

“Online?”

“Yeah, it’s what they call things in the computer, but it has news and articles on everything. I don’t even need to get references from the books in the shelves, I can look everything up on here. I’ve already burned through my and Karen’s list, what have you got left?”

Jake handed his list over to Tommy, who looked through the crossed off items on the front and then flipped a page back to read the notes Jake took on each entry.

“How long have you been here?” Jake asked Karen.

“Twenty minutes or so,” she said, “it’s amazing, isn’t it?”

“I’ve never seen anything like it,” Jake said. Tommy had moved back to typing on the keyboard, the research list open on his lap.

“Can you type fast,” Karen asked Jake.

“No,” he responded, watching Tommy’s fingers peck lightning fast at the keyboard.

“Me either,” she said, and smiled, “it’s faster just to let Tommy do it.”

“Yeahhh, that sounds right,” Jake said, catching on to her plan. They looked down at Tommy, and seeing that he was still engaged with the research list, each moved to the computer on his side, and woke it up.

One by one, each member of the group was sucked into the terminal cubby, and eventually all five of them were on computers side by side. Tommy had long since burned through each one of their research packets, and had moved on to supplementary information gathering, filling out his notes sheet and then requisitioning each one of theirs in turn for more space. Karen, from what Jake could see when he leaned back to take a look at what everyone else was doing, was perusing what looked like Discovery Channel programs on You Tube. Aemilia and Justin helped ease his guilt, all three of them had collocated on a page that had as many computer games to play as they could ever want. Jake had never seen game graphics so good, watching his stick men fight each other on the screen. The Super Nintendo system at home seemed like a hunk of junk compared to what he was watching play out in front of his eyes.

In what seemed like no time at all, a chime went out over the small intercom system, “It is now five fifty, you have ten minutes to check out any materials before the library closes.” Jake looked up at the intercom box, surprised at the announcement, and then looked at the time box at the top of his screen. It really was five fifty, he had spent over four hours sitting in front of the computer just now, and it had

seemed like nothing. He looked around at the group, Justin hadn't noticed the announcement, and Tommy was drowning in a sea of loose paper written over with notes that he was trying to organize sheet by sheet. Jake felt intensely guilty at the fact that he had squandered away the time they should have been doing research.

He closed down the main program he was using, which he had found out was called the Internet Explorer, and pushed away from the computer on his rolling chair. Suddenly disengaged from the screen, his eyes began to relax, like they had been holding a tension all day that he wasn't aware of.

He reached back and picked up his pack, then walked over and touched Tommy on the back "shouldn't we get going?"

"Huh?" He looked at the clock in the upper right of the screen, "oh yeah, sunset." Tommy closed his program down too, and one by one they roused the rest of the group from the glowing reverie of the computers. Looking around at the dormant monitors, Jake couldn't have imagined that he would be entranced by a computer for so many hours, but that was before today, when the games on computers were oh so much worse than the games on the SNES.

They each got their packs back on their backs, Tommy taking some extra time to redistribute everyone's packets back to their owners, with pages of extra content for him to stuff back in, and filed out of the cubby and to the door. The lady that helped Jake was at the counter now and she waved at

Jake, and he waved back as they went through the door to the outside.

On the walk back, which luckily Tommy had memorized because none of them had their maps out, they huddled in a three wide group and discussed what they had all found. Tommy had mostly checked out historical inaccuracies, and anything related to the rise of the Internet, which Jake had heard of a couple mentioned times before on their side of the puddle. Karen had been perusing what educational programs she could find on You Tube, but she admitted shyly that she had mostly fallen into searching for entertainment value. With that admission from one of their strongest, Jake, Justin and Aemilia shamelessly extolled the cornucopia of games that could be found in the Newgrounds program, games that were way better than anything they had ever seen on *their* consoles. Eventually the talk turned almost entirely to the games, what each one was like, and arguments about which one was best.

Eventually, after a few turns, which Tommy took without thinking, they arrived back at the pond. There was no one there, and the sun was getting low in the sky, casting the clouds above in a light orange tinge, but not at all like the sky the first time they'd come over, owing to the blue sky on the horizon. They walked over to where they thought the puddle should be, which is where Tommy stopped and asked "where is it?"

Each of them looked out to the pond, two feet away from the shore, and scanned the water right and left. Jake's heart jumped in his chest, was it really gone this time? Justin reached down to pick up some gravel, and started throwing pebbles into the water, trying to listen to the sound they made, if any of them sounded different than the others.

In this way, with five sets of eyes combing the surface of the water, they advanced down the shore. "I should have marked the location," Tommy said. Last time they had the blue rope hanging out of the puddle to guide them, but this time they had used the thin black cable, which was still hidden under the gravel of the shore, making it impossible to see from any distance.

Jake was scanning the pond surface, scanning the trees, scanning the shore behind him. He had the distinct feeling that in their perilous situation, they were ripe prey for anything to sneak up on. What he was afraid of, even he couldn't describe. On one of these visual passes, he noticed a familiar large rock in the trees.

"Guys, there," he said, "there's the rock we sat on." He pointed at the rock, barely visible behind the treeline now in the fading light, and followed the line of it straight into the pond, "which means the puddle should be there."

"I can't see it," Justin said, his voice sounding half-crazy with fear, which wasn't helping everyone else's nerves.

"Let's suit up," Tommy said, "we can't find it without getting in the water anyway."

They all moved over to the tree line, two of them leaning against the rock at a time to put on their rain boots. After the group got ready, looking for all the world like the misplaced crew of a crabbing boat on the north Atlantic, they walked down to the shore. All five of them stood in a line against the water and Aemilia said, in a defeated voice, "I still can't see it, it's too dark now."

Tommy, who had taken his flashlight out of his pack while he was changing, shone it on the surface of the water and slowly walked forward into the pond. They watched him take baby steps, sweeping the light back and forth until, on a sweep in front of him, half the light on the bottom of the pond disappeared. Tommy jerked the flashlight back to that spot and explored the edges of it, not remotely circular, but very familiar looking to each of them.

"It's here," Tommy said, "Jake."

Jake walked the two steps up to Tommy, unafraid now after seeing where the patch was. Tommy gave him the flashlight, swung his pack around to his front, and unzipped a pocket on the side. "Hold this for me while I look through, to see if the coast is clear."

Jake nodded and Tommy got out the plastic periscope. When he dipped it into the water, it looked to Jake like he was dipping it into a mirror, the black pond surface reflecting the orange-going-on-pink clouds retreating from the sun above them. He turned it around once, twice, and then extracted it again.

“Coast’s clear,” he said, replacing the periscope in his pack. Then to Jake, “would you light up the patch for everyone and come last?”

“Yeah,” Jake said, uncomfortable with the idea, but knowing its necessity. If Tommy went through with the flashlight now, they would never find the patch again without falling straight into it. From Jake’s experience, it took a pretty precise foot placement to make the non-embarrassing version of the cross over. Pretty much any other placement let you make the embarrassing one.

His hands free, Tommy reached down into the mud, searched from left to right, and pulled up with the black line, which raised up to the shore, where it went under the gravel. He stepped forward, pitched down, and disappeared into the puddle with a splash.

“Next,” Jake said. Each of them went in turn, Jake shining the light at the front edge of the puddle. The line was easy to get in between turns, it floated nearly to the surface from the slack of the last person pulling themselves up on it. Karen was the next to last person to go through, and Jake reached down and picked up the black cord after she fell into the puddle, clicking off the flashlight in his other hand and putting it in his front pocket. He looked around at the rapidly darkening pond and... was that a *person* standing next to the treeline?

Jake stood as still as possible, instinctively bending his knees toward the water. Could he be seen against the background of the trees, or was it too dark? His flashlight was

just on, would the person guess what happened if he went through now? Was there even a person over there? He wasn't sure now, with every second the light was fading, and the dark treeline took on a blobbier shape. Were they standing there, next to the break in the trees, or were they somewhere else now? He scanned the treeline, but he couldn't be sure he saw anyone anymore. Maybe there was no one at all, *just a tree*, he thought. In any case, if he couldn't see them, they couldn't see him, right? Was that correct? He looked back behind him, making sure that the trees on the other side of the pond were dark too, that would give him the greatest chance of blending in with the background. When he turned back around, there was no chance anymore of seeing anything on the shore, it was completely featureless. Hoping he was making the right move, he straightened up, put one foot out in front, and fell forward into the pond with the line in his hands.

The figure moved out of the treeline once it saw the boy's dark silhouette disappear against the mirror of the cotton candy sky. There was no doubt about it, he had gone through. The figure stood staring at the ripples rapidly dying on a faint patch of water, considering the implications.

Chapter 5

After they all got back over, Tommy collected their packets and spent all of his Sunday cross-referencing and collating. Here's what they found: the other side was very nearly like their side, but just a little different. The differences went back years and years, small ones that ended up making medium-sized changes going forward. For example, the airship that crashed on this side was the Hindenburg, not the Graf Zeppelin. How such a change, which was the furthest back they could find, affected the historical record, it was hard to say. The copy of the New York Times that Tommy copied out on the other side, and his parents' Saturday copy at home, were about half matching. But all the inconsistencies were small, boring, just one inconsequential article instead of another one, beside the same major headline.

One change was pretty noticeable though, apparently even for their side before they took the dive: a vast quantity of the midwest had just finished burning in a huge plains fire when they went over on Saturday. Tommy speculated to the group, later that week, that that was what caused the orange sky and smoky smell, even all the way over in Maryland.

Another difference, but he wasn't sure how large yet, was in technology. They had computers on their side, every one of the group had used them in school, but they were pretty expensive. On the other side a public library could just have walls of them, and there was this thing called the Internet. After some digging, Tommy found references to the Internet on this side, optimistic articles even described it as eventually being what he witnessed on the other side, but right now it certainly wasn't anything like what they had experienced.

A difference Tommy was grateful to see, and one of the first he checked for, was their parents' lack of entries in the local phone book on the other side. Well, almost complete lack; Justin's parents, or at least people with the same names, were listed, but their zip code was different from the one that contained the library and the pond. Since Karen's mention of people that sounded familiar on this side, he had been worried about possibly running into their twins, like in a time travel movie, and what kind of effect that would have. But it seemed like that was a moot point, for all intents and purposes they didn't have copies on the other side, at least not locally anyway.

It was early June when they went through to the library, and the school year was getting ready to wrap up on their side. The next week they had end of grade tests in each class, EOGs their teachers called them. Jake thought he did well, or at least felt like he did, in all of them except history. From the complaining he listened to, he assumed that Justin didn't

think the same. Their grades, they were told, would be mailed to their parents over the break, which filled Jake with no small measure of anxiety. Earlier in the year he had gotten a C in that same subject, and his dad had locked up the SNES for a month, which would have made sense, he thought, if they actually helped him study for a month. But that help only went on for a week, so for the remaining three weeks he had to try and force himself to study, unsuccessfully, while longing for the halcyon days of being able to play the SNES in the living room after school. Who knew what kind of cruel punishments his parents could come up with over *this* summer if his grades came back unsatisfactory.

The group moved their hangout spot back and forth between the cut off hilltop and the edge of the pond, the puddle was still hardly visible against the surface of the water unless you looked for it specifically. The next Saturday, after Jake fished with George, this time without his father, they suited up again. Without the big packs this time, they went through one after the other and booked it to the library, where they put in a solid five hours on five side-by-side computers in the nook. After getting that hit of Adobe Flash, they were hooked, except for Tommy and Karen, who continued to do at least a nominal amount of research.

During the last week of school two things happened. One, the teachers slacked off considerably, and they were allowed to watch “educational” films in class, which amounted to discussions of how ancient Baghdad might or might not have

been as portrayed in Aladdin. Two, a change took place in Jake's mind, and unconsciously he considered the entire puddle-side world as contiguous to the pond. While he might have logically known this fact before, the unconscious acceptance of it wrought a titanic shift to his mental model of the local geography, putting his house, formerly central in his mental map, very far to one side of a symmetrical and non-euclidian new map.

He noticed more and more mentions of George on the TV, for which he always ran downstairs to watch when he heard that familiar voice. Apparently he was on the campaign trail, hitting city after city in his presidential bid. The newscasters predicted he was a shoe in for the debates coming up in October, but to Jake that was a long way away. The entire summer laid between now and then, gloriously hot and long, and he would be in middle school afterwards. He tried to push away the thought that George would be gone for good then, it just didn't seem possible that a person could keep all that travel up.

After school on Friday, the last day of the year, the group walked to the cut off hill top, which now seemed much less spectacular than it did two months ago. As they put down their backpacks, loaded with the contents of their desks, it dawned on each of them that the school year was finally over, and the summer had finally come. The weather had been getting hotter and hotter, and up on the hill it would have nearly been uncomfortable if not for the cool breeze.

“Did you ever get your yoyo back?” Jake turned and asked Justin.

“No, that bitch stole it, I swear she sold it months ago,” Justin replied. The yoyo in question had been confiscated right after winter break by their homeroom teacher and had never been seen again.

“That’s too bad,” Jake said, not really feeling it. It was too nice of a day, too nice of a time in life, to be upset. Tommy had already thrown the first dirt clod against the tree, Karen was lining up to throw a fastball directly to it.

“Damn,” she said, as the rock flew off into the dry underbrush, making a paper rustling noise all the way down the side of the hill.

“Nice try,” Tommy said. Aemilia took up her spot next with her chosen rock, whipped it around a couple times in a softball pitch and let it fly. It zoomed off course and hit the tree next to the target, ricocheting into the underbrush to the side.

“Out of the park,” Justin said.

“Fuck Off!” Aemilia screamed, wheeling around to stare daggers at Justin, and the group went silent. Nobody moved, nobody made a sound, Justin looked down to the ground. Nowadays Aemilia went off like nitroglycerine, at the slightest touch and with devastating power. It was never a sure thing when it would happen, but after Justin’s failed attempt to give like-for-like the previous week left him

battered and bruised, they had adopted the current policy of stillness and silence.

Aemilia's eyes, which were bugging out of her red face, turned to Karen, who was looking at her with a pleading, if not worried, expression. Aemilia's anger deflated, she picked up another rock, threw it overhand, and smashed the clod on the tree. And just like that it was over. They never lasted long, but like a volcanic eruption, they had the possibility of being apocalyptic.

To Justin it was very much like the fights between his parents, and triggered a certain type of rage in him, at first. But much like his interference in his parents' fights, he had been quickly reduced to a silent, flinching observer. He wasn't sure how much he liked hanging around with Aemilia any more, this wasn't the kind of familiarity he was bargaining for.

Jake was spinning his wheels trying to figure out what to say to break the sheet of tension still over the group, when Tommy said "what's that?"

He was pointing to a tree farther back into the forest, one with a patch of lighter wood on the side. Tommy walked out first, followed by Jake and Justin. Karen and Aemilia stayed behind and watched the boys try to climb the tree trunk to get a better look at it.

"Aemilia..." Karen began, but the boys were coming back now, and she cut off the sentence that even she didn't know

how she would finish. Justin came up the dropoff first, onto the flat hilltop and proudly declared “it’s a bear.”

“It’s a what?” Karen asked, not believing she heard him right.

“There really are bears here,” Justin said, almost not believing it himself, “it’s a bear mark, where they sharpen their claws.”

“Really?” Karen asked.

“Yeah,” Justin said, as the others came up over the edge, “I saw the same thing in a book.”

“I wanna see,” she said, and Justin took her down the slope again to show her up close.

“I guess he really was right,” Jake said to Tommy, “unbelievable.”

“Well, he was always right that there are bears in the state,” Tommy said, “but yeah, I can’t believe there *is* actually one here, in this forest.”

“But how big is it really,” Jake asked, “we were going to find out, when we stumbled on the puddle, but is this forest connected to other ones or something? How would such a thing even get in here?”

“I don’t know, bears can cross roads and stuff,” Tommy opined, “but I don’t know about crossing cities or anything like that. Maybe we should continue the survey.”

Aemilia looked over, and Tommy continued, “we could start from the pond this time, save ourselves an hour, and continue on. Wherever that goes.”

Aemilia didn't respond right away, in fact she was trying to figure out if this was some sort of pity party, Aemilia's special trip. But in the end she didn't care if it was, she wanted to continue the trip she started weeks ago before it was so radically interrupted. They spent the rest of the day, until the sun got low, talking about bears, throwing rocks, and planning the hike the next day. When they finally split up at the first intersection after the rapidly filling-in housing development, she was looking forward to it.

Chapter 6

The alarm sounded and Jake's arm slammed on the big bar on the top. His parents had gotten him an electric alarm clock two weeks ago, ostensibly to replace the horrible, impossible-to-go-back-to-sleep-from sound of ringing bells. This clock even had a volume control for the alarm, Jake was suspicious that this was in fact the main feature, and he was pretty sure that his parents hadn't even woken up, he couldn't hear any noises coming from their room. He dressed in Friday's clothes, grabbed his pole and quietly headed downstairs.

In the fridge, now in a specially marked drawer, so his mother would know never to use it again, was a brand new small styrofoam box of waxworms. His father said it was just more economical to buy the small size, since he only fished once a week, and after his trips he dumped out the rest of the unused worms in the mulch between the bushes in front of the house. He grabbed the small container, no bigger than a pack of cards, and went over to the front door, where he picked up a windbreaker and left the house.

As they left spring and entered into summer, the mornings became less foggy, and Jake walked down the street in relative clarity. Already the mornings were less chilly, and the

windbreaker, which swished with every step, was enough to keep the chill out. Rounding the corner to the pond, he again saw the strange phenomenon of the steam, or fog, rising from the top of the water. He briefly wondered if it was some kind of effect from the puddle, but dismissed it as he turned left down the shore.

George was already there with his familiar yellow coat slung over the back of the bench, the rod in his hand out over the gravel shore, pointing toward the water. He looked up at the approaching footsteps and waved. Jake waved back and sat down in the seat beside him.

“Carter’s not coming today?” George asked.

“No,” Jake said, his dad hadn’t come along in weeks, “he said it’s too early for him on a Saturday.”

“Yup, that’s what all people who don’t like fishing say,” George replied, “that’s too bad, I enjoyed his company. But the morning is fine, and the fish have been a’biting.”

Jake hurriedly set up his rod and cast out into the pond, and not thirty seconds later a bluegill latched onto the line. He had long since gotten used to the weird feeding patterns of the fish, how sometimes they could seem like a roiling mass under the water, just waiting for your hook to fall in, and others they could be completely cold, but the speed at which he caught this first fish surprised him.

George laughed at his expression and Jake reeled in the fish, taking pleasure in the fight that even such a small one could provide. After he unhooked it and threw it back in, he

cast out again. They sat, in their usual places, silently waiting for another bite.

“Say,” George said, “what is it you usually do on the weekend, after fishing that is?”

“Oh, me and the gang,” Jake had regaled him with stories of his group of friends in the past, “we sometimes go out to the mall, if someone will drive us, or play games at someone’s house, or sometimes go exploring around the neighborhood.”

“You know,” George said, “I heard there’s bears in the woods. It might not be as safe as the weather warms up.”

“That’s alright,” Jake said, “they’re black bears anyway, those aren’t the dangerous kind.”

“Are they?” George asked, then tried to remember which ones it were that were dangerous. He couldn’t find the information in his head.

“What do you do after fishing,” Jake asked.

“Sleep!” George said, and they both laughed. After he recovered, George continued, “I really do nap, but afterwards I might read a book, it’s quiet now that the kids have moved out, so me and Marie spend a lot of time in the house by ourselves.”

With George’s progressing presidential bid, it was impossible for Jake not to overhear snippets about him, his record in the senate (boring) or his personal life before that. Something the newscasters never seemed to get enough of, and so even Jake, who just caught the leading or trailing ends

of the coverage, had heard, was the story of his wife's death to cancer decades ago.

Jake wasn't quite sure how to respond, he had heard old people sometimes talk about people that weren't there like they were, but he didn't know that George was one of *those* kinds of people. "Mmm" he said, and stared at his bobber in the pond.

Minutes passed, then Jake said, "I didn't know you had kids."

"Oh yes, David and Rebecca. They're all grown up now. David has one of his own, Rebecca two, so three grandkids in all." George paused. "What I look forward to most nowadays is when they come over to visit. I'm hoping for a nice long vacation this summer," George said, and smiled at Jake.

"They never talk about them," Jake said, "the news I mean, they never talk about your kids."

"Oh, yeah, well I always tried to keep them out of it all, for their privacy," George said, "it's no way to grow up, in the spotlight all the time."

"Hmm," Jake said, not really understanding. He thought it would be nice to grow up famous, but maybe if you had no mom it was different.

"Do you have any recommendations," Jake asked, trying to move the conversation back.

"Hmm?"

"For books," Jake continued, "the summer's here, which means there's a lot of time, to do anything, really. But if you

have a recommendation, I would love to read it.”

“Alright,” George said, and thought for a minute, “have you read Harry Potter yet?”

“No, I haven’t heard of it.”

“That’s pretty good. It’s about a boy who finds out he’s a wizard and goes to wizarding school. David Jr. got a kick out of it, and he’s about your age, so you might like it too.”

“Harry Potter,” Jake said to himself, trying to remember the name for a future expedition to his own library.

“Yeah. Have you read the Chronicles of Narnia yet,” George asked.

“No, but I’ve heard of them,” Jake said, “some people in my grade have read them.”

“That’s a good series too, I really enjoyed them when I was a kid, so you may find them to be a little old,” George said, “but I *think* they’re still good.”

“Okay,” Jake said, flagging that series in his mind for another look. Tommy had already read it, and the Lord of the Rings books, and the way he described them always made them seem so dry, but perhaps he would pick up a copy in the library to see what they were like.

The rest of the morning went like that, small talk being traded every so often between the two of them, until the sun came up high in the sky and Jake realized that he needed to run home to be able to meet everyone for their new expedition. He hurriedly said goodbye to George and ran off

with his box of waxworms in one hand and his pole jiggling wildly in the other.

His main contribution to the hike, like last time, like every expedition they went on, would be to bring a cornucopia of nutrition bars that they would never eat, and which he offloaded into the cubby under his night stand afterwards. Once he got home, he scooped up a few handfuls of these and stuffed them into his emptied-out backpack, and ran out the door.

The rest of the group was already at the pond, and Jake ran up to join them with his backpack swinging wildly from side to side on his shoulder. None of them, except for Aemilia, had a backpack on, and he sort of felt like the mule of the group, carrying everyone's snacks.

"Come on," Aemilia said, and turned to the left, "let's go."

They walked down the gravel shore beside the pond, past the benches, and each one of them tried to spot the puddle across from the fallen tree, but only Tommy thought he saw the outline from walking speed. They passed the puddle by and walked on to the point of the pond that they judged was directly opposite from the point they entered weeks ago.

Aemilia took out a pink ribbon from her pack and wrapped it around a tree. "Alright, let's continue on," she said with a smile on her face, and they followed her into the shaded woods on their exploratory trip, leaving the pond behind.

As they went on, Aemilia in front, she cut more lengths of pink ribbon and tied them around the trees they passed. The

air in the forest was cooler than the air on the edge of the pond, for which Jake was grateful. After the morning, he had changed into a short sleeved t-shirt, and the day was almost too hot even for that. The loam which had been perpetually underfoot in May had now transformed into dry crispy remnants of leaves from last fall, and their footsteps had a faint rustling sound to them as they stepped over fallen branches and around bramble patches.

“Hey look,” Justin said, and pointed out a line of denuded ground, “is this a trail?”

“Hmm, maybe,” Tommy said, looking at it. It twisted between trees and off into the distance, hidden by the foliage after forty feet.

“Probably a game trail,” Karen offered, “like where deers go to find water or whatnot.”

“Want to follow it?” Jake asked Aemilia. She was looking at the trail, deciding between roughing it in the underbrush and finding something new, or following a trail but maybe still going somewhere new, somewhere that only deer had been before.

“Yeah,” she said, “let’s follow it.”

She left a pink ribbon on the tree behind them and they set off on the trail, which they could barely see, in single file. The walking was easier here, the foliage had either been pushed to the side or trampled on, so they had to do neither. Jake asked Karen questions about game trails, but she soon admitted

that she was mostly familiar with the phrase, and not so much with the actual item itself.

The trail seemed to go on and on, and eventually they got hungry, and for the first time Jake got out his packed bars and distributed them amongst the five of them. They all sat on the ground, roughly to either side of the trail, and each ate two of the bars, apple cinnamon. Once they were done with their snack, Aemilia declared, “let’s go a little bit more, then turn back, so we can get back by dark.”

The group nodded, and Jake was relieved, he was starting to feel tired from roughing it all day. They got up and continued down the trail, the sunlight making it down to the forest floor in little pools and puddles.

A low wooshing noise came from ahead, which Jake faintly recognized.

“Do you hear that,” Tommy asked.

“Yeah,” Karen said. Aemilia had stopped ahead with her arm up in the halt position, right ear forward to try to get a better read. She changed the gesture to a move-forward, and they crept up slowly. The forest looked like it was lightening up ahead, and Jake realized what was coming right before they came out of the woods onto a sidewalk.

“Oh,” Tommy said, looking to the side at Aemilia’s face, trying to judge her reaction, “maybe this forest isn’t that big after all.”

Aemilia sighed, “yeah, maybe not.”

“Where are we?” Justin asked, and Tommy looked left and right for an intersection. There was one close by to their left, and he motioned them all to move in that direction.

“West Elm and Edgebrook,” Tommy said, looking up at the green intersecting signs, “I don’t recognize these, do any of you?” They all shook their heads.

“We must be a long way off... which makes sense,” Tommy said. “Now the question is, should we go back through the woods, or take the streets in the general direction of home?”

Jake looked back, realizing that they hadn’t tagged the tree where they came out onto the sidewalk, and couldn’t discern exactly where they had come out of the forest. That, and the possibility of navigating home from a long distance from who knows where, caused him to speak up first “let’s take the streets.”

“Yeah,” Justin said, “let’s continue.”

Tommy looked around and everyone was nodding, including Aemilia. “Alright, then I think that we should go... this way.” He pointed left down the intersection. “I think we came from that direction, and this road borders the forest.”

They set off, with Tommy in front now, down the street, and almost immediately came to another intersection that Tommy had to guess at their next steps on. They went from intersection to intersection like this, Tommy increasingly trying to half-ass compass directions from the sun’s position, and rapidly getting nowhere. He was just about to break down and suggest that they get directions from a

passing car when they came to a street sign that said Pineview Ct.

“That’s my street!” Jake said, and relief visibly broke over Tommy’s face. “But which way do we go,” Jake continued, and Tommy looked down both ends of the street.

“Well it can’t be too far in either direction, I don’t think..” Tommy trailed off.

“How long can roads be,” Justin asked.

“Not more than a few miles?” Tommy looked around, no one had an answer to that question. “Alright, let’s go this way,” he pointed to the left nearly at random.

As they walked down the street, the sun was starting to get lower in the sky. It would be night in a couple more hours, but Tommy felt good after finding Jake’s street. Only a matter of time now, he thought, until they ran into familiar scenery again.

He wasn’t wrong. About twenty minutes of walking down the street, they ran into their first semi-familiar intersection, then another, then another, until they found the intersection where they waited for the bus every morning, and split up after the day’s activities were over.

“Man,” Justin said, kicking the intersection sign, “I never thought I would be so happy to see this goddamn sign. The year couldn’t end fast enough.”

“I don’t even want to think about that bus,” Jake said, “while we’re not at school. You’re ruining it, Justin.”

“Oh shut up,” Justin shot back, and kicked the street sign again, then gravitated over to the rest of the group.

“What’s up for tomorrow,” asked Jake, “what’re we doing?”

“I don’t know about you,” Justin said, “but I’m busted tired. I don’t have it in me for any more adventures tomorrow.” Jake looked around, that seemed to be the general feeling around the group.

“Okay,” he said, “then let’s meet back on Monday here, at the normal time.” The normal time, to all involved, meant the time they normally got there for school, which, to their soon-to-be-sixth grade bodies, didn’t feel like an ungodly early hour of the morning yet.

Nodding commenced around the group, and he and Tommy and Justin split off one way, Aemilia and Karen the other way. On the way home, they talked about their surprise at finding the game trail, how hungry they were now for dinner, and a little disappointed about the conclusion to the expedition.

“I guess the forests around here are just patches,” Tommy said as they neared his intersection, “I thought they would connect to bigger forests, but I guess not. Unless they go off in other directions or something. Maybe I can find a map tomorrow,” he said, then turned off and started walking down the perpendicular street. “See you Monday.”

