

TOO FAR

Rich Shapero



Outside
Reading

Outside Reading
P.O. Box 1565
San Mateo, CA 94401

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Also by Rich Shapero

Wild Animus



1

On the outskirts of Fairbanks, down a gravel road, a small house and a family had taken root among the trees. A man and a woman, and a six-year-old boy. They had come from a long distance, impelled by an idea, like seed flock on the wind. In May, the northern sky pales early. Dreams trail off, and you wake and dress yourself. Robbie, the boy, managed that himself now.

After they ate breakfast, Dad would leave. Robbie would go outside.

Between the house and the wilds was a bald spot—the Clearing—and there he sat, this particular morning, in deep concentration.

Is the stick curious or something to fear?

He was twiddling a dry twig between stones, and down in the pocket a spider was watching.

Does it have a mind of its own? Robbie thought, as the spider might. *Or is someone holding it? Following everything I do.* Like a voice from the heavens, he spoke to the spider. “Grab on—”

Light steps crossed the Clearing. In his circle of sight: one shoe, then two. Socks bright and unmatched—one purple, one blue.

Robbie looked up. A girl, his own age.

“Is someone down there?” she asked.

Her eyes seemed enormous. But it wasn't their size. Ferocious thoughts, and wild ones, were churning inside. She had a brown pony tail spouting over one ear. Over the other, locks were twisted oddly, ribboned and knotted with rubber bands.

“Yep,” Robbie answered. “I'm his friend.”

She bent over and saw the spider. Her head tilted, as if considering how to introduce herself. Then she began to hum. A lilting melody—something you might please yourself with when no one else was around. Robbie listened as he peered between the stones. The song seemed to speak to him as well. There was a call to freedom in it, a confidence that banished care.

“Hey,” Robbie said. “He's climbing out.”

The girl smiled, spread her arms with a theatrical flourish and rose. Then, without a word, she began to turn. Her hands trailed, as if letting go of something. There was a magenta scarf around her shoulders and a scarlet one at her waist, and they flared as she whirled, faster and faster. She closed her

eyes and her attention drew into a private quarter. Robbie was mesmerized.

The girl stopped and plunked down beside him.

Robbie felt their knees touch.

“Everything’s loose,” she laughed, making a dizzy face.

Her breath quivered between her lips. A ringlet bounced beside her temple. She was closing her eyes again. Beneath her dark brows, the lids twitched like wings.

“I’m entering the special place,” she said.

Robbie heard an invitation.

“Are *you*?”

“Sure,” he answered, shutting his eyes.

“The wind sings my songs,” the girl said. “So do the leaves. I show them how.”

Robbie tried to imagine how you could do that.

“Your turn,” she said.

“Okay . . .” Robbie tried to think. “I can write my name backwards.” He frowned. *What’s so special about that?* He cracked his lids.

She was still immersed. “When I smile, the whole world feels warm,” she said.

That’s something, Robbie thought, closing his eyes again.

“I fly in my dreams.”

“I can be as invisible as air,” the girl said. “In real life.”

“When my friends are in danger, I rescue them.”

She giggled. “No one remembers what I remember.”

“I go anywhere in the forest,” Robbie said. “And I never get lost.”

He felt a bump. She was shaking him. When he opened his eyes, her face was inches away.

“Really?”

He just stared back.

She turned to the slope behind them. It rose steeply, thronged with aspens and red currant. Buds were starting to burst and the branches were sparked with green. “Have you been up there?”

“Sure.” Robbie shrugged, his power leaking away. The Hill was no man’s land, as distant and unreachable as the sky above it. He could hear Mom at the back of his mind. *Lying again.*

“I want to see.” The girl’s eyes flashed.

Robbie nodded.

“Let’s go,” she said.

Robbie peered back between the stones.

“*Now.*” She stood. “What’s your name?”

“Robbie.” He rose uncertainly, glancing at his home. It was double trouble. The Hill was forbidden, and the girl would quickly realize that it was a mystery to him.

Her eyes wandered up the slope. “I bet no one has ever been.”

Robbie laughed. She was starting through the scrub. Without thinking, he hurried after her. “What’s yours?”

She grasped his hand. “Fristeen.” Her lips touched his ear.

They reached the first tall tree. Robbie stopped and turned half-around. They both looked at his house.

“Is that where you live?”

He nodded. How many hours had he stood by the window, wondering what the great story of the forest was about? He gazed up the slope. This was the doorway he couldn't think beyond.

Fristeen's eyes were like the jets on a stovetop, and when she faced him it was like someone had turned the knob all the way. She knew it was forbidden, but she didn't care. And suddenly he didn't either. It was time.

"Don't tell," he said, squeezing her hand.

She promised with a squint. "I love secrets."

They entered the thick shrubs. The twigs had dark skin and brown fingers with bumps at the ends that clawed and caught at them as they passed. The leaf litter hissed and slid beneath them. It was a strange new world for Robbie, and there was another strange world clasping his hand. It was warm and alive, and not the least bit hesitant or ill-at-ease. There was a rhythm in Fristeen's breath, in her step, and inside her. And when her fingers wriggled, it was as if she spoke. "Look at this, look at that." Tips of life peering up at them, lime and maroon. Flowers venturing up from the matted litter, some quailing, some headstrong. A wasps' nest, glaring through the branches like an ashen face.

"Feel," Fristeen said as they neared a big tree. She reached out, and he did the same. Its skin was gray, cool and smooth.

"Listen." Robbie closed his eyes.

"Do you hear something?" she wondered.

"His thoughts," Robbie whispered. "He has a secret in his fingers. Look, up there." He pointed.

From a branch, twigs spoked like an unclenched fist, and leaves were trembling at the end of each.

“They’re thinking—all of them. See?” Robbie swept the slope. “Thinking about leaves!”

Fristeen yelped and broke into a run.

She reached a bush. Robbie was right behind her. She grabbed its fingers and pinched its buds, and its leaves jumped out. “Look.” Robbie spun around to another. “Shiny.” Then on to another, and up the slope, running back and forth from bough to bole. Some buds were sharp, some were still hard. But most were excited, swollen and ready, and when your fingers squeezed, they burst for joy. Green ones, gray ones, some pink like flesh. Some fuzzy, some silky, some big and sticky with a minty smell.

The trees upslope were clamoring. So they raced to the next, Fristeen crying, “You can’t stop between.” Some leaves bristled, some fanned, some you had to unroll. Look—red. No, silly, it’s your fingers showing through. And then they were guessing before they popped the buds. Furry— Prickly! Purple, I bet.

All of a sudden, there wasn’t any more Hill. They whirled and hooted and jumped up and down. Robbie ran to the tallest aspen, threw his arms around it, and looked straight up. The gray branches reached—nothing between them and the sky. The tree was urging him to climb.

Fristeen was beside him, red-faced, breathless.

“I could,” Robbie gasped. “I think I could.”

“I know you could. Look,” she pointed down the slope.

It was an amazing sight. Robbie's house was so small you could pick it up with your fingers.

He struggled with a new perspective. "I was there all the time." He glanced at Fristeen. "I never left."

"When I was a baby, I was in prison—a wooden jail. That's what Grace says."

"Grace?"

"Come on." Fristeen turned from the slope, faced the forest beyond, and started forward.

Robbie didn't follow.

She looked back. "It's okay."

"Yeah, but—"

"What?"

He heard the disappointment in her voice. "I've been that way before," he said.

"You have?"

Robbie swallowed. The breezes had vanished and the woodland was silent, awaiting his response. "I don't want to lie to you," he said.

She gave him a fond look.

"Let's go back," he said.

She shook her head.

"You'll be scared."

"Oh, I know," Fristeen said with relish.

That stopped him. Was it a bluff? No, he could see the truth in her smile: she exulted in things that frightened her. A stray breeze sent a chill up Robbie's back. He shivered, feeling himself in the presence of something new and strange.

Across the space that separated them, her gaze met his darkly, boldly.

“Fristeen,” he murmured. Was he reasoning with her, or pleading? As long as he could remember, his head had been full of fantasies. Lies, Mom called them. For all his rich imagination, he lacked the daring to make anything of them. The answer was staring him in the face.

“I might need someone to rescue me,” she said.

Retreat seemed suddenly unworthy. This was the Hill, the great unknown. And here he was on top of it, feeling its freedom along with its fear. Fristeen made him think he could be master of both.

“You might,” Robbie nodded, stepping toward her.

The earth dipped and turned lumpy. They headed into a patch of thin trees that were all bent over. When Robbie glanced at Fristeen, she was too.

“Follow the Bendies,” she said with a secret look.

Robbie laughed and hunched.

They reached a place where the trees had snapped and lay piled on top of each other. There was an open space beneath, and they got down on their hands and knees and crawled through.