“See you,” Justin and Jake said together, and continued the short walk to Justin’s intersection.

“Hey, here’s a question,” Justin began, looking more sheepish than normal, “what do you think’s eating Aemilia?”

Jake mulled it over in his mind for a few seconds, then came back with, “I don’t know, I don’t know, but she sure blows up, doesn’t she.”

“Like dynamite,” Justin said, “it sort of reminds me of being around my dad after a ‘bad day’. No one drop anything, no one make any loud sounds, or the whole house could blow up.”

“Why ‘bad day’,” Jake asked, and imitated Justin’s air quotes.

“Well because that’s what my mom used to call them, but now it’s pretty much every day, so I don’t think you can call it that anymore. ‘Bad month’ maybe.”

“Maybe she didn’t do so hot on the EOG’s,” Jake suggested, calling the end of grade tests by their colloquial term.

“Maybe,” Justin said, “but I swear if she hits me one more time, I don’t care if she’s a girl, I’m gonna haul ass on her.” Jake doubted if Justin could ‘haul ass’ on Aemilia, since she had a good three inches on him, but he even more didn’t want to see it happen at all. It was pretty shocking to all of them when Aemilia went off and started battering him last week.

“Yeah well, I’ll back you up,” Jake said, smiled, and elbowed Justin, “you know, it’s always safe to have backup.”

“You gotta loosen up,” Justin said, turning off at his intersection. “I can take her,” he yelled, then waved and

turned to go up the street to his house.

Only when he was alone did Jake realize how disoriented he was, he couldn't seem to get a grip on exactly where he was in the journey. Probably from all the forest walking, he thought, and looked up to the street signs to judge his progression.

One set of crossed signs passed by, two, then he was at the intersection on his block. Jake smiled, it would be good to get home, the creeping sense of unease and alienness, probably from having to navigate all the way back home from the forest, was getting to him. He instinctively went by house number, 126, 128, 130...

Here was 132 Pineview Ct., but at the same time it wasn't. This wasn't his house at all. In fact, it looked like...

Jake swung his head from side to side down the street. He didn't recognize *any* of his neighbors' houses. He looked up, blue sky, but it had been blue for the last couple of weeks, right? When had they crossed over? He didn't remember going into the puddle today. He had a sense before that it might be too easy to forget which side you were on when the sky was blue, but now he was *sure* that it was too easy.

Jake spun around, the small pebbles making a crunching sound between his shoe and the asphalt under him, and ran back to the intersection where he left Justin. Justin's house was closer to the intersection, right? He tried to remember as he ran. Would Justin have gone all the way home, gone into a

strange house that wasn't his? Or maybe the house at his address did look like his house, they hadn't checked.

Jake's lungs were burning as he approached the intersection, and he could see someone standing next to the street sign. The person looked up, and Jake immediately recognized Justin. He spun out the run on the rest of the way, coming up to the intersection huffing and puffing.

"What the fuck man, I mean goddamit," Justin said, "that wasn't my house I went into."

Jake looked up from where he had put his hands on his knees to catch his breath and wheezed out, "You went in?"

"Well yeah, it was my house. But everything was different inside, I knew it wasn't redecorating or anything. The walls were different. I high-tailed it out of there before anyone could see me. But boy am I glad to see you here, I didn't know what to do."

"I know," Jake said, not wanting to say what came next. "We have to run back and get everyone before they go home."

"Uh, I don't think we'll make it in time."

"Then we have to *drag* them out," Jake said, "and get back to the other side."

"Okay, let's go," Justin said, and started running back along their path to where they broke with Tommy. Jake, hating himself, started running again, liquid pain shooting through the bottom half of his lungs, and his calves beginning to burn.

By the time they got to Tommy's intersection, Jake's calves were on fire and he was gasping for breath and coughing up thick spit. Justin was the worse for wear too, clutching a sharp stitch in his side, but luckily no more running needed to be done at the moment, Tommy was also standing at the street sign.

"Thank God," Tommy began, "I thought you might come back. I think we crossed over somewhere along the line."

"You *think*," Jake tried to say sarcastically, but it came out as a wheeze.

"Yeah," Tommy said, mistaking Jake's death-rattle as sincerity, "I don't know where, but maybe there's another portal somewhere in the woods?"

"Whatever," Justin said, standing up from his bent over position, gasping, "let's get the girls and get back."

They lived further away from the stop than the rest of them, Jake's mother once said that Karen lived on the edge of the district, and they thought they had a chance at catching Karen and Aemilia before they got home. Jake, wanting to die, willed himself to at least jog along the sidewalk, while Tommy ran ahead and Justin only slightly behind, feeling the burn. Two intersections up, Tommy looked right and stopped, leaning on the street sign.

Justin caught up to him first, and from the distance Jake could only see Tommy point down the perpendicular road, and Justin resumed his hands-on-knees posture. Jake came up last, the jog not draining him as much as the run before,

but not helping anything either, and he started coughing up thick mucus as soon as he slowed down. He glanced in the direction that Tommy had pointed in a few seconds ago, and saw a small girl running with her hair flying behind her just on the other side of the intersection.

Karen shot across the intersection with only a quick peek in either direction, and nearly collided with the group on the other side. “You have no idea how happy I am to see you,” she said to them, “you know we’re on the other side?”

“Yeah, we know,” Tommy said, “but I can’t figure out how we got here.”

“It must be a vertical puddle,” Karen said, “somewhere in the forest, we probably passed through without even knowing it.”

“How could we not know it,” Justin said, “we would have had to flip upside down.”

“Maybe not with a vertical puddle,” Karen replied, “like a mirror on the ground, the sky looks like it’s deep down, but if you stand it up on edge, everything is right side up again. Maybe we passed through something like that.”

“There would be almost no telling where it could be along the way,” Tommy said, “but we know how to cross over again.”

“We’ve got to get Aemilia,” Karen said.

“Shouldn’t she be coming,” Justin asked, looking down the road that led to Aemilia’s turn, “everyone else ran back fast enough.”

“I don’t know,” Karen said, not getting that Justin was trying to save himself more running, “maybe we can get her before she even makes it home, let’s go.”

“UGH,” Justin groaned, and started jogging alongside Jake, where they quickly fell behind Karen and Tommy as they ran ahead. “I’m going to kill them,” Justin said between breaths, “they’re too fast.”

Jake and Justin could see Karen and Tommy stop a couple of intersections up, the intersection you would turn right on to get to Aemilia’s house, and look down the street. They waited there for them, Karen shuffling from side to side with a nervous energy that Jake had never seen in her before.

When Justin and Jake finally jogged up, huffing and puffing, Karen said “That’s her house, but she’s not here,” and pointed to a house a few up from the intersection that they all knew from experience.

Not just where Aemilia’s house should be, this one was *actually* Aemilia’s house, at least from the outside. Unlike Jake’s house, it seemed like other people had copies of their houses on this side. He was glad that he hadn’t accidentally gone into a fake house to find a different inside than the one he’d left that morning.

“Do you think she went inside,” Tommy asked.

“I don’t know,” Karen said, “would she know the difference?”

“My house was all different inside,” Justin added, “but the same outside.”

“So you went inside?” Karen spun around on Justin.

“Yeah...” Justin said, surprised by Karen’s intensity.

“We have to go get her out,” Karen said, and she started off across the intersection. “Come on!”

The three of them followed, Justin and Jake now perpetually out of breath and resigning themselves to that fate. Karen walked up the street and stopped in front of a house three deep, Tommy walked up to stand beside her, and Justin and Jake hobbled to join them. The house they were staring at was definitely Aemilia’s house, and the lights were on inside against the rapidly descending dusk.

“How can we get her out,” Tommy asked.

Karen thought for a second, then said “let’s go around the side, maybe we can see her through one of the windows.”

They crept around the side of the front lawn, up to the house, and slipped to the left side of it, against the painted aluminum siding. They made their way across the outside wall up to a window at just above head height, if Jake remembered correctly, the window next to the dining room.

“I need a boost,” Karen said.

“I’ll help,” Justin replied, and moved over to brace his back against the siding with his legs bent in front of him. The siding made a little creaking sound when he leaned against it, shifting against some kind of plastic backing, but that was all. Karen grabbed hold of the windowsill above her and put her foot on Justin’s bent knee.

“Thanks,” she said softly, and then pushed herself up a couple of inches until just the top of her head was above the sill.

“Do you see her,” Tommy asked.

“No, she’s not there,” Karen said, “it really does look just like her house inside- wait!”

A few seconds passed and then Karen continued. “She just came into the dining room with her parents. They’re about to sit down for dinner.”

Karen brought her hand up to the window and started making furtive waves into the lighted glass. The light spilled out of the house and onto Karen’s face, and he saw it turn down in a puzzled expression. “She’s not coming out.”

“She can’t see you,” Jake asked.

“No, she just shook her head at me” Karen replied.

“What does that mean, she’s not leaving!?” Justin said, grunting a little under Karen’s weight.

Karen made some more violent movements at the window, and then said, “she’s going to the door, come on,” and let go of the sill, stepping down from Justin’s knee. They ran around the corner to the front of the house, Justin hobbling a bit.

They heard the deadbolt unlock on the door and then the door opened, spilling out the yellow light from inside the house into the darkness on the porch. Aemilia was standing in the door, but she was blocking it with her body, only opening it face-width.

“This isn’t the right side,” Karen hissed at Aemilia, trying to keep her voice down, “we have to go back.”

“I know,” Aemilia said, but didn’t make a move to open the door. It took Karen a second to realize this was *not* the correct way a person would receive this information. “What do you mean, ‘I know’?”

“I mean I know this isn’t our side, but I’m not going back,” she said, and began to close the door. Karen shot her hand out and stopped it in mid swing, leaving Aemilia’s eye visible in the crack.

“What do you mean, you’re not leaving,” Karen hissed, pausing between each word. Jake was confused by this new vocal cadence, but then he realized that this must be how Karen sounds when she’s mad, and she was spitting mad now.

“I mean I’m not leaving,” Aemilia said, and put her shoulder into the door, trying to close it.

“The other one’s coming!” Karen whisper-shouted, and Aemilia stopped, only a crack visible in the light.

“What?”

“If they were waiting here for you, then that means another Aemilia is coming home tonight too, and we don’t know when she’ll be here,” Karen said, looking behind her as if afraid of summoning the other Aemilia, “but chances are that she’s coming right now.”

Aemilia looked out the crack at Karen’s face for what seemed like a long time, but was probably only seconds,

staring at nothing, deep in thought. Finally, she looked back into the house, back into the dining room, and opened the door up. Karen immediately grabbed her, and with her leverage on the doorframe, ripped her out of the house, the door slamming behind her in her outstretched hand.

“What the fuck is wrong with you,” Karen shouted at Aemilia in that strange clipped cadence. Aemilia looked down at the door mat on the porch, one of those bristly ones that said “Home Sweet Home” on it. Karen stared hard at Aemilia, but Aemilia continued to look down, avoiding her. Suddenly Karen pulled Aemilia into a hug.

“I didn’t mean it,” she whispered into Aemilia’s ear, “I’m sorry. Let’s go home.” Aemilia nodded against her head, and when they separated she wiped tears from her face with the slides of her hands. The boys each turned in a different direction, pretending not to see.

Karen walked off the porch first, and the rest followed her in single file, no one much wanting to buddy up and talk right now. The sky was still lit up with residual sunlight from below the horizon, but it was quickly turning darker and darker on the street. They reached the intersection, turned left, onto the road leading perpendicular past the pond, and there was a group across the street.

There were four of them that Jake could see. From the swishing hair and the height, the front one was a tall girl about the size of Aemilia, next up was a short boy who looked quite a lot like Justin...

He turned his head away from the group, keeping them locked in his side-eye. “Guys,” he whispered.

“We see it,” Tommy said right in front of him in the twilight, “keep moving.”

They kept walking away, Jake watched the group from the corner of his eye as they turned onto Aemilia’s street, but they never seemed to look back at him.

Suddenly they were out of sight, and it felt like a weight was off his chest. He heard slamming footsteps ahead, and could barely make out in the dark that Aemilia and Karen had started running at the front of the column. Justin, Tommy and he started running too, which made his aching lungs very upset.

They ran all the way to the intersection with the pond, turned into the pond, and all stopped to catch their breath, some of them worse for wear than others.

“Did you see that,” Tommy said, “Did you see that!”

“Yeah,” Justin replied, “that was freaky. They looked just like us.”

“I thought you said that there weren’t people like us over here,” Jake said, “why was Aemilia’s house there?”

“I don’t know,” Tommy replied, “maybe they have different names on this side. Did you notice your parents having different names?” he asked Aemilia. She shook her head.

“Well we *really* fucked up,” Justin said, “what would even happen if we met our doubles, would we explode?”

“I don’t think so,” Tommy said.

“You don’t *think* so!?” Justin yelled back at him.

“Shh, no, I don’t think so,” Tommy replied, “but I guess I’ve been wrong before.”

“There were only four of them,” Jake said, and everyone looked up at him, “who was missing?”

“You were,” Karen said, looking straight back at him.

Tommy took out his flashlight and they made their way down the gravel shore of the pond past the benches to the puddle. He didn’t have to look for the fallen log, a quick sweep of the beam across the twilight surface revealed a curious effect, the surface of the puddle was almost entirely black.

“There it is,” Tommy pointed, recognizing the familiar shape of the puddle, “I never noticed that before, maybe it’s an effect from the light.”

“We’ve never been out here this late before,” Karen reminded him, and he answered with an “ahhh.”

“We don’t have our boots, so just get through as fast as you can.” Tommy said.

“No way José,” Justin said, “my parents are going to skin me alive if I mess up my shoes again.” He sat down on the gravel and took off his shoes and socks, then stuffed them in his backpack. “There, no harm, no foul,” he said, grinning at his sudden ingenuity.

Tommy and Karen followed suit by taking their shoes off too, but Aemilia and Jake didn’t. It would be easy enough, Jake thought, to just use one of his other pairs of shoes for the

next few days while these dried on the porch. Once all the packs were zipped up, Tommy walked out into the water, to the edge of the puddle, and put his hand down into the light mud on the pond bottom to fish around for the cord.

He swung his hand back and forth a few times, repositioned himself, and tried again. He had been keeping the flashlight trained on the puddle in front of him, afraid he was going to lose sight of it, but after a few seconds he redirected it downwards to help his search for the black cord.

“I don’t think it’s here anymore,” Tommy said, standing up and stepping back from the edge of the puddle, his flashlight not doing much good in the brown cloud of mud he’d stirred up in the water.

“What’s not there anymore?” Karen asked from the shore.

“The line, the rope,” Tommy replied, “it’s gone. Someone’s taken it.”

Jake walked over to the gravel in front of Tommy, looked back to try to find the fallen tree to position himself, then remembered that there wasn’t a tree on this side, there was a big rock further back. He dug around in the gravel for a few seconds with the toe of his shoe, not bringing up the buried cord like he thought he would.

“I don’t think it’s over here either,” Jake said.

“Who would take it?” Justin asked.

“Maybe whoever put it here,” Karen said, “someone from this side, or our side, who was crossing over too. And they’re done now?”

The idea gave Jake goosebumps, he didn't like the thought of sharing their discovery with anyone else. He suddenly got that same old feeling again, afraid that the puddle would close up on them, leaving them all homeless and stranded on this side. Or just him homeless, he realized.

"Let's just go through," Jake said, shrugging away the heebie jeebies.

"How did you do it the first time," Tommy asked, swinging the light back around to shine in Jake's face. Jake held his hand up in front of the bright point, shielding his eyes.

"I just sort of," Jake began, remembering his flailing around in the skim of water in the puddle, and then of Karen saying "like a mirror laying down."

"Oh jeez," he said, and sat down on the gravel to take off his shoes too, "you'll want to take off your shoes, too," he said, "I think we're gonna have to take it at a run."

Aemilia nodded and sat down without a word, working at her laces. "What do you mean at a run," Tommy asked, still pointing the flashlight at him, and Jake explained as he stripped off his shoes and socks.

"I mean, last time when I went through with the rope, I was just sort of stuck in the puddle until I pulled myself through, and even then, I wasn't quite sure what side I was on. It was very disorientating," he said defensively, but continued, "I think the problem was that I went through without any momentum to get me out. So what we'll do this

time is get on the other side of the puddle, and dive through it, to the other side, so we come out closer to the shore, away from the puddle.”

He looked around, but could barely see their faces in the rapidly closing dusk. From what lines he could see, they seemed to be united in confusion. “Oh come on,” he said, and zipped up his backpack, “just watch what I do.”

He walked out with shorts and bare feet into the water, shivering a little bit as his toes sank into the cold mud, and walked around the perimeter of the puddle. The water was deeper on this side, maybe six inches, compared to the two on the shore side of the puddle, and he took a couple steps back to get himself some headroom before the plunge.

Jake looked up, “Justin, will you carry the flashlight and go through last,” he asked, a final thought going through his mind before the upside down trip.

“Yeah wh-” Justin began, but Jake cut him off with a slice of his hand.

“We need to see the puddle to jump through,” Jake said, trying to head off the question of why Tommy wasn’t going last, to spare him the embarrassment, “so just shine it there for each person, got it?”

“Sure,” Justin said, and Jake nodded.

“Okay,” Jake said to himself, taking deep breaths and swinging his arms at his sides in a runner’s pose. He crouched down, his feet sank into the mud, and he tried his best to get an explosive start.

The explosive start was mostly cushioned by the mud, but the two steps he had before the edge of the puddle each made huge gouts of water shoot up his shorts, which nearly knocked him off kilter with the thought of what it would look like. *Thank God it was nighttime.* He took his final step and leapt into the puddle at speed. He imagined himself going for a graceful head-first diver's form, but as he'd been unable to get that down at the city pool, he had no chance whatsoever of it in water that appeared to all involved to be about three inches deep. In reality, he half curled-up in a fetal position above the water as he approximated the diver's form, and hit the surface knees first.

The water was much thicker than he remembered it being, not so much a skim as a small puddle itself, and he broke through the other side with much less momentum than he thought he would have, although it was questionable if he would have ever had enough to carry out his grand plan of landing on the shore without touching the water at all. He knew he made it to the other side because his inner ear told him he was upside down, but nevertheless he landed fully on his back in the water between the puddle and the shore.

He sank a few inches into the water before he touched the mud at the bottom. *This is not the same pond,* he thought as his clothes became completely soaked through. On the other side the water was barely a couple inches deep between the puddle and the shore, but he knew right away that this was deeper. He threw his head out of the water and sucked in a lungful of

air, which is when he knew for sure that he wasn't back on his side.

His lungs hitched and then immediately rejected the air he'd breathed in, it felt more like a lungful of fire. He rolled over reflexively in the half foot deep water and started coughing with his head held down, trying to clear his lungs of the bad air. But every breath he took was just as bad, if not worse, than the last. He needed to get back, he thought, back to the other side, before anyone else came through. Before he died, he realized, as he surely would before long.

His eyes were squeezing shut automatically against the bad air, but from what he saw coming through, or what he didn't see, he didn't think they would be of much use anyway. No twilight sky, no haze of light in the distance from the city, no beam coming from the light down the street, nothing but blackness, not even stars.

Jake tried his best to crawl around to face the opposite direction he had come in at, but he couldn't think straight with all the coughing. He felt like his chest was on fire. He would have tried to hold his breath if he could keep a lungful of air down for any length of time. He swept his hands around in front of him, searching the muddy bottom for a hole like the one that existed on the other side. For a minute, or was it only a second, he was sure he would die here in this water a foot away from the puddle.

But his fingers hooked over the edge of the mud, to another muddy surface just on the other side, and even if this

wasn't it, things couldn't get much worse for him. At the moment he reached out with his other hand for the ridge, he heard a sound behind him. A panting sound, like a dog, but much deeper. The fear froze him, froze a lungful of the hateful black air in him, and he sat on all fours with his chest burning from the inside out hoping that whatever it was behind him hadn't heard. But what chance was there for that, he had been splashing around and coughing not more than a second ago.

The thing behind him, maybe twenty feet back, made a grunting sound, and he heard whatever it was splash into the water behind him, and suddenly the freeze was gone and he hauled himself headfirst over the edge of the puddle.

His head broke the surface on the other side, and he let out a scream. "Jesus Christ get me the fuck out of here!"

Jake scrambled hand over hand in the mud, scooping big gouts of the pond bottom into the puddle, trying to claw his way out, now screaming just sounds, no words. He saw the flashlight ahead again, and heard the splashing, the enormous splashing of hundreds of legs. Jesus, was it a giant centipede, he thought, a living nightmare. It was coming for him, the light was at the end of a tunnel, and he would soon be gone. He felt claws, hoofs, hooks dig into his arms and screamed his throat raw.

"Come on!" He heard Justin say right above him, and they all hauled at the same time on Jake's upper body, and he shot out of the puddle like a cork. Jake pushed them aside and

made a break for the shore, what he hoped was the direction of the shore. The urge to scream had temporarily overridden the urge to cough, but as soon as his bare feet struck gravel, he fell over on the shore and his whole body was racked by throat shredding coughs. But this time every lungful of air he pulled in seemed cool and fresh, and made the fire dissipate a little more in his chest.

He felt hands on his back now, and he recognized them as his friends, he even heard their voices querying each other over his hoarse croaks. His right arm gave out and he rolled over on his side, his body felt spent from the coughing, and from the nightmare that might even now be pulling itself through the puddle in the pond. The light was still on him, he weakly pointed out into the lake, and said to whoever was above him “the puddle”.

The light swept from him all the way back to the black blob off the shore, and Jake, now giving little half-coughs with what was left of his energy, saw nothing coming through. He watched, kept his eyes on the surface, he could tell the rest of them were too, but nothing made an appearance, the surface was settling down, and soon it was as flat as the rest of the pond, just dark black.

“What happened,” Tommy asked softly, cautiously, beside Jake’s head, and he knew that Tommy was the one whose hands had been rubbing his back as he felt like he coughed out what little pink lungflesh he had.

Not taking his eyes off the puddle, Jake said, “that isn’t our side. I don’t know what it is, but that isn’t home.”

“What was it?” Tommy asked again.

“It was dark, and the air was bad,” Jake sucked in another breath, “I don’t know, bad air somehow. Something was there, I heard it, on the other side. Something alive. How could anything be alive over there?”

The group was silent, taking in this report, this impossible report that their world had been closed off from them, replaced with a nightmare. Justin, who Jake realized must still be holding the flashlight, moved the beam back down to Jake, and as it struck his body he saw that he was covered in runnels of black water. His clothes were colored almost completely black with the stuff, it had begun to wash off his arms and legs.

Jake squeezed the cloth of his shorts and held his hand out for the flashlight. It was covered with the black water. Could he see specks of black in the water, like soot? Maybe.

He brought his hand up to his nose and sniffed. It smelled strongly of smoke, like smoke in a liquid form, and he wiped his hand off on his shorts again, then on the gravel beside him.

“What do we do?” Justin’s voice asked behind the blinding flashlight.

“We have to go back to the woods,” Tommy said softly, “we came through something in the woods, maybe if we

retrace our steps, we can go back through again, back to our side.”

“But why didn’t the puddle work?” Justin asked again.

This time Karen answered. “This isn’t our puddle,” she said, “this is some other puddle, in some other pond. This isn’t the place we’re used to, that place we access with the puddle, but this place, we got here through the woods. This place has its own puddle place, like we do, but it’s not our puddle.” She stopped for a second, then said “that’s why there are copies of us on this side, isn’t it?”

“I think so,” Tommy said, “I swear I looked all our parents up in the phone book and none of them were here, except maybe Justin’s. There shouldn’t have been any of our houses here, much less our own parents waiting for us.”

“They’re not exactly the same,” Aemilia said, kneeling beside Jake, at the edge of the flashlight beam, “they were different somehow, very different, but not, at the same time.”

“We need to go,” Karen said from far up, “what time is it on our side, do you think people are looking for us?”

“Maybe,” Tommy said, “Jake, are you okay to walk?”

“Yeah,” Jake responded, in between hawking up globs of spit which he kept dropping to the gravel in front of him, “yeah, I can walk.”

“Okay, come on,” Tommy said, and bent down to grab Jake by the arm. Aemilia shifted next to him and grabbed his other arm, and they helped him up. On his feet, Jake suddenly remembered that they all had their shoes off.

“My shoes,” Jake said, and thought to his backpack which felt soaked behind him.

“There’s a bench up there,” Justin said, and swung the flashlight up, highlighting a bench in front of them, and they made their way to the bench, all four of them except for Justin sitting down and getting their shoes on.

“I should have known,” Jake said as he pulled his shoe on over his wet foot, “there are no benches on this side of the pond on our puddle side.”

Tommy got up and Justin took his turn getting his shoes on, then they all got up and set off for the entrance to the pond, with Tommy holding the flashlight. Once they got to the street, he put it away, the streetlights were enough to make their way by.

Thankfully Tommy had memorized the route to the library from the pond, because their trip from the exit to the forest had only appended information onto it, and he was able to, with some pauses and consideration, bring them back to the long street they walked down to get to their neighborhood. As they left familiar streets farther behind, Jake felt better, he didn’t like the idea of something so similar, yet different, being so close by, even if he wasn’t in the gang they’d seen.

Once they got far enough along the street, Tommy took out the flashlight again and started scanning the treeline. They might not have marked the exact position they left the woods, he explained, but he thought they might be able to see the next furthest back ribbon through the trees if they looked

hard enough. They walked like this, looking over their right shoulders into the trees, for a while, until Tommy recognized the cross street of the first intersection they came to on this side, declared their search so far fruitless, and told them that *this* was where the real search began.

They got off the sidewalk, onto the bare earth at the treeline, and peered into the trees with Tommy's flashlight beam as they made their way from the last intersection to the one in front, knowing they had come out somewhere between those two points. They reached the next intersection, downtrodden, and Tommy had to give them a pep talk before they reversed course and scoured the treeline again.

This time, a glint of pink far back in the trees caught Justin's attention, and he called out, with his finger pointing into the trees. After close inspection from the roadside, Jake determined that yes it was one of Aemilia's ribbons. They set off into the woods toward the ribbon, and reaching it, Tommy swept his flashlight around until they spotted the next ribbon. Then he reached out and pulled it off the tree beside him.

"Hey," Aemilia said.

"It's for our own good," Tommy said, handing her the ribbon, "if we leave these here, anyone from this side could follow us into our side. There's nothing we can do about the puddle between our side and our puddle side, but I'd rather not let whatever it was that Jake saw have any chance of coming all the way through and getting led right to our door."

The mention of the thing, the thing with the rasping deep pant, caused Jake to suddenly look around them in the dark, as if mentioning it might summon it to their location. “Shh,” he said.

Aemilia took the ribbon from Tommy, and they continued to walk from ribbon to ribbon. It seemed like hours, but maybe it was thirty minutes later, walking through the dark, when Tommy, in the front of the column, said “Shhh, I hear something.”

They all stopped, stopped breathing and strained their ears. Jake immediately broke out in goosebumps again, listening on that low register for the panting. Tommy heard it clearly first, a man’s voice, calling out “Jake!”

“Jake,” he said, turning around, “is that your dad?”

Jake mentally adjusted for a different sound, and heard the call again. “Yeah, I think so,” he said.

Then he heard another voice, also familiar, yell “Justin!”

“Oh shit,” Justin said, “that’s my dad,” and suddenly Jake felt that they were all in a lot of trouble.

Chapter 7

They were. At dusk, when Jake hadn't come back yet, Anita had called Justin's mom, wondering if they were at her house. No was the answer there. Anita called Tommy's house and Justin's mom called Aemilia's house, Aemilia's dad called Karen's house. None of them were to be found, which was bad news for them, since they had a pretty strict dusk curfew. In the year or so that all five of them had been in the same friend group, they had never violated the curfew, usually coming home well before dusk to satisfy their grumbling stomachs.

In another game of telephone, the news was relayed to each house that they weren't at any other house, as well as some disturbing news from Justin's house about the mention of an expedition into the woods somewhere. Carter knew of the cul-de-sac in development on Whitmore street that they liked to play in the woods behind sometimes, Jake had asked him extensively about the area, the hill behind it (zoned for residential), and the future of that area of the neighborhood. In another game of telephone, the plan was set into motion: everyone that could be spared would meet at the intersection of Pineview and Whitmore with as many flashlights as they

could find. If the kids were really lost in the woods, time was of the essence.