“Wait,” Robbie said as they rose. He lifted his hand and pulled at one of her ribbons. The braid untwisted, covering her eye. When he brushed the hair aside, his fingertips skimmed her brow.

“What are you doing?” she asked softly.

He turned and tied the ribbon to an overhanging branch.
“Marking the way.”

Fristeen’s eyes grew wide. “So you don’t get lost.” Kids did that in fairytales.

Robbie nodded. Would it work? They’d find out on the way back.

The spell of fairytale was, in fact, stealing over them both. You’re listening, and it all seems so unlikely—full of peculiar places and things that could never happen. And then all at once, you’re in the middle of it, burning to know what will come next and believing every bit of it.

They crossed a bed of dead leaves and whisked through parched grass. Strange signs appeared, half-buried in the soil. A shovel head. A section of pipe. A rusty can. Relics of some ancient people. Then the earth ended abruptly. At the verge, a large rusted barrel lay on its side with its open end toward them, and beyond that, a stream wandered between steep walls. On the opposite bank, a dark visage loomed.

Where a large willow had bent, you could see the vault of a brow and a face netted with dead branches. Shocks of hair rayed to either side. A nexus of twigs formed a piercing eye. The other was narrowed, as if considering. Beneath the collapsed willow, where the bank had been hollowed, a wetness glossed giant lips, and roots emerged around it.

“His beard,” Robbie said, pointing.

“Hear, hear, hear . . .” A voice echoed from the rusty drum.

“And ears,” Fristeen said.

“And a nose.”

“He Knows,” the face said. “He Knows, He Knows . . .”

The mass of dark branches squinted and stared.

“He Knows,” Robbie whispered. “That’s his name.”

They traded glances. If He Knows really knew—

Robbie peered over the edge. “Where does it go?” he asked.

“The stream,” Fristeen added.

“Dream,” He Knows replied, “dream, dream, dream . . .”

“I’m in the mood,” she said.

“Too, too, too . . .”

“Would we get back,” Robbie asked, “before dark?”

“Far, far, far, far . . .”

Robbie searched the rim. To the left, where the banks pinched together, a fallen aspen bridged the stream. On the far side, the way rose through the brush.

Fristeen started along the rim.

“Okay.” Robbie followed.

“Wait, wait, wait . . .”

They looked at each other. Fristeen grabbed Robbie’s hand.

“You’re an old troll,” she cried.

“Cold, cold, cold . . .”

“No, it’s not,” Robbie shouted.

“Fog, fog, fog . . .”

They headed toward the fallen aspen, kicking up litter, shoes sucking in mud as the gurgle of the flow rose in their

ears. The log's gray skin was patterned with moss. They straddled it and scooted across. On the far side, they started up a long slope. They were both breathing hard when they reached the top. A ridge rose on the right, dipped, and then lifted still higher. Everything seemed to slope down from that crest. It made you dizzy, just looking at it.

“Do you think we should?”

Robbie saw the foreboding in Fristeen's eyes. His dread surfaced, along with the memory of her bravado at the top of the Hill. It was crazy—the impulse to hurl yourself at something you feared. “Dare you,” he said, and he started up.

“No!” Fristeen hurried forward with shrieks and cries, jubilant.

The dry growth had been flattened by wind or snow. At the dip were twin stumps that you stepped between. Then the pitch grew steeper. They held hands, huffing as they climbed. What had happened here? The slopes on either side were naked. Was it safe to look down? Not yet, not yet. Then you did, and what you saw were the tops of trees, all thin and bony with dead leaves beneath—a speckled brown sky with tiny green stars.

It was exciting, but frightening. You put your face into the wind, and you didn't talk. It was that kind of place. The forest around you expanded with every step.

So many, Robbie thought. Uncountable. Below and beyond, far into the distance— It was all one big tangle of trunks and arms. Vast, endless. Maybe this was why grownups said scary things about the deep woods, and got nervous when you

asked. It was something they preferred not to think about. How could you be anything but lost in a world like this?

“Robbie?”

He glanced over his shoulder.

“If we fell off—”

“You can’t,” he said. He stopped. “Stay where you are.”

He took a few more steps. Then he closed his eyes and let his knees buckle. He landed on his rear in the soil. When he looked back she was laughing. Then she hopped forward and sat down beside him.

It wasn’t the highest point on the ridge, but it was a privileged place. They scanned the valleys, and for what seemed a long time, silence prevailed. Finally Fristeen spoke.

“When Dada plays his guitar, I don’t talk. Just like this.”

A breeze passed between them.

“Mine’s going to be a doctor,” Robbie said.

“He wants to help people.”

“Not that kind. Do you know what you’re going to be?”

Fristeen smiled to herself. “I’m going to be the sun.”

Her cheek brushed his. He could smell her hair. It was sweet and smoky, honey melting in tea with a fire going.

“What about you?”

Robbie shook his head. “I’ll figure it out in first grade.” He shivered. The air seemed suddenly colder.

“You’re going to school?”

“When summer’s over. Aren’t you?” Something shifted at the corner of Robbie’s eye. White scarves were rising out of the ravines just below.

“If I want to spell something, Grace shows me how.”

The scarves were connecting into misty chains, climbing with such speed that it was easy to imagine they had some purpose.

“We better go back,” he said.

Fristeen saw the alarm in his eyes.

In front of them and behind, giant white fingers crept over the ridge.

As they stood, a huge snarl of mist rose with them, sending tendrils out, circling their bodies like icy rope. They shivered through them, waving their arms to clear a view of the crestline and hurrying down. As quickly as they moved, the vapors followed. Others appeared, swimming from either side, anticipating their flight. Would they make it down the ridge before— No, coiling vapors were drifting together below, meeting and joining to seal the way.

Robbie stumbled. He rolled over and stopped abruptly as his knees struck something woody. Fristeen cried out, grabbing his shoulder, trying to keep him from the invisible depths below. Robbie drew his feet beneath him, then saw the problem: one of his shoes was unlaced. A sharp wind cut through them, and then it was twisting and twisting. He shuddered as he fumbled and his shoe came off. He watched it whirl away into the bottomless fog, hearing He Knows’ warning, “Cold, cold, cold.”

Chill vapors circled as they stood, and the ridgeline disappeared. Robbie shivered and hobbled forward, feeling his way. The wind tugged the mist tightly around them.

“To the left,” a wheezy voice said.

Robbie stopped, glancing back at Fristeen. Her eyes were wide.

He edged to the left, squinting through the blasts. They were descending, leaving the crest, heading straight into a white morass.

“Put your best foot forward,” the invisible voice said.

Robbie recoiled, and began side-stepping up the incline. As they regained the crest, the voice came again.

“Almost, almost—” A crazy titter ricocheted around them.

“Who are you?” Fristeen demanded.

“The future,” came the answer from deep in the fog. The blast beat at them, shaking their parts. “Shivers, for now.”

Robbie peered at the whorls, then gripped Fristeen. There were sockets for eyes, and soggy cheeks below. A sagging nose. A scud curdled like a rumpled brow.

“Whatever brings you here?”

“We’re exploring,” Fristeen said.

“Without coats?” An O opened between Shivers’ cheeks, and through it a freezing wind blasted.

Robbie flung his arm around Fristeen, fearful they would be swept from the ridge.

The cloudy presence stood between them and safety. Was that a high collar? No, a chin impossibly long, wound around his neck.

“What do you want?” Robbie shouted.

“Want?” Shivers blustered. He began to quake. The turmoil mounted in his throat, as if he was choking, then his

lips sputtered, “Food!” and the blast was driven with a terrible hacking. “I’m famished.” The cloudy jaws chewed. “Children are best.”

An eddy reached out, gripping Fristeen like a quivering claw. She screamed. Robbie kept hold of her, shouldering into the maw of the horrid face.

“Doubts, my boy?” Shivers mouthed him. “It’s doubt I taste.”

Shudders raked their bodies, gums soft and slick wetting them through and spewing them out, delivering them to a frenzy of icy gusts that crossed the ridge like giant razors. Robbie stumbled forward, dragging Fristeen along, a putrid smell clinging to them, trailing back into the guts of the fog.

“Doubt and despair, and the sweet nibble of decay.”

Robbie waved his arms to loosen the mist. “The stumps—” He gestured toward the gate where the ridge dipped. They struggled through the flurries, while Shivers whispered in their ears.

“Can you see? A feast. In your honor it’s laid. At the head of the table, that’s me. I chew, I digest, I belch, I void. Romance you seek, and romance you’ll find. Hear? Do you hear? All those voices lifted together— Whistling caeca. Buzzing livers. Lungs blown with mold. Glorious—and *you’re there*. I hear you both in the swelling choir. Your tiny pipes join mankind’s longed-for esperanto. Hyphae ending! Mulch to all! Shivers’ peace worldwide.”