Carter, Anita, Justin's dad, Aemilia's dad, both of Tommy's parents, and Karen's mom met at the intersection not ten minutes later with an overabundance of flashlights, torches, and camping lanterns. Carter had some idea of where this flat top hill was behind the development, so he led the group of seven up the driveway of one of the skeleton houses into the woods (which gave him a thrill of fear) and up the ramp of earth that soon revealed itself. All the while they were calling the children's names.

Once they got to the top of the hill, they spread out to each edge looking for anything that might indicate which direction this expedition went in. Justin's dad was the one that found the first pink ribbon, tied to a tree a little bit back in the woods. At first he almost passed over it, thinking it was one of those light plastic construction ribbons, but a closer look showed frilly threads on either edge. This was some kind of crafting ribbon, and he shouted at the others to come and take a look. As the rest of the parents descended onto the spot, Aemilia's dad saw another one, but deeper in the trees to the first one. This settled it, in Carter's mind, someone, hopefully their children, had left a trail of ribbons from tree to tree to find their way back from their expedition. He was both pleased and scared stiff, how far were they planning to go?

The group spread out in a single file line as they walked from tree to tree, each hoping that they wouldn't get lost in turn. The flashlights swept the trees to both sides of their line, looking from above like a centipede made of light, slowly making its way through the forest as they called out the kids' names with every step. Two lights in the front, Carter and Anita, swept back and forth, calling out Jake's name and searching for the next pink ribbon. A couple times they went too far in one direction, had to get the group to backtrack to the last ribbon, and look around again for the next one, but in a remarkably short time they reached the edge of the pond.

Carter wasn't sure what to think at first. What would Jake have done, what *did* he do, in this situation? He ran through the thoughts in his mind at a mile a minute, the excitement of going on an expedition, the disappointment of finding himself, inexplicably to Carter as well, back at the pond he fished at every weekend. Sweeping the flashlight across the shore, he could even make out the four benches at the edge of the pond, with the glow of the streetlamp cutting a swath between them from the street. Maybe he would go to the left, on the gravel shore, past the benches, to go back home again? No way, they would have been home hours ago if that was the case. If they were on an expedition, he thought, maybe they wanted to continue it. That left the far side of the pond, or the right side of the pond, both going to who knows where.

"Let's circle around to the right," Carter said, "keep a look out for ribbons, they might have continued into the woods."

Somehow, to his amazement, he had become the de-facto leader of the group, and all flashlights cut into the woods on their right as their fourteen feet crunched on the gravel of the right shore, the far shore, of the pond.

Their voices, the combined calling out of five different names, made a cacophony as its echo skipped across the surface of the still water. They moved slowly up the gravel shore, the beams stabbing into the dark treeline, every so often one morbid parent flicked their flashlight at the pond water, hoping beyond hope not to see a backpack, a floating arm, on the surface.

They rounded the other side of the pond, and when they were just about to begin walking toward the benches and the street light, Tommy's mom shouted "It's here, it's here!"

The parents converged on Tommy's mom and all pointed their flashlights into the forest toward hers, which illuminated a pink ribbon tied to a tree, the same type and shade as the ones they'd been following. Carter started in, Anita behind him, and the rest of the parents fell into single file as the line slithered between the trees.

For thirty minutes they followed the trail of ribbons, from tree to tree, in mostly a straight line, and then it cocked to the right, following what seemed like a game trail. Carter tried to imagine his son's shoes trampling these leaves on the ground, looking for any indication, any proof, that they had been here. For all any of them knew they really were following some official line, the boundary of Columbia's residential

zoning, or something like that. He hoped not, he hoped with all his heart not.

Then, like a shaft of heavenly sunlight breaking through the rain, his ears caught the tail end of what sounded like the shout of a sixth grader's voice. He sensed a few other parents behind him turn their heads in the direction of the noise, which sounded nearly directly in front of them. "JAKE! JAKE!" Carter yelled out, stretching his raw vocal cords to their maximum.

"Dad!" he barely heard up ahead, thin like it was coming from a long way away. Jesus, he thought, how big were these woods, how huge is this tract of forest? He didn't think he lived in the middle of the boonies, but apparently he did.

"JAKE, STAY WHERE YOU ARE, WE'RE COMING TO YOU!" He shouted, his voice giving out to a high pitched squeak at the end. He knew a cough drop regimen was in his future.

"KEEP CALLING OUT!" Anita yelled beside him, "WE'LL FIND YOU!"

"We're here, we're here," the kids started yelling over and over, but the sound was so thin, it was hard to get a direction on it.

"I can't tell where they are," Anita said to Carter.

"Let's keep following the ribbons," Carter said back in a rasp, "double back if they get further away."

Anita turned around and pointed at Tommy's mom and Aemilia's dad, "Jessica, Gavin, stay here, we're going up

ahead to see if we can get closer, but we don't want to lose them, right?"

"Right," Aemilia's dad said, and the rest of the parents disengaged from the two of them and walked along to the next pink ribbon. The sound of "we're here, we're here" was getting louder, but still thin sounding. Carter was reminded of *Journey to the Centre of the Earth*, and shivered. In that book, during a scene when an expedition member got lost, the group could still communicate with him via the strange acoustics of the cave they were exploring, even though they were miles apart.

Suddenly, up ahead, he could see a tree lit up with the yellow light of a flashlight, and as he made his way to it the group came into view from around the side of a thin tree, as if in a magic trick.

"Dad!" Jake yelled out with a cracked voice, and he ran toward Carter. *He must have been screaming too*, Carter thought, as he ran toward Jake and wrapped the child in his arms. At that moment he realized that Jake was completely, sopping wet, and cold.

"Oh man, what happened to you?" Carter said, looking down at his son's plastered hair, and as the horror of the panting thing melted away, to Jake's embarrassment, he started crying, big gulping sobs, into his father's shirt.

Anita raced forward and kneeled on the ground in front of Jake. "Honey are you alright?" she asked, and Jake nodded his head, trying to get his sobs under control. She looked up at

Carter, and he said “he’s just scared, I think.” He looked up at the rest of the kids, some hidden behind the glare of a single flashlight among them, and motioned them forward. “We’re all here,” he said, “let’s go home.”

Chapter 8

As is always the case, the relief and happiness only held out the fear and anger for so long, and by the time Jake approached the house, walking between his parents, they were each stonily silent. In the light of the hallway, they saw, for the first time, how he was nearly covered with some kind of black water, his clothes hopelessly dyed with it, and their hearts softened for the final time that night. Anita told Jake to go up and take a shower, retrieving a plastic garbage bag from the kitchen for him to put his black clothes in after he changed out, and to come right back down when he was done.

Jake didn't know what was in store for him when he came back downstairs, but memories of the talking-to he had gotten after he broke one of the decorative ceramic lamps came back to him on the walk upstairs. The final memories of the thing on the other side seemed to melt away under the hot water in the bright light of the bathroom, and he thought that if he took a long enough shower, maybe they would forget all about the talking-to they were planning on giving him by the time he was done. He showered and showered, until the water ran clear, and then until the water ran cold, finally shutting it off, drying off, and putting on the pajamas he had brought in.

He opened the door and looked hopefully down the hallway to his parents' room, but the door was still open, which meant that he hadn't outlasted them. Feeling like a prisoner walking to the gallows, he took the staircase one step at a time, too quickly reaching the bottom and, turning the corner, saw his parents sitting on the couch together, a united front.

The talk wasn't so bad. Jake had been correct, the fear and anger had run off them during his ridiculously long shower, which they had suspected was the purpose even so. The worst part was his dad's broken, whistley voice, which matched his own. Somehow that was the thing that scared him most of all, it always seemed like his parents were constant, forever, but this small bit of damage, like a ding on a roadster, betrayed a fragility too similar to his own for comfort.

In the end, he supposed he got off relatively well, and was grounded for a week. Or five days, to hear them tell it, and had to swear again to be back before sundown always, or there would be hell to pay mister.

How could he have known then, in the light of the living room, sitting between his parents, that the panting thing would stalk him in the dark of his dreams. His parents suspected, when they were woken up by his broken screeching voice at 2am, that the ordeal had scared him more than they thought, that maybe being grounded for a week in the summer wasn't necessary after all. He tried to go back to sleep that night, but every time he did, he could almost hear

the thing breathing, the splash of whatever it was coming into the water, coming for *him*. The sun lit up the room that morning to find him playing his GameBoy in bed with his desk lamp on, and heavy bags under his bloodshot eyes.

* * *

Three days and two sleepless nights later, Anita and Carter declared that Jake's grounding was over, and he was free to meet up with his friends. This, of course, corresponded in a similarly short grounding from the rest of the parents, who had grown tighter after the search together, and had agreed on cutting their respective punishments short as well. It was summer, after all.

Thursday saw the gang at Tommy's house, taking turns at the SNES, and playing the occasional versus game in a racer or fighter. At the start, Jake was afraid something had been mortally wounded in the group, things just seemed awkward in a way that they weren't before. But after a few minutes, everything seemed fine again, and he was left feeling unsure if it was anything other than his own embarrassment at breaking down in front of his friends. No one mentioned the *other* other side, but a couple hours in, Justin said "I sure do miss the library," which they all took to mean the library on the nice side, their other side, in the pond.

The next day Justin's mom took them to the mall, where they flitted from store to store like flies unsure of which piece

of meat to land on, eventually settling in the arcade where they spent most of their time cycling through on the fighter game in a tournament of their own design. Karen, of course, had to play at a handicap, they decided, or it wouldn't be very much of a tournament at all. But she still won in the end, for a grand prize of nothing at all.

At the arcade, Jake was somewhat surprised to find memories from the pond side drifting up to him, the expedition, the cautious first steps into a new world, and inexplicably found himself imagining exploring further in lands uncharted by any person on this Earth. The problem was, as Tommy and Karen had worked out, you could only go "further", as they had coined, by going between the two portals, one in the woods, one in the pond, and it was a hell of a long walk between the two. Additionally, they still didn't know where the one in the woods was, and after taking down the ribbons on the way back from the place, Jake wasn't sure they would ever find it again. Maybe that was for the better, Tommy was right after all, as fun as it was to go over, they didn't want anything wandering in from the other side. Jake figured that once that metaphorical door was opened, it would be impossible to close again, and he felt that it was just fine to leave the door to that dark world as closed as it could be.

On Saturday, they started to regain their old pep, and after his fishing and Karen's piano lesson, they went over to the pond side again with their rain boots and jackets. The sky was

a little orange, impossible to tell from their side, and the air smelled a tinge like smoke, but luckily Tommy had kept the five surgical masks in his backpack from before, and they each donned one before their trip to the library. On the way, they walked past several other people on the street wearing masks of various shapes and sizes, some white, others patterned. One adult waved at them, and they waved back, relieved that they neither recognized the person nor seemed to be recognized by them. When they got to the library, they removed the masks in the flood of white light from the ceiling, which set all the colors in the world right again, and went straight to the computers, where they spent an enjoyable afternoon. They collectively decided to leave a good hour before the library closed, telling themselves that they didn't want to skirt their strictly imposed curfew, but at least Jake was honest with himself that he didn't want to relive the experience of being caught over here in the dark again.

When they burst through the puddle, one at a time, the sun was still well above the horizon, and they crunched along the shore, to the asphalt, and broke up into their usual groups headed toward home. They hadn't laid any plans, assuming a round-robin style phone tag game would commence the next day to settle on what to do. It wasn't like they had to maximize their time now, they had all summer.

After supper that night, green bean casserole, Jake sat with Anita and Carter while they watched a program about King Tut's Tomb on the Discovery channel, and during a

commercial break, they sent him to the kitchen to get ice cream and changed the channel to the news. Jake gleefully hauled out the heavy half-gallon of vanilla ice cream in the black cardboard container from the knee-level freezer and dropped it onto their small kitchen table with a bang. He ventured into the refrigerator for the big teardrop-shaped brown bottle of syrup, and after knocking around some glass bottles containing various seldom-used ingredients, pulled out the flattish bottle from behind an old bottle of horseradish and a questionable container of dijon mustard.

He divided what was left of the vanilla ice cream into three bowls, and to his parents he added a very reasonable amount of syrup. “Be conservative” was what they told him, which to him amounted to only two squirts of the viscous black gel. On his though, they hadn’t said anything about his, he loaded the bowl up with the cold syrup, sending sluggish rivers running down the white-capped mountain of ice cream, to pool in thick black lakes in the valleys. Finished with his masterpiece, he squeezed long-ways on the bottle, causing it to suck up it’s last drop of syrup, and wiped the remaining dribble with his finger before pushing the cap down with his hand. After putting the syrup up in the fridge, and the ice cream box in the garbage, he carefully balanced all three bowls in his hands, each with its own spoon, and walked them over to the living room.

Whether from his careful step to not upset the ice cream, or from their surprised attention on the screen, his parents

didn't hear him coming until it was too late, too late for him to not see the video, pre-recorded earlier in the day, on the screen of George in a suit being led from an office building to a police car in handcuffs. The chyron on the bottom of the screen was moving slowly, painfully slow, and said "Senator George Lloyd Taken into Custody on Charges of Child Sex Trafficking."

Whether from some errant click of the triple bowls in his hands, or the gasp he let out, Jake's parents both turned around at the same time, like guilty children caught looking at a parent's special magazine in the tool shed. But he was there, neither of them knew for how long, and the look on his face was enough to tell them that he had seen too much already to roll back the clock.

"Hey um," Carter started, as Anita fumbled with the remote control, turning off the screen, "hey champ, why don't you sit down." His dad had never called him champ before in his life, not that Jake could remember, and in shock he moved around the side of the couch, both his parents swiveling their heads to follow him like hawks, and sat down between them.

"Ah, thanks for the ice cream, it's perfect," Carter said, trying to deflect, to delay the inevitable, and Anita shot him a look. Jake was trying to work up to a question, but couldn't quite find a question to ask. On the chyron, so bold with the front of the screen, the charges had been pretty clear, and while he didn't know what trafficking with a 'k' meant, he

sure knew what 'child sex' meant, and what handcuffs meant. His face, somehow exuding confidence even as he walked with his hands cuffed in front of his suit jacket, looked like all those faces he had seen in mobster movies. The black, curved glass of the television set stared back at him like the black surface of the puddle on the other other side, and for a horrifying moment, he was sure he had come back to the wrong side after all.

"But I saw him," Jake said, "just today. We caught..." *And now the blubbing starts*, he thought, unable to keep himself composed. The tears started running hot down his face, and the sobs shook his shoulders, and the little Everest of ice cream got an unseasonably warm rain shower. Carter and Anita closed around their boy, Anita rubbing his back, Carter enveloping him and Anita in a big hug from the other side. There would be questions, oh yes, there would be terrible questions they had to ask Jake, but later, they could ask them later. For now, they had their boy, they were three on the couch, and that's more than some families in Washington D.C. could say.

Chapter 9

The questions did come, but Jake was vehement, George had never said anything inappropriate, had never *touched* him, had never suggested they go anywhere, get in any car, or anything like that. To Jake, George was just George, the old fishing man, so different looking than the politician on TV. Maybe it was the suit, contrasted with his zip up sweaters and the yellow raincoat he brought with him every day, maybe it was the way on TV he seemed to have no accent, and at the pond he nearly drawled, but it was almost impossible for Jake, after he got over the initial shock, to line up the two men who seemed so different. In a fugitive part of his mind, hidden from reason and logic, he was sure that George would be there the next weekend.

Little did he know, Carter and Anita set their son up with a child therapist the very next day. Or at least attempted to, but they had to leave a message on the office answering machine, where they mentioned their son's denials, but also his close friendship with the recently arrested senator. Word traveled through the grapevine at lightning speed, and by the time they called the other parents, they already knew. All it took was one of them watching the nightly news, one of them to

not have their child to hold on to for dear life, one of them to not think “if not for the grace of God go he,” and that juicy piece of gossip was off to the races. But none of the other parents knew about Jake’s friend, they just knew about their senator, the one that came, once upon a time, from this neighborhood, the one who tragically lost his wife to cancer in their twenties, and came back from it a driven politician, at least as Caroline told it. So they talked to their work friends, talked to their neighborhood friends, glad they could talk about it instead of screaming at the heavens.

As the round robin went, they decided not to talk to any of the other kids about it, lord knew only Tommy and Karen out of the bunch paid any attention to the news, and they hadn’t happened to hear the fateful broadcast last night. If he wanted to, Jake would talk about it, they thought, if he needed to.

This gave Jake one day, one shining Sunday, where he could forget about it, or try to, when it reared itself in his mind. Carter offered to take them all to laser tag, which was roundly acknowledged as the best damn idea anyone had ever had, and for that Sunday they ran around in a blacklight room with plastic rifles and killed each other over and over again, round after round, while Carter gorged himself on pizza and tried his luck at Tekken. His luck wasn’t good, but his idea was, and nary a word was spoken of prison or senators.

* * *

It wasn't until Wednesday that someone mentioned George to Jake, and luckily, it was Tommy. They were gathering at Tommy's house, first for some games, then whatever else came to mind. Jake got there first, and it was then, when they were alone, that Tommy said:

"I heard on the news," Tommy started awkwardly, "about George..."

"Yeah," Jake said.

"I'm sorry." Jake wasn't quite expecting it to come out like that, more like juicy gossip or whispered speculations, but Tommy was knowledgeable in that way too, always seeming to understand how people were feeling before *they* did.

"Me too," Jake said, "I never knew..."

"I don't think you can, from what the TV says, it seems like people are always surprised when... when it happens..."

Tommy trailed off, and Jake sat, staring at the corner between the floor and the wall, then said "I miss him. Is that crazy?"

"No," Tommy said, and at that moment Justin burst through the front door and the conversation was necessarily over, but to Jake it felt like enough. Enough to let that traitorous thought out of his mouth, that he wished George had never gone to prison in the first place, even if somewhere else, somewhere far away, terrible things were happening. He was glad to know that at least someone didn't think he was going crazy. His session with Dr. Marx, which his dad could

barely say without smiling, yesterday hadn't gone as well as all that. In fact, it had gone a lot worse than the talk he just had with Tommy. His mind went back to that stuffy, dusty smelling office with books all over the wall, while Justin came into the room and talked to Tommy. He revisited the argument that Dr. Marx put forward about it being better that George was away, that George could never hurt again, better for the world. But all that had done was push his little traitorous wish deeper and deeper into his heart, like a splinter when you pick at it too much, because in the end, he wanted George back because he didn't believe *any* of it.

“-beat your ass,” Jake snapped out of his reverie as Justin approached, still talking to Tommy, and they high fived, Jake not sure what about. He was heading over to the TV with the SNES hooked up to it, Tommy was following along, and Jake tagged onto the end. They all sat in front of the curved glass, Tommy and Justin in front, and booted up the system to a fighting game, which Justin and Tommy got right into.

They barely heard the door open and close, admitting Karen, and she walked over and sat down next to Jake behind the other two. They watched Tommy and Justin go at it through their muscle-bound avatars, and after Justin handily beat Tommy, he turned around and said “Hey you wanna-”

“I'll go next,” Karen volunteered, and Justin blushed as he went through his last five minutes of dialogue in his head, embarrassed at the number of strange physical punishments he threatened throughout the game, wondering how many

she'd heard. Tommy and Karen switched, Karen chose her character, a woman wearing something that looked like it would get her thrown out of the pool, much less a street fight, and they began. Tommy and Jake watched with pleasure as Justin had his ass handed to him, and he seemed to fill up almost like a pop bottle with the pressure of all the insults and threats he would normally spout out, quite unconsciously, but now was physically holding in.

Jake leaned over to Tommy, watching out of the corner of his eye as Justin's health bar steadily decreased. "Hey, do you think-"

"Yes," Tommy said. At first Jake wasn't sure Tommy knew what question he was asking, but watching for a few more seconds, he thought it was probably clearer to Tommy than it was to him.

"And do you think she-"

"Yes," Tommy said again, and just like that, a split occurred in the group. They had, at least for the last year, been one unit, one whole group, who had gone nearly everywhere and done nearly everything together. But now Jake felt that split, the two of them budding off from the rest, moving a little closer together, and perhaps a little further away from everyone else. Not for the first time since Sunday he wished that things could just stay the same, but that same voice came back: *You're going to a new school, new teachers, new bus, maybe even new friends, nothing stays the same.* He rebelled against it, he would keep his friends, he told the

voice, he would show it. *But you've seen it though*, the voice whispered back to him, *what about Aemilia...*

“Where’s Aemilia,” Jake asked, and Karen looked around, able to easily spare a few seconds for Justin to whittle away her prevailing lead.

“I don’t know,” she said, “she might have gotten hung up at home.”

“Hmm,” Jake replied. It was nice without her, a guilty voice said inside, things felt less like a powder keg about to explode, more like a lazy weekend. *No*, he shot back, *she’s not going anywhere, she’ll come and we’ll go do something. Ah*, it said back, *but do you want her to?*

“Maybe I’ll just call her,” Jake said, “so we’ll know when we can leave.” He uncrossed his legs and put them out shakily in front of him, half of his left leg numb from being pressed against the thick pile carpet. He had called each of them so many times that he almost had their numbers memorized, but he couldn’t call up in his mind Aemilia’s number, and the mocking voice inside smiled as he consulted the list beside the phone. Hoffman, that was it, and he put his finger against the row with the number and picked the receiver up with the other one, stabbing each digit with his outstretched pointer finger.

After the last one, he put the receiver to his ear and listened to the rolling electronic bell undulate behind the hard plastic ear cup. Over and over again it rang, and his anxiety

rose with every peal of electro-bell. Was it true, did he really not want her to show up? Was this really how it ended?

A click, thank God he thought, and the bell mercifully stopped tolling.

“Hoffman residence,” said a voice at the other end of the phone, and Jake immediately pictured the man who had led Aemilia back to their street from the woods beside the rest of them. He was tall, lean, and even though he was wearing a pair of jeans and a button up shirt, he somehow looked like he could win a legal case just like that, without even dressing up.

“Hi, this is Jake,” he started, but the voice continued.

“If you need to contact Gavin, you can reach me at my office number,” and then a long list of digits, which must have included the area code, before it came back, “if you need to contact Margery, she can be reached at her office,” another long list of digits, “otherwise, leave a message at the beep and we’ll get back to you.” The beep came through the handset and he put it back in the cradle on the wall. He expected Aemilia to pick up, *he* did when he was alone and a call came in, but maybe she normally let it ring through to the machine. *Maybe I shouldn’t have hung up*, he thought to himself.

“Hey,” he said to the group in front of the TV, “let’s go get Aemilia.”

“KAY OHH” the game shouted out as Karen’s character massacred Justin’s character against the side of the screen, and she put the controller down and turned around, “Okay!”

They turned off the console and got their shoes on in the foyer, from where they were piled up next to the front door, and headed out, Tommy locking the front door behind him with a key from his pocket. Jake hadn't often been over to Aemilia's house, they usually all met at Justin's or Tommy's houses, but Karen knew the way by heart and she guided them from intersection to intersection on the shortest route, which was what the two of them took together when they left Justin's house normally, with Karen travelling on a little longer to reach her house afterward.

They walked up the street and Jake recognized Aemilia's house again, a two story affair with an extra triangular room with sloped walls above that. It was much wider than any of their houses, and had a gray siding that looked a little like stone. The shingles on top were black, which overall gave the impression that they were looking at something out of a 50's tv show, like the twilight zone or something else that came on late at night. The front door was normal sized, but the arched window above it always made Jake think of soaring cathedral gates that took five men to open.

The four of them stood in a line on Aemilia's doorstep and Karen reached forward and rang the door. Jake felt relieved, four, soon to be five, back together again, and that voice inside could go to hell. What did it know? Fuck it, he thought.

Nothing. Nothing for seconds and seconds. Karen reached forward and rang the doorbell long again. They waited again. This time the wait seemed to go on for minutes.

“Is she in?” Tommy asked Karen.

“She must be,” Karen said, “she said she was coming over today.”

Justin reached forward and beat a tattoo on the bell with his finger, the bursts of ringing could be faintly heard from behind the front door.

“Stop,” Karen said with a sigh, “you’ll break it.”

“Will not,” Justin replied, but took his hand away all the same.

They waited, Jake was sure that the annoying burst of ringing would bring Aemilia storming to the door, but it brought no one at all.

“Could we have missed her?” Jake asked, and Karen looked at him. “Could she have walked over on a different street?”

“I don’t think so,” Karen said, “but maybe.”

“Let’s go back,” Jake said, “we’ll probably catch her on the way over.”

They left the front stoop of the house and walked on the same arrangements of streets back to Tommy’s house, but by the time they saw it again, they hadn’t seen Aemilia. They stopped on the street across from Tommy’s house.

“Well,” Justin said, and threw his hands up, “maybe she’s at home, but she doesn’t want to come out.”

“But why,” asked Tommy.

Karen looked down at the pavement, thinking hard with a blank stare. Jake looked at her, then back up to the boys. “Does she not want to hang out anymore?” Some traitorous

part of him was gladdened by this, surely if *she* left that was okay, right? As long as he didn't instigate it? As long as the rest of the group got to stay together?

"No," he said, shaking his head, seemingly in answer to his own question. "Where could she be?"

"Maybe the pond," Karen said as she looked up. "Maybe she went through on her own."

"Why?" Tommy asked, and Karen shrugged, keeping her face carefully blank. *Was there more here that she's not telling us*, Jake thought to himself. *Maybe.*

"Let's go," Jake said, "we'll stop by my house and I can get the rain stuff."

"Let's just meet there," Justin said, "and we'll all get geared up, no sense in just one of us going through." Jake could sense that his friend didn't want to be left out on an adventure, so he relented.

"Okay, but hurry up," he said, not liking the sick feeling that was beginning to crawl in his stomach. They had always gone through as a group before, he would never even think of going alone, without the others knowing anyway. But Karen did seem to know something, he thought, maybe this wasn't so unexpected after all.

He burst into his house through the front door, both his parents were at work, and threw open the closet door, wrapping himself in the rubberized cloth as fast as he could. He switched out his shoes for boots, Jake thought that no one would notice this on the other side if he just kept wearing

them the whole time, ran upstairs for his backpack, to store the raincoat once they crossed, and then shot out of the house like a cork out of a bottle, barely closing the door behind him on the way out. As he was running down the street toward the pond, he was formulating a plan: he would wait until the first of them got there, and then once there was someone on the shore, he would cross over, then each one of them would cross over when the next one came, until all of them were over. That might save them some time. This felt much more like a rescue mission than he cared to imagine, and even though he couldn't think of anything that would be dangerous on the other side, he still felt a giddy haste driving him.

He rounded the corner of the asphalt leading into the gravel and could see someone lying down on the ground, one of them had gotten there first. His squeaky boots beat on the packed rocks, throwing up sprays of the stuff as he ran along the shore, but as he got closer, he recognized the height of the person laying on the gravel, their long hair splayed out behind them. It was Aemilia.

Jake slowed his run to a walk, and approached the figure laying on the shore. "Hey," he said. He felt foolish, rushing around and around just to find her here without having to go over. He wondered if she had come back from the other side already, or if she even went at all, but he couldn't see a raincoat on her, so he didn't imagine she did. She didn't move to acknowledge him.

“Hey Ae-” He started, but was cut off short by the patch of red that was revealed on the side of her head, seeping through her dirty blond hair. He looked back at her face, looking for a gotcha expression, a real funny har har I-got-the-fake-blood-out-of-the-halloween-kit kind of face. But her eyes were closed, and far from a smirk or a smile, her face was totally relaxed, like she was sleeping. But she wasn’t sleeping, he knew that much for sure.

“Aemilia,” he whispered, not knowing why, as he got down on his hands and knees beside her. He put out a hand to shake her, but stopped it right above her arm. “Aemilia,” that whisper, now cracking with an edge of fear, came out of his mouth again. He didn’t know if it was alright to touch her, could he remember something about not touching people who’ve been hit on the head? He could see now the mat of blood seeping down the side of her head, starting near the back side and disappearing where her head met the gravel.

“Aemilia,” his whisper was now urgent, all soothing went out of it, replaced with high octane fear. He couldn’t touch her, he couldn’t even figure out if she was dead or not. *Please God don’t let her be dead*, he thought, *just asleep*. Just asleep. He heard a far off crunching and turned back, hoping for an adult, a police officer if he could have wished anything, but he saw Tommy on the pond shore, making his way to where Jake was kneeling. Good enough.