A break in the fog—the twin stumps stood clear. They raced toward them, but as they approached a shred of mist

appeared, hanging between, sagging and furred. One leg was crookt, one arm was raised. And a smudge like a head lifted to face them.

“Get out of our way,” Robbie cried. Fristeen was shivering behind him, clutching his waist.

“I’m a patient sort,” Shivers’ voice creaked with age. “But not for such as you.” A tendril lifted like a finger and quivered threateningly at Fristeen.

Robbie looked up and his heart rose in his chest. A lake of fog was suspended directly above them. “Take me, not her.” And he hurled Fristeen through the gate.

The hanging figure dissolved as the dam broke, and the freezing white lake came pouring down. And with it, the voice, husky with omen and creaking with scorn.

“Both, and soon. You hear? Both, and soon! It’s the short way to Shivers if the heart is your guide.”

Robbie dove through the gate. He collided with Fristeen, and they crumpled and rolled. Then they were up together, racing down the long slope. Robbie skipped and squawked, sharp things poking through the mulch at his shoeless foot.

They reached the stream, crossed the log bridge, and followed the bank. Was Shivers right behind? There—Fristeen’s ribbon. They scrambled beneath the Fallen Down Trees, and when they rose, the Bendies were just as they had left them.

At the top of the Hill, the fierce wind vanished abruptly, replaced by a gentle breeze. The spell seemed to dissolve, and their panic subsided.

Far below, Robbie saw his home. The sky hadn't yet dimmed, but the windows were lit. Down they ran, Fristeen headlong, Robbie hobbling. About halfway, she shouted, "Tree to tree." So they zigged and zagged, wheeling and slapping the cool gray trunks. Then the Clearing was before them, and they stumbled onto the flat, laughing and hugging, and gazing back up the slope.

"We did it," Robbie said. His voice was tremulous. Fristeen's hands were still shaking. Their eyes met, sharing their relief and the narrow escape.

How much had they imagined? Robbie pictured himself recounting the adventure to Mom and Dad. Were they just lies—more elaborate ones? No. What had happened was real. He'd pierced the forbidden without help or permission. Fear had lost its tyranny over him. Fristeen was beside him now, putting her hand in his, grateful and adoring.

"He Knows was right," Robbie said, mastering his pride.

Fristeen agreed.

Robbie faced his home and sniffed. "Hungry?" He could usually tell what was for dinner, but the air was odorless.

"Starving," Fristeen said.

He wasn't. He felt full, not just in his stomach, but in his chest and his head, and his arms and legs, too. It was her, Robbie realized. He was full of Fristeen.

"Want to know something?" He took a breath.

Fristeen saw the look in his eyes.

Robbie struggled for words. "I've got a secret."

She danced in front of him, circled him with her arms, and put her lips to his cheek. “No you don’t.”

Robbie stood speechless, watching as she stepped away from the Clearing and started through the shrubs. Just before she vanished, she turned half around.

“I live right over there,” she called back to him, pointing.

2

Robbie saw a shadow in the window. Then the back door burst open and Mom came flying out. Her coat was on, and she had her keys in her hand. She crossed the deck and swept him up, hugging him tightly.

“Mom,” he murmured. Her chest was heaving against his, and Robbie could feel the dampness on her cheeks. He drew her plushy scent in and a sigh escaped him. The only true fearlessness was here, in Mom’s arms. Robbie was suddenly aware of the tension inside him. He was ticking like a wind-up toy. “Dad?”

His father stepped beside them.

“What are you doing home?”

“Your mom called.” Dad put his arm around him.

Robbie grinned and reached out, full of his achievement. “Guess what—”

Mom lost her balance and was forced to let go.

Robbie slid to the deck. “Dad—”

“Where were you?” Mom shrieked. She fell to her knees, eyes wild, grabbing his shoulders and shaking him. Suddenly her face buckled, the accumulated worry overcame her and she was convulsed with sobs. “Where?” she shrieked again.

Robbie tried to find his voice. He could see Mom’s lips trembling. “In the Clearing.”

“That’s a lie,” she said.

“And up the Hill.” Robbie met her glare.

“You disappeared,” Trudy said. The day sitter stepped forward, allying with Mom.

Robbie wrinkled his nose at her.

Mom didn’t notice. She’d turned her wrath on Trudy. “I’m ready to fire you.”

Trudy bowed her head.

“Are you alright?” Mom asked. “Your shirt’s torn. Where *exactly* did you go?”

Robbie saw Dad watching him. There was a hint of sympathy in Dad’s eyes. But why was the corner of his mouth lifting? Dad nodded to him, acknowledging his predicament, then he turned and headed back to the house.

At the sound of his footsteps, Mom stiffened. “That’s it, Robbie.”

He could hear the dejection mixed with her fury.

“You’re not leaving the house,” Mom said. “Your outside time is over.”

Robbie wrenched free. “I don’t care,” he said. Then he turned like Dad had and strode across the deck.

Dad was on the sofa, thumbing a notebook, his daypack beside him.

“Dad— I climbed the Hill.”

“Congratulations.” Dad put the notebook down, glancing at the back door. When Robbie reached his knee, Dad roughed his hair and kissed his temple.

“Guess what I saw.”

Dad’s dark eyes glinted, entering for a moment the spirit of the adventure. “What?”

“There’s a stream with a voice, and a place where—”

“You’ve lost a shoe,” Dad laughed.

Robbie looked down. The sight of his muddy sock made him giggle. “Do you have to go back?”

“I think I’m done for the day.” Dad eyed the back door again.

“It was scary. This mist came, and—”

“Robbie—”

The doorknob was turning.

“Why did you leave the Clearing?” Dad asked.

Mom entered with a much-chastened Trudy.

“I decided to.”

“You know the rules,” Dad said.

“I was exploring.”

Mom leveled her gaze at him. “You *don’t* go into the forest alone.”

“I *wasn't*—”

Mom's eyes narrowed. “Who were you with?”

“No one.”

Dad moved his daypack and Mom sat beside him.

“You broke the rules,” Dad said. “What should we do?”

“Nothing,” Robbie said. “The rules are stupid.”

Mom bristled, but before she could speak, Dad lifted his hand to calm her.

“Robbie—” Dad laughed, leaning forward.

Robbie saw the dark eyes regarding him. What was Dad thinking? Sometimes you could tell—his thoughts were right there in front of you. But sometimes it was the other way. His thoughts were distant, and his expression gave no clue. Dad's hair was black, and when stubble shadowed his face, it was that much harder.

“You promised,” Dad said.

“I was a little boy then. I'm six now.” Robbie smiled. “It's okay.”

“We'll decide that,” Mom said.

“Well—” Dad sighed.

Robbie could see shadows shifting at the back of Dad's mind.

“Maybe it *is* okay,” Dad said softly.

Mom turned scarlet.

Robbie beamed.

Dad took a breath. “Felicia—”

Mom rose, shook her head, and stepped into the kitchen.

For a moment, Dad was lost in thought. Robbie remained silent. The only sound was Mom, cursing and banging pans.

Finally, Dad spoke. “You have to say you’re sorry. That’s how this works.”

Robbie nodded.

“You’re the most important thing in the world to her.”

Again Robbie nodded.

“Go wash up. I’ll come and get you,” Dad told him.

They crossed the living room together. Dad motioned to Trudy. She had gathered her things and was waiting by the front door. “Don’t worry,” he said as Robbie started down the hall. “We’ll figure it out. Everything will be fine.”

From his room, Robbie heard only the swells of emotion. He couldn’t make out what they were saying. They were mad at each other, of course. That didn’t bother him. He found a pair of shoes and socks, shut himself in the bathroom, and switched on the fan.

First he peed. Then he climbed up, put his muddy foot in the sink and turned on the tap. The cold water made him shudder, and the terrible face swam before him.

Doubts, my boy? Shivers sneered.

Robbie shook his head to banish the phantom. *My boy, my boy*— Shivers, or the thought of him, had followed him home.

“I’m not your boy,” Robbie muttered, scrubbing his foot.

He turned off the water, climbed back down, and put the fresh footwear on. Then he stood and regarded himself in the mirror.

It was the same face he’d looked at that morning. More serious, maybe. Freedom had done that. His life seemed so much

larger now. He combed his hair. It was dark brown, like Fristeen's. His eyes were blue—not a luminous sky blue, like hers. Grayish blue. When would he see her again? There were freckles on his cheeks and his ears stuck out, but there was nothing to be done about that. Maybe tomorrow. The first of his baby teeth had wiggled free the week before. He smiled at the mirror and pushed his tongue into the hole. Then he put his finger on his cheek where Fristeen had kissed it.