“Get Help!” Jake yelled out in two syllables with his hands around his mouth. “Get A Doctor! Aemilia’s HURT!” Jake

stopped in surprise with his hands splayed out beside him, and for a moment to Jake he looked like a gunslinger ready to start a duel. “HURRY!” Jake shouted again, and Tommy spun around on a foot and booked it out of the pond, down the street, and hopefully to his house for the phone. Jake looked back to Aemilia laying on the gravel. Was she breathing? He couldn’t tell.

Karen and Justin came running down the gravel soon after, and told Jake that Tommy had run into them while he was flying home, stopped long enough to tell them Aemilia was hurt, and took off again. They all three sat around Aemilia’s head, Karen shedding big tears down the sides of her face, Jake feeling consumed by his impotence. How long did they sit like that, Jake didn’t know, maybe five minutes, maybe ten, when he heard the first hopeful sound of a siren in the distance. He hoped it was theirs.

Chapter 10

It was theirs, the ambulance parked with its front wheels sunk into the gravel at the edge of the asphalt and two men in white shirts got out of the front. One pointed to the group of them, Jake was waving above his head, and they ran around to the back of the ambulance, opened the doors, and pulled out a stretcher.

It wasn't at all like in ER, Jake thought, as the ambulance drivers ran out with the stretcher between them across the gravel. It was the temperature, he thought crazily, it was too hot. In the show it looked cool, air conditioned, the perfect temperature. In the show it always seemed like George Clooney had everything under control, that there was someone who knew what to do around every corner. He never suspected that something could happen when the sun was beating down too hot on his back, when there wasn't a star surgeon in sight, when he didn't even know if his friend was still alive.

"Move! Move!" the front paramedic yelled and they all scrambled out of the way, Jake crab walking backwards, and his hand got soaked by the edge of the pond. They put the stretcher down beside her, the metal making a rat-ta-tat

sound against the pebbles and rocks on the shore as it sank slightly. The one who ran in front, who got out of the passenger side of the ambulance, began inspecting Aemilia and asked out loud “how did she get hurt?”

A second passed before Jake realized that he was the only one who knew anything, and even then not that much. “I just found her like this. She’s our friend, we were looking for her, and when I got here she was already here.”

“What’s her name,” the paramedic asked, and then looked up to his partner, “C-spine” he said, and the partner nodded, moving to a position behind her head.

“Aemilia,” Jake said, and the other man, the driver, who Jake now thought of as an assistant, since he seemed to be taking orders from the first, put his hands gently on either side of Aemilia’s head, taking care not to touch the patch of blood in her hair.

“Hey, Amelia,” the first one said loudly at her, and snapped his fingers above her face. Nothing. He reached over to her shoulder and pinched deep into her muscle. This elicited a groan from Aemilia, the first sign Jake had that his friend was still alive. He let out a gasp that he didn’t know he had been holding in and looked over to Justin and Karen, who were sitting together across from Aemilia. Karen had started up a fresh round of sobs after that, and Justin was holding her around the shoulders.

The paramedic lifted Aemilia’s eyelid, examined the side of her head, which was looking matted and lighter now, Jake

hoped that meant that she had stopped bleeding. He moved down her body, palpating her extremities. Was he checking for breath, God knew what, Jake had no idea. Why did it take so long, he kept asking himself in his head, why weren't they moving her.

“Okay, let's load her,” the first said to the second, and he moved to a standing position with one leg beside Aemilia and the other behind the stretcher. They counted to three, and both turned her over on her side in unison, while the first slid the stretcher across the gravel and under her body. He slid the rest of her on the stretcher section by section, and they folded up two big foam blocks on the side of the headrest to clamp her head between, which they strapped together.

The first moved to the foot of the stretcher, while the second grabbed the handles at the head, and they lifted in unison, and walked over to the ambulance.

“Keep up kid,” the first one said ahead of him, and Jake thought he was being addressed, so he got up and jogged to them. Aemilia looked smaller somehow, surrounded by that oversized metal stretcher frame and the big foam blocks on either side of her head.

“What's her last name,” the primary asked.

“...Hoffman,” Jake finally replied, his brain blanking out for a second. It felt hard to recall mundane things, he wasn't even completely sure he would be able to say his address if asked right then.

“Can you get in contact with her parents,” the primary asked. They were nearing the open doors of the ambulance.

“My mom knows their number,” Jake said, “and I know my mom’s number.”

“That’s good enough. When you call your mom, tell her Amelia’s at St. Anne’s Memorial Hospital, can you remember that?”

“Yeah,” Jake said slowly, “that’s where my mom works.”

“Oh, good,” the primary said, in a voice that told Jake he was only half listening. They had gotten to the back of the ambulance, and the secondary had already moved the end of the stretcher into the doorway, eliciting a metallic click from somewhere inside. The primary pushed the stretcher the rest of the way in, and moved it to the side an inch or so, where another click happened and the stretcher stopped moving.

“Go on kid,” the primary said, “go tell your mom.”

Jake nodded and waved over to his two friends in big overhand motions “come on.” They got up from the gravel, Justin still holding Karen around the shoulders, and they ran over to Jake, as he turned around, he spotted Tommy standing next to the treeline, beside the remnant of the asphalt road, clenching one hand in the other while he watched them close the ambulance doors. Jake ran over to Tommy, and Karen and Justin ran over to them. When they were all together, Jake said “we’ve got to go to my house, I have to call my mom.”

“I already called my dad,” Tommy said, “and told him that Aemilia was hurt. He said he would tell her parents.”

“But they don’t know what hospital she’s going to,” Jake said, “that’s why I have to call. Come on.”

The ambulance was backing into a three point turn, and as it pulled out onto the asphalt the rotating lights came on, and by the time it reached the intersection the siren was wailing as well. Jake and the three of them, he was very conscious that there weren’t four people behind him, ran after the ambulance to the intersection, then took the right to Jake’s house, where they ran flat out.

To Jake, the rest of the day seemed to pass in a daze. When they got to Jake’s house, all four of them huffing and puffing, he dialed his mom’s work, the number for emergencies only, misdialed once, and had to hang up the phone and try again. When he got it right, a receptionist asked him who he was calling for, and he was put on hold. After what seemed like an hour, his mom came on the phone, and at that point he could barely hold himself together as the story of finding Aemilia on the shore, the ambulance, and that she was going to his mom’s hospital all came tumbling out.

“Jake,” his mom said over the phone, “I want you to call your dad and tell him what you told me, he’ll be able to call Aemilia’s parents, I’m coming home to get you all right now,” she said, somehow knowing that his friends were with him, “sit tight, alright. I love you.”

“I love you too mom,” Jake said, and the line went dead. He called his dad right after that, and breathlessly relayed the story again, this time trying to suck it up for his old man.

“You did the right thing,” Carter said back to his son, sensing the brittle shell behind which a roiling hurricane of emotions was spinning, “I’m very proud of you. I’ll call Gavin and Margery, let them know. Have you talked to your mom yet?”

Jake told him about calling her first when he got home, and how she was coming to get them. “That’s good, I’ll call the rest of the parents as well, let them know you’ll be at the hospital.” A pause, then “Jake, do you know what happened?”

“No,” Jake said, truthfully, “I have no idea.”

Anita arrived at the house ten minutes later, swept all of the kids up into her incredibly crowded car, Justin, Karen, and Tommy all crammed in the back seat, and made the return journey to the hospital. She took them in and led them to a waiting room, where there were a series of hard blue plastic chairs bolted to a rail against the wall. She sat with them there, there weren’t that many people in the waiting room at that time of day, and took in the unnatural silence of the group. Usually when you got them together you couldn’t get them to shut up, car trips were a constant battle of “quiet, quiet,” just to be repeated a minute later as the volume inevitably rose again. This silence, it felt heartbreaking.

She sat beside Jake, on the edge of the group, and after a few minutes of quiet leaned over and asked him “do you

remember anything the ambulance paramedics said?”

Jake shook his head. “No, they yelled at her until she woke up a little, and then put her on the stretcher with big blocks beside her head, and that was it.”

Anita nodded, “That’s fine, that’s very normal, when they think a person might have had a head injury.”

“She was bleeding,” Jake said, repeating what he had said over the phone before.

“She could have fallen down,” Anita said, deliberately pushing the words ‘attack’ and ‘abduction’ out of her mind. She wondered if she only went there because of what they had seen on TV so recently about Jake’s friend George. Or maybe it was natural to go there. Did the situation really warrant it?

The sliding doors opened beside the waiting room and Anita could hear the sound of running feet, a sound she was familiar with in this part of the hospital, and in burst Gavin, Aemilia’s dad, and he ran straight to the counter, talking a mile a minute to the receptionist.

“I’ll be right back,” Anita said to Jake, who had looked up at Gavin as he ran in, and walked over to the distraught man. When she said his name, Gavin spun around like he had been frightened, and his stare was a million miles away. She said some things, which Jake couldn’t hear, then he said some things, then they walked off down the hall together, Jake imagined she was taking Aemilia’s dad to the room where Aemilia was still sleeping, being kept for what his mom called ‘observation.’

The doors slid open again and in walked Justin's mom, who, after sweeping her gaze across the inside of the room, made a beeline for the sitting group of children. She asked where Anita was, and Jake told her about Gavin's appearance, and afterward she just sat with them, her hand rubbing Justin's back. Anita came back a few minutes after that, and brought Justin's mom over for a quick whispered conversation, before they both sat down, bookending the children in the waiting room.

Over the next thirty minutes Tommy's dad, Karen's dad, and Aemilia's mom arrived, the last one Anita led off in the same direction she had led her dad, then came back and sat next to Jake.

"Would you be okay here if I went back to work?" Anita asked him, boring her eyes into his, trying to understand the feelings behind his response.

"Yeah," he said, not offering much back in the way of emoting.

Anita stared at him for a second longer, then said "it looks like everything's going to be alright, she just needs to sleep now, but you might be able to see her at the end of the day, or tomorrow, if the doctor's okay with it."

"Mmm," Jake mumbled, staring at the tiles under the seats across from him. Anita could tell that something was eating him up, but couldn't tell what. Maybe he felt responsible, in some inconceivable version of kid's logic, for what had happened. Anita didn't understand it, she was

grateful that he hadn't been there. The words from the police officer that was in the room had been 'attack' and 'from behind', words that Anita was personally glad her son had no physical proximity to. It could have been any one of them, she thought, any one of the kids. And for a selfish moment, she was glad that at least it wasn't her own.

"I love you," she said, and kissed Jake on the top of the head. He didn't pretend to fight her off, as he so often did in front of his friends, the difference scared her, especially after so recently getting lost in the woods. Was that really only last week? *It's too much*, she thought as she got up and walked to the hallway leading back to her own wing of the hospital. She looked back at Jake, Justin, Karen, and Tommy, sitting surrounded by their parents, *it's just been too much*, and turned the corner.

Anita was correct in her assumption about Jake's thoughts, one of those freaky instances of parental premonition, Jake did feel responsible in some way, but he wasn't sure how. A thought was bobbing below the surface of his consciousness, but he just couldn't get a grip on it. Whatever it was was annoying him with the constant tap tap tapping it was doing to his intellect, a ceaseless tattoo of worry about nothing. What it left him with was a vague feeling of responsibility, like they could have all prevented this somehow, like it wasn't Aemilia alone who had gone off on her own, God knew why, to the pond, and somehow fell down, or worse. The anxiety it was producing felt like it was

eating him alive inside, and looking around, it seemed like each of the four of them was feeling some version of the same thing.

They stayed like that, in the waiting room, for hours, sloughing off parents back to their jobs like a snake sloughs off skin. Eventually it was just Anita who came by to check on them every hour, and the receptionist who was tasked with keeping an eye on them.

Sometime later, the light coming through the big sliding doors was the orange color of burnished copper, Aemilia's mom, Margery, made an appearance in the waiting room and sat down across from them. She raked her eyes across them all, they were looking up hopefully to her for more news, and smiled.

"Aemilia's going to be fine," she said, suppressing a sob, "she's so lucky to have friends like you. But you won't be able to see her tonight, the doctors want her to rest as much as she can. But they said you can visit her tomorrow, how does that sound?"

They looked from one to the other, very uncomfortable around this fragile sounding adult, the voice that sounded like it could crack at any second. And then it did.

"Thank you," she said, and a tear rewet the well-worn track down the side of her face, "thank you for finding my baby. If you hadn't, there's no telling..."

Margery cut herself off with her hand over her mouth, for a second it looked like she could go either way, into a fit of

sobs, with which Jake would have no idea how to deal, or back to more stability. Luckily for him, she composed herself, looked back at the group, at Jake, and said “I’ll get your mom.”

Jake didn’t know it, but Anita had scheduled a couple more hours on at the end of the day so she could be off to pick the kids up tomorrow and bring them to visit Aemilia when she could talk. And she was in the hospital anyway, why not. Margery talked to the receptionist, who made a call to another part of the hospital, and a couple minutes later Anita came and they had a quick conversation which ended with a long hug. Anita came over to the group, one less than a gang, with her purse hanging from her elbow. “Ready to go home?”

* * *

Anita took them all home in her cramped car, dropping each one off in turn, then finally pulling into their own house. They were only at home for a few minutes when Carter got home, and after a whispered conversation around the corner, they decided that tonight dinner would be provided by Ronald McDonald, loaded Jake up again in the car, and drove the ten minutes to the closest golden arches.

Anita kept vacillating between worry and more worry at Jake’s lack of affect. Some part of her told her that this was the normal response to something so awful, but another part questioned if this wasn’t too much, just too much, too soon.

Dear lord, she thought, he's only eleven, why does he have to deal with such things. When she was this age, she thought back, the worst thing she had to deal with was her grandmother's passing, but she wasn't even that close to the woman. That seemed positively cheery compared to this.

She didn't want to think about the premature end to the summer, but depending on what Aemilia said after she woke up tomorrow, and was questioned by the officer who would come back then, there would probably be an age curfew. They would still all see each other, she knew, in their living rooms around their various TV sets, but it wouldn't be like it was before, with the wide open world around them. It might not be like that even if there wasn't a curfew, with the rude introduction into the mix of danger, which could apparently strike anytime and anywhere.

After their dinner under the harsh fluorescent lights of the restaurant, they went home again, Jake threw away his half drunk milkshake, and they watched a short program on TV, to try to put a veneer of normalcy back on the day. But they could both tell that Jake wasn't in it, still staring inward, deep in thought. Anita hoped he wasn't blaming himself, whatever happened it wasn't his fault, but he wouldn't open up about it, no matter how many times they prodded.

Eventually it was time to send him off to bed, Carter and Anita stayed downstairs and discussed what had happened, and the possible repercussions of this startling event in their lives. Jake lay in bed in the dark with his eyes open, hearing

the murmuring sounds of his parents voices downstairs. Sometimes, he couldn't be sure, he thought he heard the tail end of a low breathing sound, a pant, from too high up, across the water, and he would open his eyes and realize he had been dreaming. His parents weren't talking anymore, probably asleep, his digital clock beside the bed said 3:15 AM. He turned the bedside lamp on, and tried to go to sleep again. He didn't hear the panting in his dreams for the rest of the night.

Chapter 11

The next day Anita woke him up before she left for work and told him that he could go over to anyone's house, but for now, the pond was off limits, and so was the woods. She told him that someone would pick them up when they could talk to Aemilia, if that could happen today, kissed him, and let him go back to sleep as she left the room. She turned off the desk lamp before she went, worrying all over again.

An hour later Jake did wake up to the sound of the phone downstairs, probably one of the others, and ran down in a half asleep state to get it before it finished. He picked up the beige plastic handset, which hung on a beige plastic base against the wall, on the last ring. It was Tommy, yes he would like to, sure he would call Justin, Tommy would take care of calling Karen? Sounds good. He hung up the handset, the base making a tiny bell tinkle, and ran upstairs again to dress. They were all going to Tommy's house.

On his way over he ran into Justin, and as they approached Tommy's house they heard the sound of feet slapping on the sidewalk behind them, and found Karen running to catch up. They three came to the door together, and Tommy looked

relieved to see them all standing there at once, not having to wait for someone to make it, and never showing up.

They played video games all morning, a fighter that Karen of course beat them all handily at, even when forced to use the weakest character. Then they had some lunch, peanut butter and jelly sandwiches which they made themselves from ingredients in the kitchen, on which Justin's had way too much jelly, which slopped out of the end with every bite. Afterward, they popped in the VHS of *The Princess Bride*, and hungrily awaited that infamous line, *you son of a bitch!*

None of them would admit to the others, in fact it never even came up, that they would have chosen to do the same set of outdoor activities even if each of their parents hadn't curfewed them inside. The spectre of an antagonist, a tall dark man who stalks the treeline and hits girls on the head, knocking them out cold, for some confusing but nevertheless nefarious reason, had reared itself in their heads. Aemilia was the tallest of them, the strongest of them, the fact that someone had come up and cold-cocked her was almost unthinkable.

The phone started ringing right as the magician's wife was screaming about *true love*, and Tommy, who had seen the movie at least fifteen times, said "I'll get it," and walked over to the warbling black plastic base in the kitchen. He picked up the wireless receiver with the stubby black antenna on the top and pressed one of the buttons lit up with green backlight on the pad.

“Hey Mrs. Tower,” Tommy said after a second, and Jake looked around, he was talking to his mom. “Uh huh, yeah, okay,” Tommy said, “we’ll be ready, okay bye.” He brought the handset away from his face and pressed another soft plastic button, eliciting a beep.

“Aemilia’s awake,” Tommy said, and at her name everyone turned around to look at him, the movie, with its phonetic distinctions between “true love” and “to blave” forgotten, “Justin’s mom’s gonna pick us up in a couple minutes.” They looked at each other, Tommy on one side of the house, the other three around the TV, all afraid of what they might find in the hospital, in the hospital bed, when they arrived. Would she still be the same, wasn’t it possible that a knock to the head changed people? It certainly did in TV shows, but how realistic was that? They would find out, Tommy thought, soon enough.

True to Anita’s word, Justin’s mom showed up not four minutes later in the driveway and honked her horn twice. Tommy, Jake, Karen, and Justin had been milling around the bottom of the staircase, waiting after they had their shoes on, but now all four raced out the door, Tommy locking it behind him with his key. They drove to the hospital in relative silence with Justin’s mom, she wasn’t surprised at this drastic change of attitude, they’d all been through a shock, but she would have preferred them to be horsing around in the back like they normally did. *Maybe soon, she thought, maybe once this is all behind us, those days will be back.* But somewhere

inside she knew that the tape cassette of childhood is set on record, not rewind.

Anita met them just inside the entrance, a different entrance than they had come to yesterday, *that was the emergency room entrance*, Jake remembered, and led them past the receptionist desk to the left, down a hallway that smelled like some sort of sweet antiseptic. There was a textured light brown plastic rail at shoulder height, and Justin put his hand out to touch it, but his mom, who was bringing up the rear, grabbed his arm and put it back at his side. *Who knew*, she thought, *maybe Anita, how many diseases and diseased roamed the halls.*

None was the answer to that, this was the observation wing, no one truly contagious was brought here, and Aemilia's presence, they didn't know, meant that the physicians thought she was on the up and up, ready to be released in the next 24 hours. They turned two corners, the beige walls and nondescript wallpaper (with a faint plastic shine) blending into each other, making every hallway look like the last, save for the misplaced IV stands. Jake didn't know how his mom did it, but eventually they reached a room with a door closed, and she knocked softly on it.

Jake heard Gavin's voice on the other side "come in," and they opened the door. Aemilia was sitting upright, supported by the head of a folding bed behind her, talking to her dad, who was sitting in a chair beside the bed. She had a gauzy white bandage wrapped around her head, like in the cartoons,

and her hair shot up out of the back of it in a ponytail. She was dressed in some kind of weird baggy white shirt with dots all over it, not something she would have normally worn, but the fluorescent light above the head of the bed showed her face light up as she recognized her friends.

At this sign of recognition, and the banishment of the possibility of a total brain wipe, Jake's fears relaxed away. "Hey guys," she said, a little softer than he expected, but it really was her, all the same. As they moved into the room together, Jake spied Margery asleep on the couch against the doorside wall, where the lights in the ceiling were turned off. They must have stayed with her all night, Jake thought.

Gavin smiled too and stood up, moving the chair back away from the bed in the process, giving them room to stand in a line. As they approached the bed, Gavin walked over to talk to Anita, his tired eyes swiveling back one last time to check on Aemilia, who was now nearly hidden behind the wall of children.

"What happened," Justin asked first, and Tommy elbowed him in the side. "Whaaat!?" he whined.

"I don't remember," Aemilia said, "it's all like a dream, but I don't remember falling down."

"You fell down?" Tommy asked.

"That's what the cops said," she replied, "just my footprints in the gravel that morning. I must have fallen down and hit my head. I had the craziest dreams afterward, but I don't remember falling."

A visible tension left the four who were lined up, the spectre of an unknown attacker gone. “Good, I mean,” Justin said, and Karen shot a look at him, “I mean good that no one attacked you, that would be awful.”

“Yeah, if I couldn’t fend off the boogeyman, you wouldn’t stand a chance,” Aemilia said, and despite himself, Justin laughed, mostly with relief.

“How’s your head,” Karen asked.

“Oh, this,” and she touched the winding around her head, “is just to keep the gauze in place, I got three stitches, but besides that I’m fine.”

“Like, big stitches?” Justin asked, and Aemilia shrugged.

“What were you doing down at the pond anyway?” Jake asked, wondering if she really was planning to go through that morning. Maybe that’s how she hit her head.

“I don’t know,” Aemilia said, then her face relaxed into a polite smile and said “I don’t think we’ve met. I’m Aemilia, what’s your name?”

* * *

At that sound, a trigger phrase that Gavin was hoping he wouldn’t hear, he abruptly left Anita at the door and came back over to Aemilia’s bedside. Luckily Jake was struck dumb by this question from Aemilia, and he was able to usher the children away from the bedside and toward Anita with his arms around them. “I think it’s time to go,” Gavin said,

barely covering the waver in his voice, “Aemilia needs her rest now.”

“Come on,” Anita said, and motioned to the four kids from the doorway. They looked back at Aemilia, and she said “thanks for coming!”

They waved back as they moved toward Anita, Jake a little hesitantly, and Anita pulled them through the door, shutting it behind them. Now safely on the other side of the door, Anita tried to explain in a way that wouldn’t frighten them.

“Aemilia, she can’t remember things so well right now,” Anita said to them, each of the kids staring back at her, needing explanation. “It’s very common in concussions, which is what Aemilia had, and why she was passed out. It’ll get better as time goes on, but you’ll need to be gentle with her for now. She might not remember things she used to know, or be able to keep things in mind. Does that make sense?”

They all nodded, but Jake felt personally betrayed, for some reason he’d been the only one affected. It had a weird lightening effect, like he was less real if she couldn’t remember him, like it would be so easy for him to disappear if just a few more people forgot. “But why is it just me?” He asked, not meaning to sound so whiny when he did.

But Anita understood his pain and confusion, the feeling was so alien, the same one she felt earlier in the day when she went in to visit, and Aemilia, the girl who had been at her house a million times, had thought she was just another

nurse. “I don’t know,” she said, and put a hand on his shoulder, “we don’t know why some memories are affected, and some aren’t. But it should all come back to her, in the next few weeks.” It was so little to give, she knew, the hope of change, but they knew so little about head injuries, and Aemilia’s memory loss was surprisingly large for what appeared to be a mild concussion. With careful probing, they had discovered that she didn’t recall her parents’ recent separation at all, and Gavin and Margery had asked Anita not to mention it. She wondered if they were going to try to start over, lord knew they needed a reset.

“Has... Aemilia talked to you about her parents at all?” She asked.

“I mean, not really,” Tommy said.

“Nothing recent?” Anita asked, and Tommy shook his head.

“Ah, well nevermind,” she said, and was relieved at not having to include the kids in this deception. “She’s getting discharged tomorrow,” she said, “you’ll be able to see her then, but for now, it might be a good idea to go back home.”

Justin’s mom was in the waiting room beside reception, reading another glossy magazine with celebrity pictures on the cover, when they came back in. She drove them back to Tommy’s house and dropped them off, just as silent as when they had come, and told Justin that they all should stay in for the rest of the day anyway. He didn’t argue, and they all trudged into the house again.

Coming back into the house, Jake somehow felt worse than before they'd left it, and kicked his shoes into the corner. Tommy and Karen were sullen too, Justin was leaning up against the stair rail, taking extra time to untie his laces. Looking up, Jake saw that they were in their own worlds of worry, that it wasn't just him who'd been slighted.

"Do you think she hit her head," Jake began, "trying to go through?"

"Through the puddle?" Tommy replied, "wouldn't she have been all wet if she did?"

"Ah, yeah," Jake said, then, against all self preservation, he decided to go straight to the heart of the matter. "Why can't she remember *me*?"

He looked around the group, they were all looking at him. Justin shrugged, and Karen said "Your mom said the memory loss was normal-"

"Yeah, but why me," he cut her off, "why not any of you, and only me?"

Tommy, sensing the fragile anger, stepped up "It's not just you," he said, "we're all upset. It worried me to see her like that, I think I can speak for everyone that it worried all of us. How much doesn't she remember? You only saw yourself, but what about all the things we've done together, how much of that's left?" He saw Karen's face draw inwards, and felt strong enough, in that moment, to admit to his own matching emotion. "It scared me, it scared all of us. But your

mom said she'll go back to normal, so we just have to wait," Tommy said.

Jake, suddenly ashamed of his inability to see his friends' pain, nodded his head. "Yeah," he said, and looked to Karen, whose eyes were shining with unshed tears. "Yeah, she'll be okay soon, we just have to wait for her to come back to us." This time it was Karen's turn to nod.

* * *

Aemilia came back home the next day, and as per their parents' warning, they took it easy and stayed inside all day playing video games with her, when they could. She was overcome with awesome headaches several times that day, and they sat and talked while she laid down with her eyes closed during. As painful as it was to him, Jake introduced himself again to Aemilia, and they tried to explain to her that Jake had been here the whole time, that Jake wasn't a new friend. She never seemed to really believe it, but they got on well anyway.

Jake could swear that she acted different, but in what way he couldn't quite put words to, besides the memory loss. But he didn't feel so bad as the day went on, and through normal conversation they uncovered more holes in her memory. This adventure she remembered fine, but that one she couldn't recall at all. Did they go to the mall the other weekend? Yes,

but not the time before that, when they had seen George on the TV.

Jake wanted to try out something, a reference to their biggest adventure yet. “We thought you might be on the other side, that’s when I found you.”

“The other side?” Aemilia asked. Jake saw Tommy shoot him a sharp look.

“Yeah, of the woods,” Jake pivoted smoothly, having been prepared for a memory gap.

“Is that near the pond,” she asked, “the pond where you found me?”

“Uh, yeah,” Jake said, not being prepared for a deeper investigation, “on the other side of the pond.”

“I dreamed of those woods,” she said, “it was the craziest dream, I don’t even remember going to that pond.”

“What *do* you remember, from that morning?” Karen asked.

“I don’t think I remember anything, not really. The night before seemed normal, and then I wake up in the hospital.”

“Do you normally sleepwalk?” Karen said, her brow bunching up quizzically.

“No, not that I remember,” she looked up at Karen, seeing if she remembered right.

“I didn’t think you did,” Karen said, and Aemilia’s face relaxed.

“I think I just don’t remember, I don’t think I slept-walked over there,” she said, “I didn’t even know there *was* a

pond there.”

This had been something they discovered, she had completely forgotten the pond and everything they did there. But of course they'd found her there, Jake thought, the pond had become very important to all of them, not just Jake. He wasn't sure what she was trying to do there, or why she had taken off that morning, but apparently it had to do somehow with the pond.

At six, Aemilia's mom came home, and they were politely but firmly ushered out the front door. As they were leaving, they saw Aemilia's dad's car drive up into the driveway, and he waved at them as he went into the house. They walked back to their respective intersections, where one by one they peeled off, back to their own houses.

When Jake got home Anita gave him some light questioning, trying to infer both Aemilia's and his conditions, when she got out of him the other pockets of memory loss she'd sustained from her injury. Anita put on a brave face, told him that things would get better with time, but internally she was very worried. Memory loss like that was more associated with traumatic brain injury, not a medium concussion. Gavin and Margery had told her that the scans all came back fine, but that there would always be the chance of an undiagnosed brain bleed in the future. But nothing suggested there was anything wrong right now, so far. Anita sampled from her own jar of hope, which she so liberally

doled out to Jake, and hoped that things would come back to normal for his friend.