They're done now, Robbie thought.

But when he left the bathroom, they were still arguing. So he snuck out of his room and crept along the hall.

Mom was saying something about a moose.

"How many times have we been over this?" Dad said.

"You trust his judgment?"

"He knows what to do," Dad said. "They don't stalk kids."

"Or a bear—"

"The chance of that—" Dad began.

"What if he gets lost?" Mom's voice rose. "What if he falls? What if he breaks his leg—"

"Felicia—"

Robbie pictured the disbelief on Dad's face.

"Stan's boy is six," Dad said, "and he's free as a bird. You ought to get to know Jenny—"

"Once was enough."

"Stan said she enjoyed the morning you spent—"

"Greasing her well pump?" Mom said. "Next time we'll shovel out her privy."

Silence.

“There are a lot of boys Robbie’s age,” Dad said, “wandering these forests. That’s what this is all about.”

“For you, not for Robbie.”

“He has to take some risks,” Dad said.

“Please—don’t tell me about Illinois.”

“He’s got a mind of his own.” Dad laughed and repeated in a squeaky voice, “I was *exploring*.”

Robbie heard the admiration in Dad’s voice.

“I’m glad he isn’t content to twiddle around in the Clearing.” Dad’s scorn filled their small home.

More silence.

“You’re turning him against me, Jack.”

Mom was faltering.

“The look on his face—” Mom cut herself off.

She was getting sad.

“It’s my fault,” Mom said. “This never would have happened if I’d been here.”

Dad said nothing.

“I’m gone all the time,” Mom said.

“Three days a week?”

“It’s too much.”

“That’s insane,” Dad said.

Silence again.

“Oh, Jack—”

Robbie could barely hear her now.

“He’s changed,” Mom said.

“He’s your son.”

“With work— And school in September—”
Robbie turned and headed back to his room.
“I’m losing him,” Mom said.



When dinner was ready, Dad came to get him.
“Say you’re sorry. Remember.”

But Robbie did better than that. He circled the table and pulled out Mom’s chair for her. It made them both laugh.

“I’m sorry.” And he meant it. He loved Mom.

The food wasn’t special, but he ate everything on his plate. Afterward, they would talk and agree to change the rules, and there wouldn’t be any more arguing.

They cleared the dishes and sat back down. Nothing remained on the table except the two waxen cylinders, white and unlit.

“We set the boundary at the Clearing,” Mom said, “when you were five. You’re older now. You have better judgment. You can climb the Hill—you’ve proven that. So we’re changing the rules.” She glanced at Dad. “You can go to the top of the Hill.”

“But—”

Dad’s expression warned him.

Robbie shook his head. The new rule didn’t make any sense. “There’s a place higher up—Where You Can See—”

“If you think the limits should be changed,” Dad said, “we’ll talk about it. Give it a little time. Alright?” He winked.

“Alright.”

“You got Trudy in trouble today,” Dad said.

“I know.”

“And Mom was really upset. They just want to know where you are.”

Robbie nodded.

“The top of the Hill. No farther,” Mom said. “I should be able to see you from the deck.”

“We won’t.”

The words slipped out before Robbie could stop them.

“We?” Mom prickled with fresh alarm.

“Me and—” Robbie shrugged and grabbed his milk. “Any friends of mine.”

“You were with someone.”

Robbie took a swallow. “Yep.” He set his glass down.

His indomitable air had its effect. Mom’s jaw dropped. Dad tried to straighten his laugh with his hand.

“Well, who was it?” Mom asked.

“Fristeen,” Robbie said, pointing through the window. “She lives over there.”

Mom’s head bowed. “What next?”

Robbie waited for her to continue, but she just sat there. Dad leaned back from the table with a blank look on his face. *What’s happening?* Robbie wondered. Dad’s attention shifted. He reached for the mail and began to thumb through it.

“She’s—” Robbie searched for a word. “Amazing.”

“That’s beside the point,” Mom sighed.

“It had to happen,” Dad said under his breath.

“What do you mean? What’s wrong?”

“I want you to stay away from her,” Mom said.

“But—”

“No ‘buts.’”

“You don’t under—”

“We’ve lived next door to them for two years, Robbie. There’s a reason I haven’t taken you over to play.”

“You don’t understand—”

“No,” Mom said. “You have other friends.”