* * *

The next morning, Jake was woken by his alarm clock, which had a weekly alarm for Saturday, even though he had told his parents that he wasn't going out fishing that morning. But the old routine, slapping the top of the alarm clock, seeing the faint tinge of light beyond the window, eased his heart, and he thought that maybe he would just go out that morning, even if no one would be there to fish with him.

He got his clothes on, grabbed his fishing pole, went downstairs, and opened the fridge to get the box of wax worms out of the crisper drawer. But when he opened it, it was empty. *Of course*, he thought, that was earlier in the week he said he didn't want to go, and his dad hadn't gotten any more on Friday after work. He closed the drawer and the refrigerator, and decided that he would try the baits in his clear tackle box again. George was probably wrong anyway.

The memory of George slapped him in the face like a cold wet towel, and he paused for a moment with his hand on the fridge door. Maybe he didn't really want to go out this morning. He realized that in his heart he thought that George would be there, sitting just like normal, like any other day. He hadn't really thought George was gone, and not only that, but

that there was no George, not really, not the person he thought he knew.

But he straightened his head and pushed off the fridge handle, toward the counter. He could still fish, he thought, he didn't need some stinking old pedo to fish with, he could fish on his own. It wasn't like he wasn't catching lots of fish anyway, he was doing just fine. *I'll just go out there and find out which baits work, and which ones don't, and damn that old fool,* he thought. Jake wrote "Gone Fishing" on the top sheet of the notepad on the counter, tore it off, and wedged it underneath the rubber magnetized gasket on the side of the fridge door, where his parents would see it when they woke up.

With his clear plastic bait box, and his pole with the bobber and hook still strung up on the first eye, he went out the door and closed it behind him. Carter heard the door close, just like he heard the alarm clock, the elephant stampede down the stairs, and the fridge door. Anita heard them too. He looked over to her and said "that's probably for the best." She nodded, and they went back to sleep.

* * *

As the summer went on, the mornings grew hotter, and Jake seldom went out with even a windbreaker on, as he was this morning, trooping down the sidewalk in his t-shirt and shorts, bait box in one hand and fishing pole in the other. The mist which had dominated the morning tableau when he

started fishing in the spring was nearly burnt off by the time he left the house, and even though the sun was barely over the horizon by the time he got to the pond, the warm air had sucked up all but the most stubborn layer of gossamer white on the surface of the water.

He rounded the corner of the treeline and choked in mid-step, bringing his front foot down a little short of where it would normally go, and stumbled forward. There was someone sitting on his bench, not their bench, not anymore. That hope leapt up in his heart again, but he quickly quashed it down, it wasn't George, it was just someone else. Fine, he would sit on the bench beside that one, where he could be alone.

He walked through the gravel, pushing little waves of it out with the sides of his shoes, as he approached the benches on this side of the pond. He was almost to the closest bench, when he made out a long, thin pole sticking out from the man, pointing over the water. No, it's not George, he thought, it's just another man, just another fishing man. But he had to get closer, he had to know.

The sun got higher every second, lightening up the day bit by bit, and it shone on the invisible line, making a line of fire out to a bobber in the pond. Jake approached carefully, but nonchalantly, so he could turn off at the last minute, when the man turned around and it was just a stranger, someone he hadn't ever seen before. Just two people, fishing in the pond,

nothing weird about that, I'll stay over here thank you very much, just after I get a good look at you.

The man's silhouette was difficult to distinguish against the gray gravel shore behind him, Jake's vision was tunneling into the face between the collar of the shirt and the Bogart hat on top. It was impossible to see the outline from this far away, and he walked in closer, keeping that same nonchalant air about him. *No problem, I'll just walk up and say hello, one fisherman to another*, he thought, *nothing weird about that*. Nope, nothing weird at all.

But when the man turned at the sound of Jake's footsteps, when the head swiveled around, and George's face lit up from the wan light of the rising sun, and his face cracked into a smile in greeting, Jake knew there was something weird, something very weird after all. Jake kept approaching, but now he held his pole upright between him and the very George-like figure on the bench. He blinked, once, twice, but the face didn't go away, it stubbornly and impossibly stuck to the man sitting on the bench.

"Heya kiddo," George said as Jake continued approaching, his attempted nonchalant steps having turned into shuffles. George's smile fell as he noticed this change in posture, he must not be able to see my face, Jake thought, with the sun behind me. Or else he would have run, he surely would have run by now, because he would know that I know, that I know he had escaped from prison.

Something caught his eye above and to the right of George's face, and Jake flicked his eyes up as fast as he could. A patch of water about two feet off the shore of the pond wasn't steaming, it completely lacked the white blanket covering the rest of the pond. Jake looked back to George, and for the first time saw, really saw, the raincoat, which he thought of as an anachronism the same as George's funny hat, folded over the back of the bench, and the boots, not shoes, on George's feet.

He shuffled up to the edge of the bench, staring at the raincoat, and a drop of water fell off of it, into the gravel behind the bench. George followed his eyes to the raincoat, and for a moment, they were a concentrated force of interrogation. Then Jake broke off and looked at the old man quizzically looking at his own raincoat.

"You're from the other side, aren't you," Jake asked, and George looked up. "From there," he said, and pointed to the patch of water mysteriously devoid of steam over George's shoulder. Jake saw the excuse, the deflection, George had been rapidly assembling fall apart on his tongue, as Jake pointed to the patch of water.

"You've been?" George asked, his voice clicking as he swallowed hard.

"Yeah," Jake said, "with my friends."

George sighed, "Cat's out of the bag, huh? I thought I saw y'all going over once. I don't know why I thought it could stay

secret for so long.” He looked up again, “have you told anyone else?”

“No,” Jake said defensively, “only the gang and I know.” Now it was Jake’s turn. “You were never a senator?” Jake asked, hoping beyond hope at the answer.

George chuckled, “no, no, I’m not a senator. I’m retired, which is probably close to the same.” He sat back and looked at his bobber in the pond, “some people just have more ambition than others, I think.”

Jake, finally knowing in his mind what he knew in his heart all along, that this wasn’t the same man on the TV, relaxed his arm and let the fishing pole swing beside him. He walked over and sat down on the bench beside George, put down his tackle box, felt his eyes tear up, and held out his hand. “Well hello, George from the other side,” he said thickly.

George’s face broke into a smile of relief, and he shook Jake’s hand. “Actually, I am from this side,” George said, and Jake’s eyebrows went up. George looked out at the pond again, out at the bobber, looking for all the world like a relieved Atlas, and asked “You got time for a story?”

Chapter 12

The year was 1960, and George Lloyd was a broken man. He went to the pond often, a hobby that passed out of favor during his childhood had come back with a vengeance over the last few weeks. Others thought him strange, sitting in the gravel off the road beside this unnamed pond, with a fishing pole in his hands. *Let them*, he thought. Let them, let them, the thought had gone away over time, along with all other thoughts, as the bobber floated silently on the surface of the water. What he liked about fishing was that it swept everything else away, and for a few hours it was just him and the water, no empty house, no bed that was now too wide for one, no drawer of clothes that he couldn't bear to open or throw out. There was nothing but the water.

All day he would fish, every day, nothing but fish. He bought food from the grocer's and spent just enough time inside that house to keep himself alive, eating and sleeping. That house, it was like a tomb now, her tomb. But she didn't have a tomb, just a grave, a hole in the ground with a pretty headstone, not five miles away. He hadn't been back since the funeral.

When his dad passed not two weeks later, he barely felt anything at all. Now there was no one in the world, nothing for him. He was like this bobber, the traitorous thought slid into his mind, if he cut the line and let it float out in the pond. No, he thought, and chased the thought away. I am already the bobber.

He didn't keep the fish, didn't need to, not with the kind of money he had inherited as a consolation prize for total alienation. And anyway, if he kept every fish he caught, he would have a pile up to his shoulder by the end of the day. It was a good pond, he thought, when he allowed the thought to come, it had too many fish, just ready to be caught. Too many fish by far, for a pond its size.

He picked a different spot every day, his big decision, and sat down on the bank until the sun went down. There weren't benches back then, just the unbroken gravel shore, and if you sat back far enough, you didn't get your trousers wet from the moist sand underneath. One day, in the early days of winter, he sat down on a blanket he took on a whim that morning, and his coat ballooned around him like an igloo with the trapped air. He picked up the rod, hooked on a waxworm, and cast out.

How long could he keep doing this for? He was sure his job at the magazine wasn't there anymore. How many of those phone calls that he hadn't picked up had been from work asking where he was, reminding him that bereavement leave was only two days. He didn't want to go back to copyediting,

so he didn't. She had gotten him into that job anyway, with her indomitable will and drive, at the same company where she was a cover artist. It had been a beautiful, wonderful few years, those halcyon days from the middle of college to last year, their fifth anniversary. The light had dimmed in those memories; fatigue, the doctor, the treatments. The nausea and the vomiting, the God awful vomiting. She shrank to a skeleton and there was nothing-

He was back at the pond, forcibly wrenched from the slippery slopes of grief. He wouldn't let himself go there again, if he went there again, he might not ever come back. Best to just fish, just fish and fish and fish. What would he do when winter really came around? Maybe take up ice fishing, he thought, and smiled a little at the idea of him with an auger out on the frozen pond. It was very speculative, he didn't like to plan more than a day ahead, not anymore, living in the now was the best way to keep the pain away.

The bobber drifted with the breeze, he let it, seldom reeling in and recasting, sometimes going an hour without realizing it had drifted up to the shore and was stranded on the rocks, where no fish would find it. Or at least no fish big enough to get the hook, tiny as it was, in their mouths. Although there had been some enterprising individuals, he recalled a baby bluegill who had taken the waxworm and gotten just the tip of the hook lodged in the side of its mouth. *That fish was going places, he thought, he had spunk.*

The bobber drifted to the left on the breeze, further and further, and suddenly turned side-up on the water. George noticed it only a second later, and jerked the rod, feeling no resistance, no weight, at the end of the hook. The bobber jumped forward a little bit, and settled down again on its side. *Huh*, he thought, *broken bobber*. He didn't think they *could* break, maybe he'd gotten a funny one. No matter, it still did its job, it would go under when something took the-

Was that the hook, floating on the top of the water beside the bobber? With the lead split-shot clamped around the eye? Yes, it was, he could see the pale yellow of the waxworm on the end. He sighed and reeled in on the metal rod, the line coming in wet, and recast out further into the pond. This time the bobber set up right on the surface, and squinting his eyes, he couldn't see the hook next to it. *We'll see*, he thought, he'd never had a busted jig like that.

Hours passed, the sun rose high, and started on its precipitous descent into the West, George took off his coat and laid it on the blanket beside him. The blanket, he hadn't realized when he took it in the morning, in the dark they all looked the same. This was the picnic blanket, and he tried to keep his eyes clamped on the surface of the water, not daring to look down. If he looked down, he might be lost, and he didn't want to go back to those days, the days in golden sunlight, where picnics were eaten together, instead of bologna sandwiches eaten alone.

Sometimes he felt a tickle on the sides of his face, and reached up to find tears. It happened every so often, he couldn't tell what triggered it, but he felt it now, the traitorous runnel of salt water making its way down his stubbled cheek. He had to get up, he had to get away from this blanket. He would come back later for it, he thought, when he left, but he had to get away from this hole he was falling into.

He scrambled to his feet with his fishing rod held awkwardly out in one hand in front of him, and took a walk down the shore to the left. He could sit over here, he thought. Yes, that would be a good spot indeed. As he walked to the new spot, he dragged the bobber along the shore in his wake, and, getting ready to settle down again, he looked up and saw the white stripe sitting up next to the red stripe. It was sideways again.

He was already up, he thought, no reason not to look. It's a sandbar, he thought, or a gravel bar, whatever they would call it in a pond, a place where the gravel is humped up next to the surface, where the bobber is dragging the bottom. But when he stopped in front of the sideways bobber, he couldn't see the gravel brushing the surface of the water. In fact, he squinted into the water, he couldn't see the bottom at all. Here was the bottom, next to his feet, there was the bottom, leading up to the bobber. But then suddenly it wasn't there. He traced the absence with his eyes, a roughly circular hole in the pond bottom. Was it some kind of drainage shaft, he thought. Something for some municipal water supply? Was

this a reservoir? He realized he didn't know, and for the first time questioned whether or not fish were regularly swimming around in his tap water, and thought back to all the leaks he had taken in this particular pond. His mouth drew down.

Just how deep was it? He bent over, and found a white rock with bright scrapes across its surface, about the size of a half dollar. He tossed it underhand into the circle, ready to track its descent with his eyes, and it did descend, for a second. But then it was back. *Plop plop plop* was the sound it made as it entered the water, boomeranged back, exited, and entered again. Now it was floating, by God it was floating on the surface of the water itself.

Maybe there was something wrong with these rocks. He reached down and picked up another one, and dropped it into the water right in front of his shoes. It sank, like a stone. Still keeping the bobbing white rock in his view, he bent down again, picked up the same, now submerged stone, and tossed it into the circle. It too bobbed back and forth on the surface of the water. The ripples made from tossing it in were moving the white rock to the edge of the circle, and as George watched, it tumbled over some unseen ledge, and he was able to track it the three inches to the bottom, where it stood out against the dark gray substrate.

He walked out, right out into the pond, the cold water invaded his shoes instantly, clamping his toes with a wet vice. He was up to ankle deep water when he leaned over and

picked up the second rock still bobbing on the surface of the pond. Lowering his hand with the rod in it for counterbalance, he lifted his hand with the rock, and slammed it down into the circle as hard as he could. He could see it go down down down, stop against what he thought was a reflection of the sky, but was now not so sure, and start to move up up up, gaining speed. He moved his head out of the way barely in time as the rock zipped up through the surface of the water and shot ten feet into the sky, where George tried to keep an eye on it, black against the blue. Its return wasn't so accurate, and it landed beside the circle with a plop in the shallow water.

George reeled in his rod, stopping only when the bobber was caught at the tip, and thrust the pole down into the circle. You weren't supposed to get these metal poles wet, he'd been warned by the guy at the tackle shop, but as George swished the pole around, he wasn't sure it *was* getting wet. He didn't feel any resistance at all, and the bobber was swinging wildly back and forth at the end of the pole, like it was flying around in the air.

He looked down into the circle, at his bobber hanging up against a cloudy backdrop, barely feeling the water squish in between his toes, and didn't stop himself as he started to lean forward. The surface was coming, closer and closer, and he could swear the sky was rising up to meet him. The water gobbled up inches of fishing pole, then feet, then it slapped against his face, and the bracing cold shocked him into

gasping for breath. But he was already under, he thought he would die from inhaling the water, but what came into his lungs was a clear cold breath of air.

He was rising out of the puddle, then, suddenly not rising any more. He was falling, falling back into the puddle, but what he saw was a treeline just like the treeline he had sat down next to. The gravel shore was there too, he was in a reflection. Somehow, he had passed through the mirror.

George flailed his arms around and splashed down to either side of the circle, grasping an edge of gravel against what his body told him was an endless pit. His arms were thrown out, and he tried to kick his legs under him to swim the rest of the way out, but his legs were so heavy, and they seemed to only want to lay on the surface. He felt the cold water creeping up his calf, and thought that his leg might be laying on top of the water. He pushed forward with his foot experimentally, and felt gravel yield under it, he was somehow in a sitting position, where his legs were pushing up against a skim of gravel, but his upper body was above that same skim. He tried to push his legs back around once again, but they were too heavy to lift, so he bent them out sideways and swung them around until they were lying behind him and he was belly down in the pond. He reached forward with his hands, one still grasping the fishing pole, and grabbed the edge of the gravel dropoff, hauling himself forward and trying to kick his legs in the weird gravity. Finally he was far enough that he could plant his heels on the opposite edge,

and used this leverage to haul himself up on his hands, which he used to walk his upper body over into the rest of the pond.

The water here was freezing, he could swear the air was colder too, and he felt that cold water seep into his khakis as he pushed his knee down into the gravel and got his other foot under him, rising unsteadily to his feet on the edge of the circle. He looked left, he looked right, was he on the other side of the looking glass? Their picnic blanket, which he had fled, was nowhere to be seen on the shore. He really was somewhere else, but where? As George took his first hesitant steps into that new world, he felt something growing inside himself. It was hope.

* * *

After that first foray to the other side, and the splashing ascent back to this one, George took to crossing over every day. In those days there was no road to the pond, the only thing signifying its existence in either neighborhood was a break in the trees from the road that went parallel to its shore, so George never felt any fear of anyone seeing him go through. *And what if they did*, George didn't pay much mind to the thought, as far as he was concerned, this may just be something that people knew about, no matter how unlikely that was.

The half-finished development was mirrored on the other side of the pond, the sound of bulldozers filled the air to the

northern half of what would become the neighborhood, and construction sounds could be heard from the edge of the pond. One day he took a walk down the road to where his house was, but the lot was empty over here. The line of progress hadn't yet reached this spot, it seemed that no one had bought that location just yet, the sign on the lot still said "For Sale, Build Your Dream Home!"

The thought that someone else could come along and snatch up this plot of land filled George with a vague sense of dread, like that of being erased. Would he show up, with Marie, in a month, two months, select this lot, and start building their house? Would the cancer even then be growing in Marie's bones? But was it possible, just possible, that Marie was here, that he could catch a glimpse of her, and for even one second be sent back to that time and place where nothing could go wrong and the future lay before them like an eager highway?

It was possible, George decided, but to see what he wanted to see, he would need information. He went to the nearby library, thank God it was already built, he didn't have a car on this side to drive over to the city one, and looked through the phone book. He coarsely skipped letters and letters, slowing down as he got to the L section, thinking of the book that would come next year to his door that would be missing a name next to his. He turned page after page, getting to Lo, and started scanning down the columns. Then he found it, "Lloyd, George." That was all, Marie's name wasn't here. Was

she already gone over here, had the cancer come sooner, had they not even met?

He flipped sections of the book over, moving to the “S” chapter. They could have never met, he thought, she still might be here. What were the chances of two people just missing each other, flying by, when they were destined to be together? It felt awful, the idea of a near miss, but he had to know. The Sc section came up, and he hungrily consumed names from column to column until he found “Schubaker, Marie”. She was alive, at least someone with her name. It could be anyone though, he said to himself, it might not really be her. But he had to know, he thought, he had to know for sure.

He went back early that day, made a trip to the bank, and extracted four thousand dollars in large bills, which he placed in a briefcase bought specially for the trip. The next day he went over, with the aid of the thick light-brown rope he had pegged into place on both sides, covered in rain gear, with the briefcase held out behind him. He stripped off the rain gear and hid it in the forest, at the location where the rope was pegged into the ground, and started his walk to the road, but not before placing the hat in the briefcase on his head. Once he got to the road, he started walking in the direction of the auto dealer, several miles away, with his thumb out. He thought, if people over here were anything like people over there, he would catch a ride at some point.

Luckily he was right, and was saved the five mile walk by a family of four who let him ride in the back with their two sons. He regaled them with his planned story, a car breakdown, which explained the need to get to the auto dealer, which they automatically assumed would have an attached repair shop. This one didn't, on the other side, but he hoped they would forget all about that by the time they arrived. At prompting, he told them about his job, editing magazine articles, and the boys took off on that, wanting to know what kinds of magazines he worked in. Unfortunately, he hadn't done any work for MAD magazine, his steady employment having, at least until recently, been with a home and garden magazine.

George knew they were coming up on it from the multicolored bunting that fluttered out over the road on the wind. The man pulled into the lot and George said a polite goodbye to the family as they proceeded on their errands. The dealership was not more than a squat building covered in colorful flags, with bright text in greasepaint written on the windows. He knew of it from reputation on the other side as a greasy little pit where money was king and few questions were asked, especially those regarding licensure or registration. He was happy to see that this at least was true across worlds, and a squat man in an oversized suit, the jacket of which looked like it was made out of upholstery fabric, was already running out the door towards him.

“John K. Simmons, my good man, nice to meet you,” the man yelled out, out of breath from the quick traversal of the lot, launching into his rehearsed spiel, which included a fair number of rhymes and references to the quality of the cars that came from this lot. George listened with half an ear, looking around at the cars lined up in front of the office, and beside the street. There were many old models, a couple new ones, but the lot tended to skew used. The blood was pumping now, and George felt invigorated like he hadn’t in so many weeks. He was on an adventure, and he would get himself an adventure car. A bright red interior jumped out at him from a car right in front of the office, no doubt placed there for that exact purpose, and he moved to it with the salesman still yammering in his ear about rock bottom prices.

Pleased with his placement, and the bright interior that inevitably drew the eye of many a buyer, John Simmons launched straight into his prepared talk about the Mustang without even finishing the sentence he was on. “I see the Mustang has caught your eye. With a red leather interior like that, I wouldn’t doubt it. That’s real leather, by the way. This baby came on the market at an unconventional time, we like to call it the 1959½ Ford Mustang, but it bills as the 1960 Mustang. This baby’s got it all, power steering, four speed automatic transmission, you couldn’t ask for a better car, and we’ve got it straight from the dealer so we can set those rock bottom prices. How does twenty five hundred clams sound to you?”

George was captivated by the car. He wasn't much of a car person, but he didn't remember anything like this on his side. He reached out to touch the chromed handle on the white painted door, and opened it, taking in the blood red interior. It seemed like everything was red, the seats, the floorboards, hell even the speedometer, which was laid out straight horizontally in between a fuel gauge and the RPM meter. He looked back, not much room for two others in the back, maybe if they scrunched their legs up, but nominally it looked like it sat four. He closed the door and walked around the front, which was parked toward the office. He nearly gasped. He supposed that the effect was meant for those who were discussing options behind the windows, so they would see the car leering in at them, but the front of the car had a positively ravenous persona. Something about the lines, the lights, the grill, this thing was meant to drink gasoline and chew road, and that's just what it would do.

He had gotten out more than he needed, way more, from the bank, just in case. He assumed that he wouldn't be able to extract money from the bank on this side, he might not even use the same one, and in a weird way the idea felt like stealing. He was planning on getting a used car, something cheap, since he would never be able to bring it over to have on his side. He could imagine it now, trying to drive it through the puddle and it ending up on it's roof on the other side, waterlogged, halfway out. No, this purchase would have to

stay on this side of the pond. But his blood was hot and he was on the scent of adventure, he was living again God dammit.

“Twenty four hundred,” he said, still staring at that hungry grill.

“Oh I don’t know about that,” John said to him, “it’s really quite new-”

“In cash,” George continued, and for the first time John K. Simmons really looked down at George’s briefcase. *Were there more than work papers in there*, he thought, and licked his lips unconsciously. Truthfully he needed the car off the lot, it had sat for too long. It was too weird, looked too different, and people didn’t like it. He heard that they weren’t selling so good all over the country; the ten thousand, of which he was ecstatic to get even one, probably wouldn’t be sold by the end of the year. Now he used his albatross to menace the signing customers through the window into higher loan rates, but he was perfectly happy to unload it completely.

“Oh um, well, let’s step into my office, shall we,” and John motioned to the side of the building, where a door was set in between two windows. Ten minutes later George was short twenty four bills but up one Ford Mustang, which roared like a lion and my God did that sucker go. He rolled out of the lot, and then really opened the throttle up on the straight track of undeveloped road going to the city. The speedometer needle moved right over to sixty so fast it nearly scared him, but at the same time filled his blood with the kind of fire one

expects when riding a bull or a wild horse. He liked this car, he thought, he liked this car a lot.

By the time he arrived at the address listed for Marie, maybe his Marie, maybe not, in the phone book, the taste of the car had soured in his mouth a bit. He had been rash in buying it, especially since nothing he bought over here could be taken back. He might as well have thrown the money away, where was he even going to park the thing? Maybe on the side of the road, next to the pond? Maybe he could ease it into some kind of back road, but would it get stolen? He wasn't sure, he didn't know how different things were over here. It was a problem he would have to sort out by the end of the night, unless he wanted to sleep in his car, and he didn't think it would make half as sexy a bed as it made a roadster.

The building at the address was an apartment building, four floors tall, with brick facing, or was it constructed through with brick? The front door had a little bell which jingled whenever someone went through, reminding him of a shop, but alerting *who* he had no idea. He could barely make out the shape of a staircase in the gloom when the door opened, but the difference in light between the cold winter day and the dark inside was too great to know for sure.

He was hoping for a house, something where he could tell if it was or wasn't her by the person who went in the door, the apartment made this much more difficult. People kept coming and going, he searched each face, but none were recognizable. This was so far into the city, further than they

had ever lived, even in college, he wasn't sure if she *would* live somewhere like this even if they hadn't moved into a house right after school. Despite the chilly air, the sun beat down into the car, against the red leather, and up at George, heating him like a greenhouse pepper, until he had to crack the window at his side to get some relief.

According to the watch on George's wrist, which he had replaced from the briefcase after the splash through the pond, it was eleven thirty in the morning. He did some mental math, realized he couldn't for the life of him figure out what day it was, and decided that he would stay watching the front door of the apartment until seven. That left eight good, long hours full of nothing. But it was worth, it just in case, for the slightest, smallest possibility, that Marie could be there. Seven would be enough time to come home from work, surely.

Committing to an eight hour car wait and doing it were two different things, and within the first thirty minutes he had read completely through the owner's manual of the Coupe and replaced it in the glove box. He lowered the window even more, the bright sunshine overwhelming the sluggish cold breeze, and stuck his elbow out through into the chilly fall day. The sense of being on a stakeout had crept up into the back of his mind when he started, which he tried to dismiss as being childish. He went right around to embracing it by the hour mark, and by the two hour mark he wasn't sure how cops did it. They must bring books, he thought, before

dismissing the idea. You couldn't be sure you saw everything if you were reading, you really had to just watch the place.

He longed for something he could even pretend to read, a newspaper, a phone book, anything, and by the four hour mark he was on his third read-through of the Coup's manual. *What a great car*, he thought, *I wish they would write more about it.*

A movement jerked his eye up from the index in the manual, and he was drawn to a walking figure down the street who had just rounded the corner. They were too far away for him to quite make out, but something about the way they walked, so familiar. As the person got closer he could see it was a woman, which he already knew in his heart, a woman wearing a full length white dress with red repeated designs scurrying over the fabric. She had a blue-green button up sweater, held together by the bottom few buttons, and was carrying a brown paper bag in front of her. She must have gotten off a bus, he thought, or could she have walked all the way from whatever grocery store she went to. She was coming closer, her image was clearer to George's eye and he felt himself pulling himself forward by the steering wheel to get a better look.

It was Marie. She was alive. He felt a weird juxtaposition between this new face, every bit the way he remembered her before, and the sunken gaunt face in the hospital bed, the face that had gone to sleep and hadn't woken up again. He felt like he was back in time, like he had gotten into H.G. Wells' time

machine and had spun back the clock three years. Would this Marie also die so soon, was there any point in seeing her, was it a betrayal to do so? He knew then, as he watched her walk into the apartment building and pay some small greeting to the person who must be sitting just inside the door, that he would try, even if all those questions were answered yes.

George looked down at his watch, it was only three in the afternoon. It sure felt longer to him, but all that time spun away, it was all worth it. He sat back in the seat, feeling his back wrench with the effort of being unkinked, and thought through his next plans. For what felt like so long now he hadn't had any plans, the pond had changed that, and this was the biggest change of all. *If I had to get her all over again*, he thought, *how would I do it?* His mind reeled back through their courtship in college, he wondered how much of what he remembered about her was true on this side, these many years later. Would she go for the widower George Lloyd?

* * *

Fall turned into winter, and spring found George sitting up in Marie's bed on Saturday morning, the book "Man and His Symbols" halfway done, and Marie sleeping soundlessly beside him, her back to him. If Jung could get a look at what was happening over here, George thought, he might have a few additions to make to the text. He looked over at Marie's back, the expanse of skin framed from above and below by the

sheets, backlit by the sunbeams coming through the half-shaded windows. It had been all too easy, he thought, replacing the bookmark and closing the book, to get Marie back. All too easy, except when he had to go back to the other side. Then there were the nights, the nights when the full weight of what he was doing would crash down on him. It was worse than cheating, somehow. This wasn't a widower moving on, this was a widower not letting go, polluting the memory by dipping from the well again. There were times he felt like he couldn't live with himself, that he had to cut it off, get back to his lonely life on the other side and move on. But she was here, and he kept coming back, no matter how many times he admonished himself.

The ring was heavy in his pocket. A new one, with a diamond set at the top. He wouldn't, couldn't, use the other ring, the ring that was in the top drawer in his bedroom on the other side, next to two wedding bands. When he thought of that jumble of metal, he could hardly face himself. But he had bought the ring anyway, the bittersweet emotions of loss and blooming remembered love turning the memory murky gray in his mind, like the mud at the bottom of a certain pond. He loved her, he had never stopped loving her, and he loved her all the same again. Maybe he needed a shrink, he thought, he probably did. But later, sometime later, not now, not yet.

She rolled over in bed and looked up at him, her eyes meeting his, and said "Penny for your thoughts."

George smiled, one of those smiles that she said she wasn't sure was happy or sad. That was new, he thought at the time, she had never said that about him before, on the other side. He said "I was just thinking of an errand I have to do."

"Oh," she said, and pushed herself up against the bed, the covers falling from her breasts, "and pray tell what would that be?"

George smiled, "Later," he said, and leaned in to kiss her.

* * *

There were so many lies, a web of lies really, that George had to keep up. He knew she would say yes, he was as certain now as he had been uncertain the first time he had proposed. He could see the love in her eyes that it had almost taken him too long to understand the first time around. She would say yes, and he could never leave again, he thought. He would make his new life here. Sometimes you didn't have to move on, sometimes, if you were lucky, you could go back to those good days again. If you could keep the guilt pushed down, that was.

The web of lies was surprisingly easy to spin, mostly they were truths from the other side, with things left out here and there. Sometimes the gaps were big, he never went into what his job, he thought she thought he was some sort of traveling salesperson, but she had never pried too deeply. That lie would transform into some type of truth, he knew, but what

truth he wasn't sure. On the other side, sure, he could go back to copyediting, he even thought he would like that. But on this side, could he even get the job?

There was a George Lloyd over here, and that was a problem. Not yet, they hadn't run into each other, and he didn't think there would ever be much chance of that, since the other George lived on the other side of the city. But there were other collisions, more confusing ones. Bank accounts, for one, what bank did this George use? He had been getting away with toting over stacks of bills, paying for an apartment to rent on this side as his house on the other side gradually went to seed. But the money wouldn't last forever, especially if he had to start over from scratch. It was funny how fast the money spent itself when you had an apartment *and* a house.

What money was left would need to be put somewhere, he couldn't keep hiding it in a box under his mattress. But that wasn't even the worst part, the worst part was, what this side's president called the problem of government. One day, and that day would probably be soon, he would have to start filing taxes, and two sets of taxes from the same social security number, or one from a number that didn't exist, would be a problem, one that would soon be investigated by the proper authorities. That was the crux of the problem, there couldn't be two George Lloyds on the same side.

That was the errand this Saturday morning, to go to the other George Lloyd and try to convince him to take his place on the other side. Well, first the task would be to convince

him that there *was* an other side, which probably wouldn't be too hard, if they looked at all the same, like Marie did. There wasn't much he had to bargain with, but he had to find out the lay of the land. He couldn't ask Marie to marry him again without knowing that he could be with her. He had put it off for too long.

As he got closer to his destination, the buildings on the side of the road looked worse and worse. At some point he crossed the tracks, and things really went downhill from there. He passed children playing in yards fenced with chain link in front of row houses, and apartments with dark drip lines coming down the facades. It was in front of one of these that George stopped, looking at the number plastered in concrete above the front entrance. How much would they really have in common, he worried, as he got out of his car, being sure to lock it with the key.

He walked up the steps, mixed brick and concrete, where he supposed the brick had broken off, and looked at the line of mailboxes on the wall. On mailbox 3A he saw his own name, and tried to burn the apartment number into his mind. Opening the door, he looked to the left with a bright smile, trying to look at home in the place, but there was no minder, there was no desk at all there. Well, that made it easier, he thought, and mounted the stairs in the damp smelling gloom of the apartment interior.

Two flights of stairs later, he was standing in front of a door marked 3A, trying to listen for any sound from inside.

The roar of studio laughter from some TV down the hall made it difficult to hear anything, and the smell of someone's cooking made George's stomach rumble. Well, he thought, there's nothing left to do, and he knocked three times on the door.

"Yeah," he heard, yelled through the door, in a voice eerily similar to his, "who is it?"

George paused for a second. Oh shit, he thought, he hadn't thought of what he would say in this next part. "Water authority," he shouted back through the door, the first thing he could think of, "we've got a problem with your payment."

"Listen," the voice said, and George could hear locks unlocking on the other side of the door, "I thought I told you fuckers to-" the last lock of three snapped open and the other George swung the door open onto a view of himself staring back at him. The other George stood there dumbstruck at the image, one George in a gray tank top and sweats, and the other in a trench coat and hat.

The silence only lasted a moment, George knew it would only be a moment before it would come to an inflection point, and pushed his way into the apartment, slamming the door behind him, still keeping his eyes locked on the other George. The other George, for his part, looked like he hadn't thought of slamming the door, calling the police, or anything really. He was still openly gawking at the stranger with his face.

"George," George asked, "may I call you George?" He took off his hat and looked around for a hook or hat rack, nothing,

so he held it in his hand and let his hand drop to his side. “I sure would appreciate a cup of coffee.”

* * *

The other George didn't have coffee, in fact, didn't have much of anything in the dingy hole in the wall that he called his apartment. The walls had suspicious brown stains dripping down from the ceiling, there was a mattress off to one side on the floor with no fitted sheet, and the kitchen could hardly be called that. A foot of counter space beside a dirty stove, and about three square feet of linoleum didn't make a kitchen, George thought, but he held his tongue. There was a door down the wall that was closed, which George assumed led to a bathroom of some sort.

After their stare off, tense for George, but bewildering for the other George, they had sat down at the card table in the living room where, George assumed from the stains, the other George ate his dinners. There he explained where he had come from, the pond that separated the two sides, and the new life he was setting up in this world. After some trivia about the minutiae of differences between the sides, George got into his real pitch.

“As you may or may not have deduced, the more established my life gets here, the harder it is for us to exist simultaneously on this side. No, I'm not talking about magically or scientifically, I mean governmentally. You do

your taxes, huh?” At this, the other George made a noncommittal sound. *All right*, George thought, *I’ll probably have to deal with that at some point.*

“Anyway, the system isn’t set up for both of us to be running around at the same time on the same side. Bank accounts, tax returns, hell, even house purchases aren’t set up for this kind of thing. Someone’s bound to find out at some point, and that will produce a whole rigmarole that I don’t want to be involved in.”

“Which brings us to us,” George said, fixing the other George with a hard stare, “I can’t proceed with my life over here any further without concluding this point. If we can’t come to some sort of an agreement, I’ll go my way and you’ll go yours, and that’ll be that. But that’s not what I want. If we can come to some sort of agreement, we’ll switch places. No, not exactly, but we’ll switch sides of the pond, as it were.”

The other George, who had been quiet for a while during this explanation, asked “What makes this side so much better than the other one.”

George sighed, “It’s not that it’s better, per se. It has someon-”, George cut himself off, “things that the other side doesn’t have, and vice versa of course. There are plenty of things that the other side has that this side doesn’t as well.” He tried to size up the other George, to see if this offer would land true, before he said “differences that could be profited from, if you get my meaning.”

The other George thought for a moment, considering, and asked “why haven’t you brought them over yet? Or have you?”

“No, no, I haven’t,” George replied, “I have everything I want over here, I’m just enumerating some certain benefits from the deal.”

The other George looked thoughtful, but unconvinced, on the other side of the card table. George would have thought that he would jump at the chance to improve his lot in life, given the conditions he had found him in, but he feared that the other George thought that would be too much work. George dug in his coat pocket and brought out a small notebook he had prepared for just this case.

“Here I’ve listed out quite a few of these “differences”, things that this side has and the other doesn’t. These are things you could take over easily, books, movie scripts, art, designs, and make a killing on. I’m sure it’s just the tip of the iceberg, these are just the first things that stood out to me.” He handed the notebook over to the other George as a queasy feeling took over his stomach. He had tried to play it off nonchalantly, but he wouldn’t go back to the other side. If this George wouldn’t take the deal, any deal, then he didn’t know what he would do, but he was sure that he was capable of all number of sins not to have to return to that lonely house.

The other George, whether a crack negotiator, or just uninterested, paged through the notebook with a bored look

on his face, barely looking at each of the pages. “Ah,” he said, and George involuntarily started, “I saw that one, good flick.” George could feel sweat start to seep out from his pores as the room suddenly felt too hot.

“There’s a house,” George blurted out, and the other George looked up, “it’s still got half a mortgage on it, but you could stay there or sell it, I don’t care.” George hadn’t wanted to give away his house, their house, he had imagined a life where he could keep it and stay on the other side. But he was just holding onto memories, sweet memories, and it went on the chopping block. “And a job, if you want it, copyediting, which pays a fine salary.” That was a stretch, he thought, since he probably didn’t have the job anymore. Could this George get a new one, with a reference? He could think of a couple people in the office that pitied him enough to either support his bid for his old job, or to give him a good written recommendation for a new one.

“Copyediting, what’s that,” The other George asked.

“Mostly it’s editing articles for magazines, making sure the grammar’s good, no misspelled words...” George could see the other George’s eyes glaze over. He had one final bargaining chip, the big one, the one he didn’t want to give up, but would. He grew calm with the decision to put it all on the table. It was all or nothing, he didn’t want to consider what might happen if the other George didn’t take it.

“One hundred thousand dollars,” George said, and the other George’s eyes snapped up. George thought that would

get his attention. “On my side my parents died, leaving me a sizable inheritance. It’s yours, if you want it.”

“Hah!” the other George barked, and slapped the surface of the table. “So the old fuck was good for something after all!” George winced at his counterpart’s display of mirth for his parents’ passing, the trauma, coming so close after Marie’s death, had been what brought him completely down. For George, that side of the pond was essentially blasted earth, the victim of a total war between himself and God. There was nothing left there.

“That’s all there is, that’s everything,” George said, “you can assume my life on that side, pick up like I never left. I think you’ll find it quite comfortable.” George risked the little dig, seeing the greed in his counterpart’s eyes, knowing that his small revenge wouldn’t matter to this man who looked so much like him, now that he had gotten the prize he wanted.

“You know... George,” the other George said, leaning back in his aluminum tubing chair, which elicited a screech from the rivets, “I think this deal suits me just fine.”

“Uh huh,” George said back across the table, not liking what he had to give up. He supposed he would have to start from scratch on this side, new job, new life, and somehow that didn’t seem so bad. A fresh start, in a new land.

“Shake on it?” The other George put out his hand, and when George grasped it he half hoped the other George would blow up from some kind of interference, but nothing of the sort happened. They pumped twice and let go, the alien

calluses not matching up at all, and George began laying out the order of operations.

Chapter 13

“The last time I saw him, he was driving away in my car, to my house, and I was standing right here,” George pointed down to the gravel at the foot of the bench.

“Did you ever regret it,” Jake asked, looking up at George, who looked so old it was hard for him to imagine a younger version.

“No, not even once,” George said, “I’ve lived a full life, the other side’s more home to me now than this one. In terms of time spent, I’ve been on that side longer than this one. Sure, I come back to fish, to keep up the connection, but I belong over there now.”

Jake sat, thinking about what he had heard, and George looked out at the pond, which had already lost its layer of gossamer mist. Something came to Jake and he turned to George.

“Was it the same Marie, on the other side?” he asked.

“No,” George said, and sighed, “it wasn’t the same Marie. Sure, they looked similar, lots of things were the same, but some were different too. For example, she went to a different college, had a different job, things like that. No, I thought, at the time, that I was getting back something I lost, but over

the years I've come to realize that it was more like getting remarried. This side's Marie, we had those years together, and I'll never forget them. She'll always be my first wife, my beautiful Marie, but I built a life on the other side. Sure, it was hard in the first years, especially with no money to my name, but we made it work. Well, she made it work, she was much better off than me. We have two kids, David and Rebecca, and I've got three grandkids now." George chuckled, "Can you believe it, sometimes it goes by so fast. But, no, I thought it would be the same, in the beginning, that's why I switched sides, but it wasn't. But that's okay, I wouldn't have had it any other way."

"So the George over here, the senator," Jake began, and George nodded, "the one in prison, he's the one from the other side."

"Yea-, what?" George cut himself off, looking at Jake with a shocked expression. "He's in prison?"

"Yeah," Jake said.

"What did he do?" George asked.

"Something about child trafficking," Jake said, and George recoiled slightly, wincing. He was looking at Jake, but his eyes were a million miles away.

"He was a senator," George murmured, "do you know," he cleared his throat, "do you know how bad it was?"

"No," Jake said, "my parents didn't let me watch, they said it was too mature for me." George looked down, momentarily ashamed.

“I see,” he said, even though he didn’t. In his mind he drew a web, connecting event to event, trying to disentangle cause from effect. Bringing the other George over here was no doubt his fault, but would something similar have happened on the other side? The money probably didn’t help, in fact he was sure it was what launched the other George’s political career, from what he had seen of the man’s lack of ambition. Trafficking, that spoke of a pretty large operation, unfortunately there was no doubt to his mind that the money had helped finance this.

“What do you know about the other George?” George asked Jake.

“Not much, just the trial stuff mostly. I only saw him once on TV, he was giving some kind of speech, had a different accent than you.” Jake replied.

“When I met him, we had the same accent,” George said, “I wonder if he changed it on purpose, after he came over.”

After he came over, Jake thought. Something was knocking at the door of his mind, wanting to be let in, but it wasn’t fully formed yet, more a ghost than a figure. Something about the story, about what George had done. While George thought things over in his own way, Jake reached back through the story. Went over, met the other George, house, money.

Ah, there it is, Jake thought, but he wasn’t pleased at his discovery. When the other George had come over, he had just lived out the first George’s life, staying in his house, spending

his money. But if they had lived in the same house on both sides, how could one of them tell which side they were on?

It was near noon now, and the sun was heating up the pondside. "I think I have to go," Jake said to George, which snapped him out of his reverie.

"Well," George said, "with this heat, there's no wonder we didn't catch anything," and chuckled. Neither one of them had cast out during the whole morning, Jake at first enrapt in George's story, and then George thinking troubled thoughts about his counterpart.

Jake hopped off the bench with his rod in his hand, and George said, "But Jake, I don't think I can come over anymore. What would someone think if they saw me?"

Jake hadn't thought that far ahead, and it seemed to him a cruel joke for George to be here this morning, for one more morning, and gone the next. Jake looked down at the ground, "yeah, I guess," he said, trying to think of a solution.

Then one came to him. "I could come over to your side," Jake said, "there's no problem there, Tommy already checked to make sure that we didn't have copies."

George smiled, "you sure have done your homework. But I don't think so kiddo, what if your parents came out in the morning and you weren't here. No, maybe in the future, but for now I think we should say goodbye. At least for a while."

Jake was standing up, looking back at George on the bench, and it was like watching the news program about the arrest all over again. A lump was coming up in his chest, and his

eyes were stinging something horrible. It must have shown on his face, because George put his rod down on the gravel and opened his arms. Jake wasn't ashamed to run into the hug.

"I'll always be on the other side," George said, "same time, different place, Jake. Think about it like that, and it might be easier. Maybe I can even come back in a while, after all this has died down, and everyone's forgotten. Who knows what time will bring, I sure don't. But I really enjoyed getting to know you, Jake. You've shown me something I didn't know."

Jake pulled away, "what's that?"

"That I was never really ready to let go," George said, "I thought I was, back then, but I kept coming back, didn't I? I guess I'm an old romantic, or something."

Jake brushed the tears off his cheeks unashamedly, and looked at George, trying to commit him to memory. "I'm going to miss you," he said.

"I'll miss you too kiddo," George replied, and as Jake backed away, George got up, and grabbed the raincoat off the back of the bench. Now Jake knew where he was going, and maybe it wasn't so far away after all, even if it was on the other side of the world.

* * *

When Jake got home, his parents asked the kind of questions you would ask someone their first time back to an old task after a loss in the family, and he gave what he thought were answers that one would give if that were true, all the while thinking of the story George had told, of switching lives between sides. After lunch, he picked up the phone and called Tommy. Meet at the old flattop hill? Good, would you call Aemilia? I'll call Karen and Justin. Sounds good, see you soon.

Jake wanted privacy for this, something none of their houses would give them on a Saturday with all their parents around, so the hill it was. After calling Karen and Justin, he stashed some snacks in his backpack, light from being cleaned out of all conceivable school materials for the summer, and headed out. He ran into Tommy at an intersection, and they walked together to the housing development, now home to substantially more filled out houses than had been there in the spring. Would they still be able to meet here next school year? He supposed that it would be someone's yard they would have to walk through then, and wasn't sure. Things seemed to be moving so fast, but that was a problem for another day, now he was single minded, and had to find out the truth.

They climbed the ramp of earth and Jake sat his pack down in the dirt beside a big rock at the top. There they waited, and within a couple of minutes, passed by playing their old dirt clod game, the rest of the gang arrived, with Aemilia and Karen bringing up the rear.

“Hey,” he said to them as they joined the circle.

“Hi” Karen said, and Aemilia smiled and looked around, shyly not saying anything. Now that he was looking for it, he could see so many things, and felt like an idiot for not putting it together before. But maybe they could put it right, now.

“So what do you want to do,” Justin asked.

“I want to hear Aemilia’s dream,” Jake said, and Aemilia looked straight at him for the first time, with her mouth opened in a surprised “o”.

“What dream?” Tommy asked.

“You said you had a weird dream,” Jake said, “when you were in the hospital.”

“Oh, um,” Aemilia dithered, “I mean it’s just a dream, and I don’t remember it.”

Jake could tell she was embarrassed, but he hoped she still remembered it. From what his mom said about memories, he thought she might.

“I think it might be *really important*,” Jake said, trying to catch her eyes with his, “can’t you tell us anything.”

Aemilia looked at Karen, then back up again at Jake, and met his eyes. The gaze was softer than he was expecting, than he remembered. It was full of anxiety, and maybe something else.

“Okay,” she said, and looked around, “first thing is that I wake up like normal, you know, late, and everyone’s gone from the house, but I hear a knocking at the door. Well, mom and dad are at work, so I put on some clothes, and hope it

goes away. But it still keeps on going, it must have been for minutes, so I finally go downstairs and open it up, and it's me on the other side. Crazy right? Well, I thought so too, and the other me says she wants to come in, that she really wants to talk to me. Well we sit at the table and talk, she tells me that she's from another world, a very different world, full of futuristic technology like flying cars and holograms, Star Wars stuff, and that she's come to make contact. Not only that, she wants to *show* me her world. Well, at this point I think I might be dreaming, so I say *hell yeah, lets go.*" Aemilia blushes at this, but she's got the whole group's attention, so she goes on.

"She says that to get to the other world we have to go on a journey, and I say sure, why not, I'm not doing anything else today, or in this dream. So we leave the house and walk, and walk, and walk. I thought we would never stop walking! But eventually we reach a treeline, and she says we have to go through here. Well we walk and walk some more, at some point I think we're following a trail, but I don't think we stay on it the whole time, until we reach a pond. But that's the end of the dream," she shrugged her shoulders, "I never even got to see any Star Wars stuff."

Aemilia realized that what she had taken for rapt attention was actually something else frozen on the faces of her friends after she finished talking. Tommy huffed out a breath and turned around, walking in a circle next to the group and

started hyperventilating. Karen whispered “oh my God,” and Justin looked at Jake. “Do you think..”

“Yes,” Jake said, and Tommy stopped his pacing and looked toward him. They were all looking toward him. “I think we have the wrong Aemilia.”

Chapter 14

Everyone except Aemilia got it, with Aemilia being unfortunately ignorant of any of it. Jake pressed on though, and told about how he had gone to the pond that morning to go fishing, and had seen George there. Tommy, who had been the only one paying attention to the news, caught on quick that something similar might be up, and nodded during Jake's retelling of George's story. By the end of it, when Jake explained about the senator's arrest, everyone was on the same page, that is, except for Aemilia.

"I don't get it, is this a movie?" Aemilia asked at the end.

"No," Tommy said, "this is real life."

"No, I mean, ah forget it," Aemilia said.

"No," Jake echoed, "we can't forget it. Aemilia, this is about you most of all. The hole in the pond, that's real, there really is a hole in the pond, and a whole other world under it. There's something like it too in the woods."

"In the woods?" Aemilia asked, still with a skeptical look on her face.

Jake sighed, "A while ago, we went on a hike in the woods, on an adventure. Well, we came on a road, but when we each tried to go home, things were different. Not very different,

but it definitely wasn't home to us. Aemilia, our Aemilia, not you, went *all the way* home. We found her eating dinner with your parents, and we had to pull her out by force. Then, on the way back, we're pretty sure we ran into your group of friends. But you all don't have a *me*, do you? There's no Jake where you come from."

Aemilia smiled nervously, "what do you mean? You're not making any sense, there is no other Jake, it's just the concussion." She whispered again, "...just the concussion."

"That's his point," Tommy cut in, "there *is* no other Jake, you aren't friends with him, but you are with all of us. You don't have memory loss, you're just not on the right side."

Aemilia swung her head around to Karen, looking for relief, but Karen was staring at her with a frightened look in her eyes.

"I, I think I'm gonna go home," Aemilia said, and started backing away.

"Aemilia." This time it was Karen, and Aemilia turned her head to the soft voice, barely shaking with fear. "Come with us to the pond, just come with us and see."

Aemilia stopped backing up, and looked hard at Karen. "Okay," she said, "but I have to go home after. I've got... you know... chores."

"Uh, huh," Jake responded, never having heard of Aemilia's chores keeping her from doing anything. "Let's go by the road," Jake said, and pointed down the side of the flat hill, toward the rapidly finishing development. They each

picked up what they brought and followed behind Jake, who led them down the ramp and to the street. From there it was two turns, once right to get on a main road, and right again to go on the road that intersected with the pond. Jake was aware of Aemilia sandwiched between the four of them behind him. He suspected that the rest of the group was as nervous as he was of her bolting straight home.

When they reached the pond, Jake hung left along the shore and walked over to the spot across from the fallen log in the woods. The rest of them came up behind him, and he turned to talk to Aemilia.

“Do you remember this place?” he asked.

“Yeah,” she said, “from my dream...”

Karen let out a long sigh, Jake thought that if nothing else, that probably cinched it for her. All of their adventures, everything was gone, but for the memory of being led here by the other Aemilia. What little doubt that was left in anyone evaporated when they saw her puzzled look.

“Out there,” Jake said, “is a hole in the pond, and on the other side is a different world. I’m gonna go through, then...” Jake thought, “Justin, then you, Aemilia, then Tommy and Karen. We’ll all go through, and you can see that we’re telling the truth.”

“But I don’t see a hole,” Aemilia said, looking at the surface of the pond, “what do you mean?”

“You’ll see,” Jake said, as he kicked off his shoes, and hopped on each one to take off his socks and stuff them

inside. Now barefoot, Jake lined himself up between the log and the patch that he couldn't see anymore against the reflection of the blue sky, and started forward into the lake. He bent down, grabbed a couple times, and sighed when he found the line. Pulling it above the surface of the water and holding it in his hand, for the first time he thought that maybe George had pounded this line into the earth, to help him move across as he got older.

The thought of George made his heart sink, he already missed the old man. He didn't want to think toward next week, where a lonely morning awaited him. He could see how such a feeling could drive you to do what George did all those years ago.

Jake walked forward until the line held in front of him led directly down into the water, into what must be the edge of the puddle. Looking over, he couldn't see his reflection, just the sky on the other side; this was it. He looked back to make sure Aemilia was looking, she was, and stepped over the threshold.

He rose, like every other time, from the puddle, grasping the line and using it to pull himself away from the edge, and had already started to wipe the water off his clothes before he realized there was a man sitting in a chair directly across from him with something on his lap.

After taking another step forward, Jake reached up and wiped the water out of his eyes, and recognized George in the

chair. Jake's face broke out into a smile, and despite himself George also smiled.

"I've never seen someone come through before," George said, as Jake walked barefoot up to the shore, "you scared the bejeezus out of me."

Jake dropped the line and ran over to George, throwing his arms around the old man's neck. George laughed and hugged him back. After a second, when something reminded him that others would be coming through at any moment, he broke off the embrace and asked "What are you doing here?"

"Well this is *my* side, after all," George said, "I could ask you the very same thing."

"Ah well, it's complicated," Jake said, and heard a splash behind him. Jake turned around to see Justin coming out of the water, his bare feet scrabbling for an edge on the gravel.

"Is the whole group coming over?" George asked.

"Yeah, pretty much," Jake said, and looked down. The device George had on his lap looked like a battery powered radio of some kind, complete with a dial in the front and an antenna coming up the side. "What's that," he asked.

"Oh, I thought I would listen to some radio while I sat. It's a very nice day you know," George said, and Justin walked up to the shore, finally recognizing Jake through his surprise and the water in his face.

"Hey, um," Justin said, and Jake could see the wheels whirring in his head trying to come up with an explanation for what he was seeing.

“This is George,” Jake said to Justin, and Justin let out a relieved sigh. “Ah, nice to meet you.”

“Nice to meet you too young man,” George said, “how many more are we expecting?”

“Three more,” Jake said, training his eyes on the puddle, “they should be coming through any minute now.”

A minute passed between Justin coming through and the next disturbance, but when it happened, it was a doozy. Aemilia raised halfway out of the water, gasped for breath, and fell halfway in again. She started climbing the thin black rope for her life, out of the puddle, and finally got her feet under her. The entire front of her outfit was soaked, and for a second Jake saw himself standing the same way, just past the edge of a puddle, with black water soaking the front of his clothes, unable to see anything. Then it was gone, and there was just Aemilia standing there.

Jake waved to her and she walked over, her feet splashing through the inch-high water from exhaustion. “Are you alright,” Jake asked.

“Yeah, just peachy,” she said to Jake, but looked at George sitting in the fold out aluminum chair, whose supports had already sunk into the gravel. Jake introduced the two of them, and Aemilia stayed suspiciously silent, to Jake at least, considering this was the first time she had gone through.

The other two, Tommy and Karen, came through and completed the journey to the shore, each surprised at the presence of George, who now looked more like a king

surrounded by his congregation than an old man enjoying an afternoon on the lake. After they were all introduced, Jake considered if they *could* have this discussion with George nearby. The similarity to the old man's situation was so fresh in his mind that he thought there was a chance George might have some valuable input, and decided to start right away.

“So you see,” he said to Aemilia, spreading his arms out, “there is a whole other world on the other side of the puddle. Almost everything's the same, but a few things are different. Almost no one knows about the puddles, I think, except for us and George here, at least, I've never heard of anything like them before.” He stopped and looked around at the group, then back at George, who nodded, a little confused look on his face.

“What do you think?” Jake asked her.

“But I didn't go into the lake, in the dream,” she said.

“That's because there's another one, just like it, in the forest,” Jake said, and pointed across the pond to the far edge, where the trees met the shore. George looked over and an alarmed look crossed his face.

“There's another one?” he asked, and Tommy responded.

“Yes, there's another gate, portal, whatever, somewhere in the woods. We accidentally stumbled on it while out exploring, and it goes somewhere else. That's where she's from,” and he motioned to Aemilia.

“Where she's from!” George exclaimed, looking at Aemilia. “Are you telling me that she's not from your side?”

“Exactly, we think *our* Aemilia switched places with her,” Jake said, purposefully leaving out the part where Aemilia knocked her twin unconscious to cover her tracks.

George let out a long sigh, raking his hand through his thinning white hair under his hat, and looked from Aemilia to Jake to Tommy. He brought his hands down again, rested them back on the white plastic arms of his fold-out chair. “What are you gonna do?”

“We’re going to switch them back,” Jake said, and Tommy nodded across from Aemilia. “We’ll find the other portal, and exchange them, then everything will be back to normal,” he added hopefully.

“The sooner the better,” George said. “I have to believe I caused this, lord knows if I had just let it go all those years ago, you might never have found that line.”

“Oh,” Karen chimed in, “we didn’t find the line, not until later. We found the puddle on our own.” George looked to Jake, who nodded in affirmation.

“Even so, I’ve been thinking a lot since our talk this morning, and I do feel responsible, if not for this, for the other thing, my other...,” George trailed off, and cast down his eyes. Jake thought it looked almost like shame. He had never seen it on an adult before.

“So I’m coming with you. You kids need some adult supervision, I doubt your parents know quite how far away from home you’ve been going.” And at that, Karen and

Tommy averted their eyes to the ground, feeling guilty for the many fibs they'd told along the way.

"Mmm, hmm, well, let's get going," George said, and leaned forward to get up.

"Mr. Lloyd, I don't think we can go today," Jake interjected, and George paused with his hands poised against the arms of the chair, and leaned back again, crossing his arms over his waist. "And why's that?"

"It's a long way through the woods," Jake said, "to wherever it is, and an even longer walk to get to Aemilia's house. A couple hours at least, each way," Jake turned back to Tommy, who nodded at the estimate, "and since we got lost last time, our parents won't let us out past dark anymore."

George sighed and put his hand to his face, rubbing the short white stubble that had begun to grow there. He sat like that for nearly a minute, staring out at the pond past the group of children gathered around his chair, and then said, "Okay, you've got me. But tomorrow we're going to return this young girl to her home. I want to see you and her at our bench at eight AM sharp, and we'll go from there." He looked around at the rest of the group. "Just the three of us, understand? I don't want anyone else tagging along." Tommy, Karen, and Justin nodded.

"Okay, well you better get back to your side now," he said, and then looked at Jake specifically, "and I expect you to be on time, this is very important." Jake nodded in huge sweeps of his head, and George smiled, and waved them away. This

time, they went back through in reverse order, with Jake staying last. When it was just the two of them, Jake looked back from the rippling water of the puddle to George and said “we really did find it all on our own, you know.”

“I know,” George said, but he still looked troubled. Jake, wanting to say something to relieve the old man, but not knowing what, looked for a moment longer, and then went out into the pond, where he swung through the watery barrier.

They spent the rest of the day, their last day with this Aemilia, telling her about their adventures between the two sides, and the whole story concerning them getting lost and stumbling onto her side, including Jake’s brief foray into the dark place, her version of the puddle. She listened with rapt attention, asking questions and speculating like Jake had only seen Tommy or Karen do, and every moment he spent with her he saw how different she was to their own bull-headed Aemilia. When the sun got low and it was time to head back home, they split up at their usual intersections. Aemilia was strangely, to Jake at least, unbothered with the prospect of spending the night with these people that weren’t her parents. When he asked her about it, she told him that she couldn’t tell the difference between the two. Jake would have liked to think he would be able to, but remembered that he hadn’t even realized something was wrong with Aemilia until today, which sobered him.

That night, Jake nonchalantly dropped that he and Aemilia were going exploring tomorrow, no, not in the woods, yes, they'll be careful, only on roads, got it. All of these were lies, of course, but it would give him the time he needed to get there and back without being missed. That night he slept fitfully and dreamt of walking through an endless forest of trees, not being able to find his way out.

Chapter 15

Jake moved his hand out of the covers and clicked off the switch on the alarm, which said 7:29. He had woken up at six from a bad dream, and had been unable to go back asleep, so he watched the minutes ticking closer and closer to go time. He rolled over on his back and stared up at the ceiling. He didn't know what the day would bring, or how they would get their own Aemilia back. The Aemilia who-

He didn't like to think about it, what it must have been like on the shore of the pond, two Aemilias, one with a stick, a baseball bat? He didn't know, he didn't want to think about it. Jake pulled back the covers and slipped out of the bed as quietly as he could. He had told his parents that he would be going on a hike, but in case he didn't make it back until later, he didn't want them to know when he had left. It might just buy him a couple more hours, and he didn't want to get in trouble again so quickly.

In the dark, the window glowing with the morning light behind the pull-down shade, he dressed quietly. He didn't take his backpack full of slightly-old Nutri-Grain bars, since he didn't imagine them staying or exploring much. As much as he dreaded the inevitable confrontation, and the way

unknown to him that they would bring Aemilia back, he was excited to be going on a trip with George. To hear him tell it, their last trip, but he hoped not. It was nice to finally have an adult around who knew everything, without worrying about them forbidding the gang from anything. That was the problem, parents liked to ruin anything they thought was any fun, he ruminated in the dark, but it wasn't like they wouldn't exploit the puddle for themselves. He had seen too many science fiction movies to fall for that.

Jake tiptoed through the minefield of his bedroom floor, deftly sidestepping discarded toys on the way to his door, which he opened with the greatest of care. He cracked it a fraction, listening for any sound from his parents' bedroom, but there was nothing to be heard. He pulled it the rest of the way open, stepped through, then closed it with the handle turned all the way, letting it slowly release once the latch was lined up.

Still nothing. Jake went down the stairs one at a time, in a fashion that would make his mother proud, as opposed to his normal elephant stampede, and, after grabbing a brownie from the covered casserole dish for breakfast, he went out the front door, cracking the noisy weatherproofing as quietly as he could. Carter and Anita slept through the whole thing.

Walking down the paved street, munching slowly on the rich brownie, he felt a lot better. Maybe it was the sun, which was high enough above the horizon now that the sky shone blue, and warmed his skin with the coming heat of the day.

Maybe it was the prospect of an adventure with an uncertain end. But whatever the reason, as he transitioned from the street to the sidewalk, he had a bounce in his step.

As he approached the intersection to turn into the pond, he spotted Aemilia coming from further away on the opposite side, and waved to her over his head. She waved back, and he slowed so that they would reach the intersection at the same time. When he got close enough, he could see that she was wearing the same outfit that she had been wearing the day he had found her on the gravel.

“Hey,” Jake said, and he stopped in the street in the middle of the intersection.

“Hey yourself,” Aemilia said.

“Are you ready to go back?” Jake asked.

“Yes... yes I am.” She looked down, then back up again. “I was wrong before, they aren’t exactly the same.”

“Who?” Jake asked.

“My- her parents. When you pay attention, they’re not very similar at all. I’m ready to go back.” Then she smiled and added, “but I’ll miss you, Jake. I guess you’re the only one who isn’t over there.”

“Maybe I am, somewhere,” Jake said, and they turned onto the road leading to the pond, “if you catch sight of me in school one day, take it easy on me, huh?”

“I’d be happy for that day,” she said, and they turned left together onto the gravel, and were greeted with the sight of a

group of kids surrounding an adult sitting on the far bench. *Ah, Jake thought, it was the gang, they came anyway.*

Tommy was so engrossed in his argument that none of them, save George, noticed Jake and Aemilia walk up. "...and anyways, you don't even know her. How are you going to get her to come back, you have no idea what she's like."

"I said no and that's final," George said, but without any of the ferocity that should accompany those words. He really must be a grandfather, Jake thought, he had lost that parental tone somewhere along the line. "Jake, Aemilia," he said, and nodded towards them.

The rest of the gang looked back at the two of them standing awkwardly behind, not knowing how to announce themselves. "Hey," Jake said, Aemilia just smiled nervously. "Hey," Tommy said back, the rest of the gang just waved. There was a tension in the air, going from George, through the gang, to Jake and Aemilia, for just a moment, then George sighed.

"Are you ready to go?" George asked, as he stood up. Jake and Aemilia nodded, and George said, "alright, let's head out." He spared a glance for the puddle on the right as he set out. Jake and Aemilia fell in behind him, and after hearing a whisper and crunching gravel behind him, Jake turned back and saw Justin, Tommy, and Karen following in a line behind. They made it to the treeline on the other side of the pond before George turned back to ask Jake what next, and saw the rest of them.

“Now what did I tell you,” George began, but Tommy pushed forward and cut in.

“Where to, Jake?”

“Huh?” Jake said.

“Where next, where do you enter the forest?”

“Well,” Jake said, and looked at the treeline, “there should be some pink ribbons somewhere...”

“I took those down,” Tommy said.

“When we came back that night? But then how did...”

“This morning,” and Tommy’s mouth widened into a checkmate grin. Jake’s eyes widened, and he turned to look at George, whose mouth was slightly open in surprise. This transmuted into anger for a split second, then resigned after that.

“I suppose you think you’re pretty clever, young man,” George said, fixing Tommy with a stare. Tommy looked back, hard, into his eyes, not blinking.

“I am,” Tommy said defiantly, and George’s face softened and, betraying himself, he laughed.

“Well I hope you’re as good a navigator as a tactician,” George said, and Jake knew that Tommy had won. They would all be going on this mission.

Justin leaned over to Aemilia beside Jake and whispered “Karen came up with the idea.” Aemilia looked back and Karen, who was smiling, and Jake saw her mouth “thank you” to her. He hadn’t considered it until then, but Aemilia must be the most frightened of them all, and he appreciated

his friends even more at that moment for coming together to help this wayward visitor.

“It’s over here,” Tommy said, and took lead as George followed behind, each of them spreading out in a line behind them. Tommy came to an unassuming gap between two trees and walked between, leading the group into the forest.

The trip reminded Jake a lot of their original trip which had ended so disastrously, he considered that even this now could be considered an extension of that original catastrophe. But where there was uncertainty and exploration on that trip, Tommy now forged ahead, seemingly with complete confidence in his route. He followed what could barely be considered to be a trail of any kind under their feet, Jake thought it might have been made by either them or the search party that came for them afterward, and then turned onto the game trail that he remembered from last time.

After a while, during which the only thing that convinced Jake they weren’t lost was Tommy’s confident trailblazing, Tommy stopped at the front and looked back.

“Pack in here, the door is straight ahead,” he said, and pointed forward. George came in beside Tommy and stopped in the dry leaves, Jake arrived next to him and looked at what Jake was pointing at.

Or tried to look, but Jake couldn’t see anything. After the whole gang were lined up, Tommy leaned over, picked up a twig from the ground, and looked back at them.

“Watch this,” he said, wiggling the twig, and then tossed it sidearm so that it flew diagonally to the left. Jake tracked it as it flew, and then suddenly it was gone. There was just enough time for him to look back and forth across the space where the twig should have been flying, before he heard the sound of something hitting rustling leaves far off.

“Where-” Justin started, but Karen was already walking forward with her own stick, this one a long walking stick, probing the air in front of her.

“Hey, I don’t think you should-” George said, but cut off as he saw the tip of the stick disappear into thin air directly in front of Karen. But she didn’t stop walking.

“It’s through, it’s through,” he said hurriedly, and Karen came up short, waving the stick around in front of her. “Is it,” she asked.

“Yeah,” Tommy said, “you just can’t see it disappear because you’re right behind it. If you look at it around here,” and he motioned to the side with his head, “you can see the edge.

Karen moved her head to the right and she gasped, “oh! It really is just in the middle of nowhere.” She moved her stick right and left, and it rang out like it hit something, but to Jake’s eyes there was nothing there. She swung it all around in a circle, but the only edges she could find were on the right and left, the gate apparently went down to the ground and up into the sky, or at least higher than about six feet anyways.

George stepped forward and put his hands out experimentally to either side. He grabbed something in midair, and pressed on it with his weight, but the thing didn't budge.

"I never thought," George said, "that there might be another one. How many could there be?"

"It's exponential," Karen said behind him, and he turned around to look at her. "Each one exists in the other worlds, at least we think so. There's a puddle on this side," she pointed through the invisible door ahead, "but it doesn't go back to your side or our side, it goes somewhere else completely different. So you can go through each of these, at least two doorways, and get a seemingly endless string of worlds... maybe."

"It would be easy to get lost," George said, looking back at the invisible lintel in his hand, "I wonder how many people have gone through without realizing it over the years."

After a second more, he experimentally put his hand through the door, and while he was doing so, Tommy stepped right through, completely unafraid. George looked like he wanted to reach out and pull Tommy back through for a second, but he relented and stepped through the door himself. The rest of them followed, with Aemilia taking a second to touch the lintel of the door. Jake reached back, already through, and grabbed at the invisible side. His hand met resistance, something hard but incredibly slick, like ice

but not cold. It was almost as if the air itself were made solid around the edge.

“Come on,” Tommy said, pointing forward. They all followed his finger, and could see a pink ribbon tied around a tree. “It’s not much further.”

After the invisible doorway, the boundary between their worlds, Tommy led them from ribbon to ribbon. As he was going, he explained that since morning all he had been able to memorize was the route to the door, not any further, and so had left the ribbons up. A few minutes later, they heard the wooshing sound of a car pass by up ahead, and a few steps later they broke out onto a sidewalk.

George looked a little confused at the reveal, and Tommy caught the look. “You’re confused because the neighborhood doesn’t line up to meet a road here.”

George looked at Tommy, “Yeah, at least not on my side.”

“Not on ours either,” Tommy said. “These roads,” and he moved his finger from one intersection on the left to another on the right, “aren’t here on our side, it’s something special to this side, like how your side only has three benches along the pond, instead of four.”

“Can you find your way to where we’re going?” George asked.

“Sure,” Tommy replied, “we’ll just go the same way as last time.”

Tommy hung left, and George followed behind as they walked on the long sidewalk, leading the rest of the gang

behind them. It seemed to Jake like they walked forever, passing intersection after intersection. At a certain point, they started talking, the group instinctively falling into a multi-perspective retelling of the last few weeks, their adventures, and misadventures, with the pond. Jake wasn't paying attention to where they were going, being too engrossed in the story, but Tommy was, because he likewise confidently took them on turn after turn, until they turned onto a street that *did* seem familiar, and stopped in front of a house that was nearly the twin of Aemilia's.

Tommy looked back, "this is it, isn't it?"

"Yeah," Aemilia said, relief in her voice, "this is it."

"We'll need to send someone in to get her out," Karen said, and Aemilia immediately replied "I'll go!"

"No," Karen said, and Aemilia looked back at her, "you're the only one who *can't* go, what if she's already in the house, what if your parents are there too?"

"Oh," Aemilia said, and looked down.

"I'll do it," Justin said, "she won't be able to tell the difference between me and the other Justin anyway." Unintentionally, Justin had for the first time put voice to their real mission, to trick their friend to come back. None of them thought that she would return voluntarily, and even though it had gone unsaid, each of them were anticipating the confrontation where they may have to haul her back by main force.

“Okay,” Tommy said, “we’ll wait around the corner there,” and he pointed to the intersection down the street, “and you’ll bring her?” Justin nodded. “Okay, just don’t spill the beans, or we’ll never get her out of that house.”

“My house,” Aemilia muttered under her breath, Jake barely heard it, but Karen reached her hand out and grabbed Aemilia’s. They split away from Justin, who stood on the sidewalk watching them retreat to the intersection. Once they were behind the corner peeking out around a hedge, George was standing back, which looked much more dignified, they saw Justin disappear onto the porch, where they all imagined him ringing the doorbell.

Long long seconds passed, then they saw Justin reemerge from the house and Tommy and Karen, who were in front, ducked back instinctively. But he was coming alone, and they waited until he reached the corner to stand back up straight.

“Well?” Tommy asked.

“She’s already gone,” Justin said, “her, er... your dad,” he motioned to Aemilia, “said that she already left to meet up. I had to play stupid, but it seems like they went to the hill.”

“Yeah,” Aemilia said, “we go there a lot.”

“We used to too,” Jake said, “before we started hanging out at the library on the other side.” George looked down, taken aback with surprise, and Jake smiled up sheepishly, “it has the internet.”

George rolled his eyes around, in what Jake thought was a very “kids these days” gesture, and Tommy spoke up. “New

plan, we'll go to the hill, and..." he trailed off, losing track of the plan.

"We're all already there," Karen said, "there's no way we can get her without spilling the beans." Justin chuckled at such a phrase coming out of Karen, but when she looked back he cleared his throat and looked around.

"I'm not," Jake said, and they looked at him. "We're all there, except for me, because I'm not over here, right?" He looked at Aemilia, and she nodded back.

"She'll know right away," Justin said.

"Maybe that'll be enough," Jake replied, "you know, to bring her back. We did come all this way, maybe she'll know the jig is up."

They looked at George as one, Jake knew he was looking for support for his plan, which he knew was flimsy as hell. George looked back and shrugged his shoulders. Eh, Jake thought, that's not the best sign of success. But it was the only plan they had, unless they came up with a better one on the way over to the hill.

"Let's go," Tommy said, clearly on Jake's wavelength about the flimsiness of the plan, but the lack of any alternative, "we're burning daylight." It was true, the sun was already high in the sky, shrinking all of their shadows into small discs the shape of their shoulders beneath them. Jake was very cognizant of the time it would take to go back, versus the time it would take to get dark. Right now they had enough time to make it, with a large margin he thought, but

he didn't want to push it. This exact situation had previously been the cause of their existing curfew.

They headed off, now with George at the back of the line, on their very familiar route to the hill. Half the houses they passed looked different than they were used to, and the other half exactly the same, leading to a dizzying feeling as they turned on their route, even throwing Tommy off at the front. Eventually though, they reached a cul-de-sac, but one that was very unfamiliar.

All of the houses around the circular end of the street were completed, and looked occupied from the smattering of cars parked in and around driveways. The house at the dead center of the circle had what looked like a light brown line in the grass beside it, leading into the woods behind it. *This must be the route they take, Jake thought, to the hill, even though all this construction is complete.*

Looking around at the houses to either side, the group moved as one down the center of the cul-de-sac. Jake half expected George to object when Tommy continued on to the dying path of grass, but he didn't hear any objections from behind. *Probably the damage to the lawn is already done,* he thought. He wondered if they would leave a trail in the grass too one day, on their own side.

Now past the line of houses, the woods were soothingly familiar, nothing standing out enough to elicit a skew into the uncanny when it wasn't exactly the same as they remembered it. They moved along the well-worn path in silence, the trees

on either side covered in more green than they had seen on the other side yesterday, dappling the ground with green tinted sunlight. After a bit, they reached the base of a hill which was bordered by a sloping path, wide enough for heavy machinery, which cut off about twenty feet up, where they knew the ground flattened out to a near moonscape. They could hear voices up above, very familiar voices, and the thunk of dirt hitting trees.

They congregated into a circle at the base of the ramp, George coming up a second afterward, slightly winded from the path they had taken. “So,” Tommy said, looking at Jake, “what’s the plan?”

“Uh,” Jake said, not realizing he was supposed to *have* a whole plan. He usually relied on Tommy to come up with the plans, coasting behind in his wake. “Um, I guess I’ll just go up there, and try to get Aemilia to come down here, where we can switch them.” He looked at Aemilia, and she nodded seriously. He looked back at Tommy.

“What are you going to say,” Tommy asked.

“Um, I’m not sure,” Jake responded, “I guess I’ll just wing it?”

Tommy shrugged his shoulders. Jake looked around at all of them, George included, leaning over to hear their whispered planning, and felt strangely comforted. *At least if I fail*, he thought, *I have backup, whatever that would mean.*

“Okay,” Jake said, and stepped back out of the circle. He turned toward the ramp, but looked back once over his

shoulder at the rest of them, who were watching him. George had stood up to his full height, and was giving him a thumbs up. A smile tugged at the side of Jake's mouth, and more than his friends, he felt sure because he had George. He finally turned around and started climbing the hill.

As he crested the hill, the edge of rock caked with dried mud giving way to a view of an unnaturally flat top scattered with muddy tread impressions and small stones, the strangest sensation came over him of seeing double. There everyone was, Justin, Tommy, Karen, and Aemilia, standing just like they always did, with their backs to him, taking turns throwing rocks to try to hit the tree with the dirt clod. He looked down, there were all the same people, and George, watching him with their necks craned back. As he prepared to do who knew what, he took a breath, and felt the strong impression that he was walking into a group of aliens, things that looked like people from the back, but when they turned around their faces would all have pig snouts or something. Or they would let out that horrible scream from body snatchers.

Suddenly he was gripped in a sort of fear, and he felt unable to take a step forward. His hands felt too wet and cold, his back felt too hot from the sun, and he was frozen to the spot. He did the only thing he could think to do, he cleared his throat.

Nothing, no one heard. This time he took in a breath, and made a comically large throat clearing noise, like something

an angry French butler might produce at an unruly patron in a movie. This caught Justin's attention, who turned around.

"Hi," Justin said, and at that, Tommy and Karen turned around. Aemilia was halfway cocked back to throw a rock, and when she turned around she yelped, dropping the rock on the ground.

"Hi," Jake responded nervously. It was strange, so strange, to see this look of unfamiliarity in his friends' faces. He almost felt like it would have been easier if they *had* all been aliens, at least *he* wouldn't feel like the alien here, which is what he did feel. Somehow they were all together, and he was separate. That crazy fear came back to him then, that he could just be erased from existence, and only the thought of his friends, the group he did belong to, camped out below, steeled him. Suddenly he was very glad indeed that they had forced themselves along, he didn't know if George alone would be able to give him the strength he needed to continue.

"I'd like to talk to Aemilia," Jake said, and he heard a quaver in his voice that he hoped no one else could pick up across the hill, or down below. The other Karen looked back at Aemilia, Justin and Tommy were looking at him, when Aemilia stammered "I, I don't know him."

Whether it was from the fear in her voice, or the petulant sound of refusal, this got Justin and Tommy to look back at her as well. She was holding one hand in another in front of her, and slowly shaking her head from side to side. "Aemilia?" Karen asked.

“No,” she whispered, and although Jake was too far away to hear it, he could make it out from her expression. It was the expression of a kid who had been caught with their hand in the candy jar, but who refused to let go of the treat.

“It’s time to go home,” Jake said, choosing the most innocuous sounding thing he could think of. Maybe they could still make it out without spilling the beans. But Aemilia began walking backwards, taking tiny shuffling steps in the dirt.

Jake tried again. “Your parents want you to come home.”

“NO THEY DON’T!” Aemilia screamed. *Wrong choice*, Jake thought, *I’ve really fucked up*. “No they don’t,” Aemilia repeated, and now she was crying, tears streaming down her tomato red face, “they don’t want me. I’m not going back, you can’t make me.”

“Aemilia,” Karen said again, in a soothing voice. The mirror gang were all turned toward her now, and Karen was slowly approaching her with her arms held out in front of her to take Aemilia’s hands. Aemilia took another step back, and her back ran up against a tree at the edge of the clearing.

“I don’t know him,” she was babbling, “I don’t know him.”

Karen approached Aemilia and took her hands. They were talking in whispers, Aemilia openly crying, Karen rubbing her upper arm for support. The other Justin and Tommy were looking at him, and it wasn’t long before Karen turned back around asked “Aemilia’s parents sent you?”

“Yeah,” Jake lied.

“We’ll bring her home,” Karen said, “don’t worry about it.”

Jake felt the situation shift alarmingly out of his control. They had encapsulated around Aemilia, intent on protecting her from whatever was assailing her, whether it was her parents or an unknown kid, and he felt his chance slipping away. It was time for drastic action.

Jake looked back over the edge of the drop to the lowered ramp and was shocked to see everyone grouped in less than a foot below him, having crept up during the exchange. Even George was pressed up against the wall of dirt behind him, listening to what went on. He had tried it the easy way, trying to keep the beans in the pot, but at this point he doubted whether a strange kid or a stranger adult could pry Aemilia away from the protective arms of her friends. He was both proud and annoyed at the same time. He looked into the other Aemilia’s, their Aemilia’s, eyes below him on the dirt ramp, and made up his mind. He would drown them in beans.

Jake twisted around and motioned up quickly with his hand. “Come on,” he whispered. “Do you want-” Tommy tried to clarify, afraid of the repercussions, but Jake was insistent. “Yes!” he hissed, and they made their way up the ramp in a line, appearing one by one to Jake’s side.

The effect was immediate and devastating. Justin and Tommy had been watching Jake motion to someone unseen below, so they had been the first to take the sight of their

doubles full on. The sound of other scuffling feet caused Karen to look around, and sure enough she spotted her own double as she came up the ramp. Aemilia looked up and sobbed as she saw the group reveal themselves. Finally, George came up, who would hopefully be the linchpin of the operation.

“The senator’s here,” Jake said, directing his speech to Aemilia, who was trying to place the familiar face. He could imagine his words bringing her back to the Radio Shack where they saw him on the TV, or hoped they were, and hoped that what he saw was a look of recognition cross her face. “He’ll take us back across, all of us.”

Jake was banking on the authority of the title, although George wasn’t very good at holding it. Now that Jake knew the truth, he could see that George didn’t look half as imposing as his double who resided in a prison cell. However, he was counting on Aemilia not taking long enough to put two and two together, to ask why their state senator would be helping a bunch of kids cross worlds to retrieve their friend.

“What,” the other Tommy asked, looking at his double, “what is this? What’s going on?”

“I’m afraid we can’t tell you,” Tommy responded back with a smirk on his face, leaning full into the role, “classified. But that Aemilia you have there isn’t *your* Aemilia, she’s *our* Aemilia. Isn’t that right?” he asked, as he looked up to George.

George cleared his throat. “Yes, that’s right,” he said, barely mustering any of his God-given authority as an adult in his surprise. Jake nearly rolled his eyes at how bad George was doing at the improvisation, the sooner this was over, the luckier they would get.

“That’s not true,” Aemilia rasped behind the other group, trying one last gambit. But nobody in that group looked back at her, they were all transfixed at the sight of their doubles. The other Aemilia, Jake’s Aemilia for the last week, stepped forward from the group of arrivals.

“It is true,” she said, staring straight at Aemilia. “I don’t know why you did what you did, but these aren’t your friends, and those aren’t your parents. They’re mine, you have your own on the other side.”

“Not like this,” Aemilia said, and the other group, feeling the energy between the two of them, stepped back and away from Jake’s Aemilia, spreading out on either side of her.

“You don’t think I know, I know,” the other Aemilia said. “I saw how they are, but they’re back together, for you! Well, because of what you did, to me by the way. But they’re back.”

“It won’t last,” Aemilia said, shaking her head, Jake could see her trying to steel herself against hope.

“Maybe it won’t, but that’s up to them. You can’t keep pretending, they’re your parents, not mine. How long can you live in a fantasy world? Your friends miss you, and mine miss me. We aren’t meant to be switched like this.”

Jake thought back, without looking, to the old man standing in the middle of the group, and the exchange he made forever ago. About how he said that she wasn't the same, not exactly the same, but what he gave up to have her even so. He thought about a house in their neighborhood, he didn't know where, maybe someone else lived in it now, maybe it had been demolished, but where George had lived a different life for years before going over. It didn't seem like it was a choice that would be easy, Jake thought.

While Jake had been ruminating, Aemilia and Aemilia had been locked in a fierce staring contest, which their Aemilia lost every few seconds as she blinked the tears away from her eyes. Finally, the other Aemilia said, in a low but clear voice, "come home."

This seemed to break their Aemilia. She let out one, two sobs, the tears started flowing freely down the sides of her face, and she walked forward. The other Aemilia walked forward too, and they met in the middle, and to Jake's surprise, embraced. But then again, it was hard to feel anything but pity for the girl who was so broken down, and Jake supposed there could even be another level to it, one he hadn't felt on this day, when you come face to face with your clone. The two Aemilia's exchanged a few whispered words, and then broke apart. The other Aemilia turned around and looked back at the group, four kids and an old man, and said "thank you."

It was weird, Jake thought, he knew he might never see this Aemilia again, but they were getting *their* Aemilia back, and in a way it was almost like they were getting back most of the other Aemilia too, but not all of her. The pang of sadness he was expecting from a long parting of friends never came, he supposed it was too mixed up in the strangeness of the situation. Maybe he was the only one who wasn't still shell-shocked from seeing his double, but Jake said back "you're welcome."

The other Aemilia smiled, grabbed Aemilia's hands in hers for the last time, and walked back to her group of friends. Their Aemilia, on the other hand, shuffled slowly back, her head hung down in what Jake supposed was shame.

Karen ran forward and wrapped her arms around Aemilia, and Aemilia sobbed again at the embrace. One by one they approached and added themselves to their hug, until they were four surrounding one, with George standing behind them all, taking in the two groups of nearly identical children.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry," Aemilia kept repeating, sometimes choking back a sob, and Karen only stopped her by saying "I'm so happy you're back."

"Me too," Tommy said, then Justin repeated it, then Jake. He heard her sigh in the middle of the cluster of hugs, and the structure sagged a bit as she relaxed.

George cleared his throat, and Jake looked up at him. He was looking at the other group, and Jake looked over to see them crowded around their Aemilia, listening to her story. A

second throat clearing got their attention, and they looked back to the only adult on the hill.

“The U.S. Government would appreciate your discretion in this matter,” he said, “the existence of...this, isn’t widely publicised, and we would like to keep it that way, to prevent panic in the general populace. You understand.” The other group all nodded in unison, except for Aemilia, who smiled a little bit. Jake was surprised at this agent act that George had pulled out, and impressed.

“Can I count on you, young lady,” he said, addressing this to the other Aemilia specifically. She suppressed the smile at his change in attitude from a nearly doddering old man to whatever character he had copied from some old movie, and nodded back. “You can,” she said.

George nodded. “Well, I think that concludes the matter at hand. I think we’ll all be leaving now,” he looked back at the group, at Jake, and Jake also nodded. They unwound from around Aemilia, their Aemilia, and filed down the ramp behind George. George stayed for a second longer, looking at the other group, then after saying “Good day,” he turned around and walked down the ramp after the gang, whole again.

He kept up the stiff-legged government agent act as he shepherded them out of the woods, but once they hit the pavement of the cul-de-sac, he seemed to deflate into his old, old self again. “Do you think they’ll stay on this side,” he

asked Jake, as they moved onto the sidewalk in preparation to take the first turn.

“I think that all depends on Aemilia,” he said, then, after a pause in which Aemilia pointedly didn’t turn around, “the other Aemilia. But I don’t think so.”

“Hmm,” he said, then fell silent as Tommy led the column down the sidewalk to their series of turns which would bring them back to that long stretch of road with the woods beside it. Karen and Aemilia walked side by side, holding hands, but no one was talking. Maybe, Jake thought, he was actually the lucky one for not having a clone on this side. Maybe the other Aemilia was right, and they weren’t meant to ever meet like that.

Chapter 16

The group walked mostly in silence, with Karen helping Tommy out occasionally with the directions, as they made their final way back from the other side. Jake knew that he didn't see any reason to come back, and he didn't think they would; the hike was too long compared to just going through the pond. George might not approve of them journeying to the other side of the puddle, but he couldn't stop them, not really, and he had already gotten a taste for what the internet had to offer. He wondered if they would ever get it on their side.

The sun was hovering halfway up the sky when they reached the treeline next to the long stretch of road, and even though the shadows from the trees were all crisscrossing, it only took them a second to locate the first pink ribbon, much easier than doing it in the dark.

"Over here," Tommy said from a few steps into the trees, and they followed his voice to the tree with the ribbon tied around an outstretching branch. Tommy reached out and untied the ribbon, stuffing it in his pocket afterward and looking back to the group. "Just so no one finds it." The rest of the gang nodded in agreement.

From then on it was walking and stopping, waiting for Tommy to untie the next knotted ribbon, before going on. None of them had thought to bring scissors, and his brief but doomed attempt to pull the ribbon off by force had showed that they were made of stronger stuff than he could exert on it's short dangling ends, so they stopped every few steps to untie another one, and another one. It reminded Jake of trying to get home after school the few times his mom drove him, starting and stopping in the rush hour traffic before they got to their neighborhood.

Aemilia was getting to be more talkative again, with Karen prodding her with questions about the other Karen. After what felt like an hour of stilted progress, she seemed back to her old self, but Jake couldn't help but wonder if there would be some longer term repercussions from this. She *had* knocked her double out cold and tried to take over her life. In fact, he was surprised that the double wasn't more upset about it. Maybe it had something to do with the nature of having a double, something he wasn't a part of. Maybe in another universe, maybe through the forest gate after taking the pond gate, but not here, and not in George's world either. He tried to push away the feeling of loneliness by thinking of how ridiculous it was, but it didn't help.

A few minutes later, they came to a tree with a pink ribbon on it, from which they couldn't see the next one. "This must be it," Tommy said, and went to work on the knot that Aemilia had tied what seemed like a million years ago. Jake

walked forward some, trying to catch the slight differences that made up the face of the doorway. Each of the others did the same, all wanting to find the door first, except George, who was content to wait back with Tommy and watch over the wandering kids.

Jake caught a strange movement out of the corner of his eye, and turned his head. The trees to his left looked weird, like they were half there and half not, and a split second after he realized that he was seeing the tree with one eye and not the other, Karen, who was standing in front of it, called out “I found it!”

Jake walked the couple steps over, waving his hands around in front of him, until he hit an invisible stake in the ground. With Karen holding the lintel on the other side, it was almost possible to imagine seeing the doorway, even though it was still completely transparent. The rest of the group, with George bringing up the rear, moved over to stand directly in front of the gate.

“Well, I guess this is it,” Tommy said, and after looking around, stepped through. Justin went next, then Aemilia. George walked up to stand in front of it and motioned to both Jake and Karen, “you two go through first.” They nodded and turned around their respective doorposts until they were through. Finally, George walked through what to all intents and purposes looked like an ordinary patch of air.

“Can you get us the rest of the way back,” George asked to Tommy.

“Don’t worry about it,” Tommy said in a feigned New York accent, and tapped the side of his head. George rolled his eyes, along with Jake, and Tommy smiled. After swiveling his head this way and that, he pointed into the woods seemingly at random and said “this way.”

Progress was much faster now that they weren’t stopping to erase their tracks every ten seconds, and Tommy’s memory of the forest going back was much better than Jake expected it to be. Jake didn’t know what time it was, but the color of the sky indicated that they were making good progress against the remaining daylight. After a dogleg turn off of the game trail, and another stint through untamed wilderness, Jake started to recognize landmarks; a tiny stream, a downed log.

Then, with no warning, they were out of the treeline, onto the gravel shore of the pond. The sun was still pretty high in the sky, located an inch above the treeline on the opposite side of the pond, casting a wicked glare into their eyes from the water.

“Nice,” Jake said, and high fived Tommy for his expert direction. He looked around for Aemilia, and saw her staring at the surface of the pond with a melancholic look. He had learned a lot over the last few days about her, too much really, and some things that she wouldn’t have wanted them to know. He didn’t know if he would ever have put together that he hadn’t seen her mom around for the past couple of weeks, would she have ever told them about it? Something made him

doubt she would. Maybe she would've carried that pain alone, trying to cover up that missing part of her life for as long as she could. Perhaps it was better that it all ended up this way, maybe not for the other Aemilia, but for them, as the gang. Maybe this time they could help her themselves.

Jake looked up at George, towering over the kids, but he was looking intently to the shore, his face lit up with the golden light from the reflected sun. Jake turned around and followed his gaze to the bench where he had left his raincoat. But that's not all there was. In front of it, holding up the raincoat for inspection was another man. It was hard to make out anything about him, the double suns from the pond made Jake squint. But he could see that the man was tall.

"There's someone over there," Jake said, wanting to reach the raincoat before this stranger claimed it as his own, by right of finders keepers.

"The ghost of Christmas past," George said under his breath, and as if summoned, Jake noticed the shape of the man's head change. He was looking at them now, pinned up against the treeline by the sun's glare.

"What does that mean," he asked George.

The dark man-shaped silhouette dropped the raincoat and started walking over to them. Jake could barely make out the sound of the crunching gravel under the other man's shoes, and he saw the shape contort to pull something out of its pocket.

Remembering George's clone's imprisoned status on this side, Jake started to warn George to keep out of sight, "I think you should—"

The shape held out its arm, it was close enough for Jake to see that against the glare, and four pops rattled off in quick succession as it was walking toward them. Craters appeared in the wood of the trees beside them as they exploded, showering them with wood chips. Something kicked up gravel which sprayed into Jake's legs, and through his squinting eyes from the flying debris Jake thought, very calmly, "I think we're being shot at."

"BACK INTO THE TREES," George shouted, and reached out to pull Jake and Karen, who were standing closest to him, backwards. The others, who were out in front, turned to run, and he pulled each of them behind him before taking a last look at the approaching figure with the outstretched arm. Another shot pierced the air and the tree behind and slightly to the right of George cratered, spitting splinters at his clothes.

George followed the kids into the forest, and he could see Tommy ahead in front, followed by Aemilia, Justin, Karen, and Jake. They were weaving through the trees so deftly, as only young bodies could do, George thought, as he pushed himself harder to keep up with him. The previous two hikes had tired him out, and now it was all the adrenaline his body could muster that was pushing him on. His heart was beating against the front of his chest, and his temples were pulsing

like he was being hit with a sledgehammer, but he kept on going, as fast as he could to follow the children in front.

They kept looking back, back at him, and George knew they were slowing down to not outpace him, but he didn't want them to. He wanted them to get away, as far as they could, this was his demon to fight, if he could fight at all. But he couldn't tell them that, just keeping up with them made his chest into a burning brazier, and his throat was thick with mucus, he could barely swallow anymore. It was all he could do to gasp and keep up with them.

He tried looking over his shoulder. Was the nightmare still following them? He couldn't see anything for the second he dared to look, before a root in front of his foot almost sent him sprawling on the forest floor. He turned back around to the front, hoping that they could lose their hunter by the grace of Jake's friend's clever memorization. Outsmarted by a bunch of kids, he thought, and almost smiled through his wheezing teeth. It was the only thing keeping him alive.

They had been running for what seemed like hours through the forest, and George knew for sure now that the kids were getting slower so that they wouldn't lose him. The hammering in his chest came with a sharp clicking feeling each time, which felt distinctly unwell. Maybe he wouldn't have to worry about outrunning his pursuer after all, maybe he was already dead from the flight.

Up ahead, Jake's friend, the all too clever one, came into view, half of his body gone, waving wildly with his arm in a

through motion, as each of the children disappeared from view around a corner. George realized that the gate, a gate that after all these years he had never known to exist, was up ahead, and they were going through it to the other side. A snippet of conversation came back to him, about how there was no connecting road on this side, only on the other. On their side it was just miles of forest, the edge of the development.

George slowed down and put his hands on his knees when he reached Jake's friend at the edge of the door, looking back over his shoulder to try to see anyone coming up from behind, and gasping too loudly to hear anyone approaching. After a second, he was able to spurt out from between gulps of air "the street... police..."

"I don't know how," Jake's friend said to him, and that confident chessmaster that had stood up to him earlier in the morning melted away in front of his eyes. He was just a scared kid now. "I don't know how to get to the road, I took down all the ribbons."

"Pond," George wheezed, and waved Jake's friend to the side, through the doorway, as he lurched forward and rested his hand against the invisible lintel that the boy had been clutching. "To the pond," he managed to get out, and then swallowed the thick spit that threatened to spill out of his mouth.

"Okay," the boy said, and ran ahead, if ahead is what you could call it. To George it looked like he took a step and then

disappeared, but George could still hear his footsteps slapping against the soft dirt. George rounded the lintel and then he could see the boy's back approaching Jake, who was with the rest of the kids standing just down the trail. It was weird, George thought, he had run right past them, but in another world, and didn't know it.

George approached the group as quickly as he could, nearly lurching from tree to tree, and Jake ran up to meet him halfway.

"George..." he began, but George cut him off, finally recovering some of his breath.

"You have to get to the pond," he wheezed again, "then the police. You'll be safe there. Go on ahead," and George pointed at the rest of the group, "don't wait for me."

Jake looked at him for a second, and then nodded, George could barely see it in the dying light of the deep forest, and ran back to the rest of the group. He hadn't given himself much time to think about why the man was chasing them, but if he knew anything about him at all, George wanted everyone as far away from him as possible.

The group moved forward, but slowly this time, they wouldn't leave him, and he shooed them ahead with his arms whenever any of them looked back. Karen and Tommy were in the front of the group, seemingly in deep conversation, and from their gesticulations he could see that they were having disagreements about the trail ahead, which puzzled George, since Tommy had been so confident on the first way back.

The children were proceeding at what felt to him like a snail's pace, just out of his reach ahead, and he felt like some tragic Greek figure forever trying to reach them. He hoped that when they found the right way back, he would be able to tell which way they went, or risk forever being lost in the woods, but *their* safety was paramount.

The sky was getting darker by the minute, the sun must be close to the horizon, George thought, and he had transitioned to a fast walk from his wheezing stumble, but the children were still just out of reach ahead, not picking up any extra speed.

Then it came to him like a sledgehammer. Tommy the chessmaster didn't know the way back through *these* woods, because he had never mapped the route from the door to the pond on this side. It was from the pond to the door on their side, and then from the door to the road on this side. George hoped that the two of them up in front could puzzle it out, he really didn't want to be running through the woods for the rest of his life, either dying by starvation or confrontation.

The sun must be getting low, George thought, *because the forest is getting very very dark*, when they finally burst through the treeline onto a gravel shore. He could hear their footsteps ahead in the gravel, and he came up behind them out of the trees. The glassy surface of the pond was black, reflecting the nearly dark sky above, with only the slightest glow of orange on the horizon across the surface of the water. There were no benches, George realized, on this side's pond, and some detail

was struggling to come back to him from Jake's story about this side.

Finally out of the woods, figuratively and literally, and within sight of a road that could take them to safety, Jake relaxed, and turned back to George. They would be able to stay together as a group for the rest of the journey, it wasn't a hike anymore. But Jake's eyes got wide as he looked back, and his mouth fell open.

George saw Jake look back, and the horrified transformation of his face, before he heard the footsteps on the gravel behind him. He tried to mouth out the word "run" to Jake, but Jake was paralyzed in fear. No one else had noticed yet, maybe he could hold the man off, they were the same age for God's sake.

George turned around and saw a dark shape walking toward him across the gravel, with one arm outstretched, he had no doubt, clutching a gun. As the man got closer, the wan light from the setting sun detailed more and more of his features, and George could see how Carter would get them confused. Even after all these years, the two Georges looked nearly the same. *Well, George thought, maybe the senator was fitter.*

The man approaching them had a baggy button up shirt on, and corduroy trousers, a very mismatched pair, but, George thought, he might not have had much choice on his flight from the lockup.

“I heard you were in prison,” George said, and the man stopped, hearing his double’s voice, “and a senator, congratulations.”

“I was,” the senator said.

“Obviously, so what are you here for?”

“Just you,” the senator replied.

“Ah,” George said, and he realized the pied piper had come back for his payment. “Now that you’ve fucked things up over here,” he heard one of the children gasp behind him from his curse, “you’re going back to the other side, are you?”

“That’s the plan,” the senator said. George thought this unusual level of candor, especially from a politician, was probably the result of the impression of talking to yourself in a mirror. A funhouse mirror, anyway.

“We made a deal,” George said, and stepped to the right, into the still water of the pond. It was a risky move, especially since it moved him out from in between the senator and the children, and he could only hope that the senator would follow.

He did, the arm with the gun, barely highlighted by the setting sun, tracked his movement into the pond. The children, the gang as Jake called them, were standing like sticks stuck into the sand. They had all turned around and were watching the exchange without a single sound out of the group. *Good, George thought, just stay there, this is between the two of us.*

“I’m working on a new deal now,” the senator said, and stepped forward, keeping pace with the retreating old man.

“Oh yeah, and what’s that?”

The senator didn’t reply at first, and George took the opportunity to step back again into the water, this time going in under his shoeline, cold pond water flooding the soles of his feet. He was happy to see the senator step forward again, absentmindedly stepping into the water too.

“All I need is the portal,” the senator said, “not you, not them.” George winced, he was hoping beyond hope that the senator’s mind had completely left the group of children on the shore. George stepped back again, and the senator followed. “Just show me where it is,” he said, “and I’ll leave you be.”

“What about *my* life,” George asked, backing up, slowly, “you aren’t the only one who’s built up a life over the last thirty years.”

“We could both go through,” the senator said, and he flashed a smile that reflected orange in the disappearing sun. *A politician’s smile, George thought, he’s lying.*

“There’s no reason why we both can’t live on the same side,” the senator said, spinning out the yarn, “there are ways around the problems we had all those years ago. Nothing that can’t be bought off,” and he patted his front pocket, which bulged grotesquely. Had he really run off with a stack of cash in one pocket and a gun in the other?

“What happened to you?” George whispered, still backing up further.

“What happened to me?” The senator nearly shouted. “What happened to YOU? I bet you never even left the neighborhood. Look at me! Do you even know who I am?”

“I know enough,” George said, and cut his eyes left toward Jake, who was nearly parallel to him on the shore. Jake was shaking his head slowly back and forth, with his eyes wide. He suspected, George knew. He must be close, it must be around here somewhere.

“What do you know,” the senator said, “I’ve risen to heights that men have only dreamed of. You found a genie and what, you only wanted to start over? Start over your old life? You didn’t deserve that money, it was wasted on a low life like you.”

“A low life,” George said, and chuckled. He could barely see the outline of the senator now, it was getting so dark, but his mind reached back to the memory of talking to this George in his apartment, coming up with the plan, handing over a folder with keys, bank info, everything, at the surface of the puddle, before he jumped through. He *did* think he could just start over, but he didn’t realize he’d be releasing a demon with a full tank of gas on this side.

“I *am* a low life, I did this,” George said. “If I’d just left well enough alone, none of this would have happened. But I couldn’t accept it, I had to have another chance at happiness,

another shot at life. But what did it cost? I think a lot of children have paid for my happiness.”

“Where is it,” the senator snarled, stepping forward through the water. George backed up quickly, hoping he wouldn’t trip in the muck. “You tell me where it is, and I’ll let them live.” Ah, George thought, so we’re finally down to brass tacks.

George tried to match the senator step for step, but the soft bottom of the pond was sucking at the heels of his shoes, and the distance was closing. “I don’t want to hurt you,” George said, and the senator barked a laugh, but stopped advancing. “I want to help you. This is something I did to you, taking you over to this side, this never would have happened on the other side. But it doesn’t have to end this way. You *are* right, there is a world where we can both survive this, if you’ll go there with me.”

“Sure,” the senator said in a mocking voice, “just show me where it is.” The senator couldn’t see that he was standing very nearly on top of it, in between and to the right of the two of them was a patch of water slightly smoking with mist. George supposed he was the only one who could see it in the sliver of daylight because he was in front of it, but for whatever reason, he counted his blessings, the senator was blind to it. He hoped again that he was right about what he was about to do.

“Sure,” George said, then took in a deep breath and jumped headfirst into the puddle to his right. The startled

senator let off a shot that would have taken George in the chest if he hadn't dove down, which divoted the water ten feet beyond. George plunged through a thick sheet of water and felt his chest make contact with the pond bottom on the other side, where he scrambled against the soft mud to pull himself out.

The water was about a foot deep, and as soon as he was clear of the hole, he drew his legs up to his chest and wiped his eyes, still holding his breath, still half submerged in the water. Nothing, he cleared his eyes again, it was pitch black, he couldn't see anything. He didn't even know where the patch of water was anymore, but he could hear a sound perhaps twenty feet away, something was walking.

The sound of splashing broke the dead silence. "Come back," a voice very like his own yelled out, and he heard it suck down a lungful of air for another yell, but choke, and the senator started coughing. George couldn't see anything, but he could hear the senator continue to haul himself out of the puddle. It was a dirty trick, he didn't think the other man knew he was on another side with another puddle, but it was the only way he could see out.

Through the hacking and coughing, he heard the sound move away from the puddle, and he tried to commit the location to memory. The coughing man stood up, above the surface of the water.

"George!" the senator screamed out in between coughs, and at that, he heard something stir the gravel some distance

away, followed by a soft splash. The senator heard it too, George could tell because he was now trying to hold back his coughing fit.

In the seconds between coughs, as George's lungs were getting hotter and hotter with a fire he knew he would have to let out, they both heard another splash, this time closer. Whether it was from fear, or because he thought the sound was George escaping, George didn't know, but the senator decided at that moment to let go a salvo of bullets in the direction of the sound.

In the flash of the gunpowder let loose by the shots, George knew that he hadn't gone blind on this other side, but he wished that he had. Something was illuminated, not twenty feet from the senator, who was on the other side of the puddle. Something black, and huge. The legs, George thought, if he lived another thirty years he would never be able to forget the legs. In between flashes something like ten of them reached out, getting closer with every shot, to the senator. George wanted to scream to him to get back, to get back through the pond, that they would settle this on the other side, where he didn't know who would be victorious. Anything to keep what was about to happen from happening.

But George couldn't scream, couldn't move, his eyes were locked on the darkness that every bullet torturously pulled back. The senator screamed and thrashed, letting loose two more bullets as he was pulled up into the air. George didn't

know how long he had before the thing came for him, but he wanted to be through before the crunching stopped.

Rotating his head back to where he thought the puddle should be, his lungs now aching with their fire, he could see a faint glow from the surface of the water. Starlight, he thought, and as quietly as he was able to, he swam down into the surface of the puddle.

When his head broke the surface, the air inside his lungs exploded outward, quickly replaced with the freshest air George felt like he'd ever breathed. From the dark side, his eyes were sensitive enough to see that the group was standing around the edge of the puddle. Even Jake, who had talked of his journey like it had been a trauma, was standing on the edge, watching to see who would emerge, if anyone.

“Help,” George whispered, and more from his voice than the faint sight of him, they knew it wasn't the senator. Jake, Tommy, and Karen grabbed his outstretched hand, and they hauled him bodily out of the puddle, his legs weren't kicking at all to exit. Jake could guess why.

“Come on,” Tommy said, and pointed to the shore, and they walked the old man to the gravel beach. George thought he could make it on his own, but his legs kept buckling from underneath him as he walked, making him lean awkwardly on his crew of rescuers. He accepted their assistance to the shore, where he sat down hard in the soft gravel and stared at where he thought the patch of water was. He could sense Jake

beside him doing the same, watching for any contamination to come through.

But as George caught his breath, nothing stirred the water on the surface of the pond. Finally, after gathering his courage, Tommy asked “What happened to the senator?”

“He didn’t make it,” George replied, and faint outlines of legs came to him, causing him to shudder involuntarily. “He didn’t make it,” he repeated.

Jake moved closer to the old man, and wrapped his arm around the man’s back. George turned toward Jake and grabbed him in a hug, and they sat that way for a minute, the child comforting the old man. Jake felt George’s breath hitch in a sob once or twice, but the old man never cried, even after what Jake thought he must have seen.

Finally, George broke the embrace and whispered “Thanks,” to Jake as they moved apart. He looked up into the sky, the stars were wheeling overhead, and he thought for the first time that night without stars really was the worst thing in the universe.

But that thought brought another, and he said “I think it’s after your curfew.”

“Yeah,” Tommy said, “I don’t think this is going to end well.”

“Shall we start back,” George asked, and could barely see them nodding in the starlight. They helped him up out of the gravel, and turned toward the street, taking the long way around to the freestanding gateway in the woods. After what

felt like hours of walking, they reached the stretch of road that they all recognized as the entrance to the path to the gate. At that point, Tommy and Aemilia took the lead, helping each other with their partial mental maps of the route, and in the pitch dark, lit only by the starlight that managed to break through the top of the forest, Tommy ran into something that wasn't there.

“Ow, oh hey,” he said as he grabbed the column of air, “here it is.”

Aemilia groped around in the dark to his right and found the second column. “Here too,” she said.

One by one, they passed between the two columns of air, followed up by Tommy and Aemilia. Tommy moved from the back to the front again, and led them surely through the forest on a hike that was much easier than their headlong dash into the greenery earlier. Soon enough, they popped out of the treeline at the edge of a pond, but one that looked to George so much different than the one they had just been at a couple hours ago. There were the four benches along the edge, one more than on his side, and the shore toward the middle was lit up with the glow from a street light out of sight.

A helicopter passed by to their right, its searchlight stabbing into the forest canopy. “I think that might be for you,” George said, and Jake sucked in his breath through his teeth. “It could be for...the senator,” Tommy volunteered, and George frowned and nodded.

“Regardless, it means it’s time to go home,” George said, “and me too. I’ll be in enough trouble as it is.”

“Why?” Jake asked.

“Oh you know, out later than I said, there’ll be some explaining to do.” Jake didn’t think that the explanations would include an accurate account of everything that had transpired, he didn’t think any of them would be telling about that.

They walked over as a group to the section of shore between the downed log and the puddle, now invisible, in the water. George’s raincoat was gone from the bench he left it on, probably a piece of evidence in a locker somewhere, he thought. He looked down toward the water, where the puddle would be, and then looked at Jake, standing in the middle of his line of friends.

“I’m sorry,” George said, and his voice seemed to age a decade in a second, “you shouldn’t have had to go through what you just did, and for that I’m sorry.”

The experience of being apologized to by an adult was so unnerving that most of the group turned their gaze away from him, all except Jake, who stared straight back. Their eyes met for a span of seconds, then George broke off, looking up to another helicopter that was skimming the treetops.

“I think that’s my cue,” George said, and stepped into the inch deep water, reached down, and picked up the line hidden on the bottom. He looked back at the gang, all watching him, and said “Go right on home.” They nodded, and in less than a

second he was over and gone, a practiced maneuver from decades of experience.

Chapter 17

The fallout was worse this time. The story they'd concocted on the trip back was suspiciously similar to the first, and although all of them stuck to their guns, their respective parents viewed making nearly the same mistake again in a very negative light. This time they were all grounded, by round robin call, for two weeks, nearly until the summer was halfway over, and by God there would be no reprieve.

But two weeks of absolutely boring days in the house spent watching tv and replaying the same games over and over again later, they emerged again like butterflies from their cocoons and met up at the bulldozed hill. This time the change in the cul de sac was drastic, it was looking more and more like the cul de sac from the other side. They spent that day like they always did, throwing rocks, walking around, and talking. Aemilia told them that her parents were finally getting divorced, they had given it their best shot, but it wasn't enough. But just like that, it was something out in the open, something that could be talked about, and they did talk about it. Jake couldn't be sure, but she seemed lighter when they left the hill that day.

The next Saturday Jake took his fishing pole, cup of waxworms, and raincoat to the pond. After zipping the cup up in his coat pocket, he rotated through the cool morning air, into the skim of water, and out again. There was an old man sitting on the bench far away, but he didn't seem surprised at all to see him. Jake walked the rest of the way out of the puddle with his fishing pole in his hand toward the bench, and sat down next to George, who already had a bobber in the pond.

"How's the fishing over here," Jake asked, stripping off his raincoat to lay over the back of the bench.

"Not as good," George said, smiling in spite of himself, at the sight of his young friend. "Not nearly as good. You'd be better off to fish on the other side."

"Maybe," Jake said, and that was the end of George's token resistance. If George was being honest, the years of keeping the secret had taken a toll on him, and having someone who knew what he knew was a salve to his soul.

"So how bad was it?" George asked, and as Jake set up his fishing rig he regaled him with the story of the parental crying, the hurried calls to the police, the search party called off. They had kept mum about the senator, but he had been spotted in the area, and half the helicopters really were searching for him. But in two weeks they hadn't found any trace, and the news programs had eventually stopped airing coverage of the predator's daring escape.

“Does it feel different,” Jake asked, “with him being gone?”

“No and yes,” George said, “no, nothing feels different, physically that is, now that he’s gone. But I’d always assumed my life went on on the other side, something like my life was going on here. I never would have thought it would take such a terrible turn. How much of me was there in him, how much of him is here in me?”

“But you’re nothing like him,” Jake said.

“Not at first glance, but I can’t deny that we were, at one point, nearly the same person. That point was long ago, mind you, a long time before I even met him, but it must have existed. Then does that mean that but for the grace of God I would have turned out like that?” He sighed. “Maybe we each have the possibility for great good and great evil in us, and everything in between. I don’t know.” He looked at Jake again, who was watching him, and smiled, “But you never found your copy, did you?”

“No,” Jake said, “maybe I have one over here, but living somewhere else, or maybe over there, but I never met him. I’m kind of sad about it,” he looked back out to his bobber on the water, “everyone got to see theirs but me.”

“I’m sure he’s out there,” George said, looking out to his bobber too, “I’m sure.”

* * *

The years passed like leaves falling from the trees. Tommy moved away in seventh grade, Karen and Justin started dating in eighth. Jake fished every Saturday, but on Sundays he would make maps and plans. He blazed the trail from the puddle side to its own forest gate, and every weekend he would explore down the line. He once got as far as five jumps over during the summer when he said he was going camping with Justin, but he never found his clone, his copy, on any side. Aemilia and her dad moved away during the summer of eighth grade, and it was just Jake, Justin and Karen left in the neighborhood. They still hung out, as the years went on, but less and less.

Jake got a new group of friends, mostly other anglers in the school he met through the club, and they would go out on trips with their teacher sponsor to far off lakes and rolling rapids. Sometimes, when they would camp out overnight, Jake would wonder if there was a puddle nearby, or two trees, through which another world could be reached. He supposed that there must be, they must be all over the place, but no one ever found them. When he was in tenth grade he stopped exploring down the line, he supposed that everything he could ever be was still in front of him, and he would make that decision when the time came.

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