“Fristeen isn’t just a—”

“No,” Mom repeated sternly.

“I’m going to marry her,” Robbie exclaimed.

Mom was dumbstruck.

Dad looked from the mail to Mom. “Did we get an invitation?”

The humor pierced her bewilderment. She made a dazed face and rolled her eyes. “Until then,” Mom laughed, “you’re not to play with her. Are we clear?”

“But—”

“Are we clear?”

Dad nodded. “Mom’s right,” he said.



When it was bedtime, Dad came in to read him a story. Robbie was sitting with his back against the pillow and his legs beneath the sheets, sulking.

“What’s wrong?” Dad said.

“You know.”

Dad’s hands shot out. Robbie crowded his arms together, but Dad’s fingers found the gaps, playing his ribs like a toy piano.

Robbie howled and writhed till he cried.

When they had both calmed down, Dad pulled a book from the shelf.

“Right here, Doc,” Robbie patted the bed.

Dad laughed and sat beside him. “It’ll be awhile.”

Robbie closed one eye, as if taking aim, pointing his finger in his father’s face. “Your brain is a forest.”

“And the nerves are trees,” Dad sang out.

“When the branches touch—” Robbie brought his forefingers together.

“Snaps jump between the leaves!”

They squinted at each other, and then Dad opened the book.

Robbie put his hand over the title page. “I want to go to the lab.”

“Sure.”

“And look through the microscope.”

“At . . . anything in particular?”

Robbie looked at the wall opposite. A large poster hung there, showing a brain in cross-section. It was ringed with examples of branching nerves. The riddle of the mind—that was an interest he and Dad shared.

“Thoughts travel around inside nerves,” Robbie said. “I’ve seen nerves in the lab. I want to see thoughts.”

Dad frowned.

“It’s not that simple,” Robbie guessed.

Dad shook his head. “Nerves and chemicals are physical mechanisms. They produce thoughts. But we can’t see them.”

“When you’re older, you decide what thoughts you’re going to have.” Robbie regarded him. “Don’t you?”

“What do you mean?”

“Mine just fly out of nowhere. Because I’m six. Right?”

“You’ll have more control over them when you’re older. But thoughts are that way. They come and go without permission. They can surprise you. Shock you. Overpower you. The way they take control of the mind is a great mystery.” He paused. “Is this about the Hill?”

Robbie peered into Dad’s eyes. He didn’t have to say anything. Dad’s eyes were razor sharp, and in their depths the darkness was irising open.

“Thought takes us to our limits,” Dad said softly. “The highest mountains, the deepest oceans— And beyond, into the cosmos. To distant galaxies and boundless space. Thought seeks the unknown.”

“Exploring,” Robbie said.

“Yep.” Dad put his arm around Robbie and held him close.

“Mom doesn’t understand.”

Dad didn’t reply. He gazed at the open book for what seemed a long time. Sometimes a thought takes hold of you and won’t let go.

“She does understand,” Dad said finally. “You don’t remember what it was like in California— And before you were born—” He stopped cold.

“What?”

Dad shook the thought off. “The moose that killed that boy in Nenana— That scared her. It scared me, too.”

“He was feeding it peanut butter sandwiches.”

Dad eyed Robbie sadly. “Mom would do anything for you. We’re lucky to have her. Don’t make things harder for her.”

“Just tell me why.”

“Why what?”

“Why she doesn’t like Fristeen.”

“Let’s not get into that.”

“Has she ever met her?”

“Probably not.”

“What about you?”

Dad shook his head. “I bet she’s a firecracker.”

Robbie laughed, and a little star burst to life between Dad’s mind and his.

“Now listen—” Dad turned serious. “The rules may be nonsense. But you better use your head. Even great explorers make fatal mistakes.”

Robbie nodded. He remembered Shivers and their head-long descent.

“What are the Big Two?” Dad asked.

“Don’t eat anything except blueberries, and if you see a moose, don’t stay in the open. Get behind a tree.”

“Right. And when you leave your backyard, there’s a third. Don’t get lost. There are things you have to do—”

“Like marking the way.”

“Exactly. Make sure you always know where you are. If you get excited about going this direction or that—before you do, stop and look around. Which way did you come from? How will you find your way back? What will stick in your memory if you get confused? That’s *your* job, no one else’s. Whether you’re with a friend or alone.” He gave Robbie a searching look. “Got it?”

“Yep.”

“You never know,” Dad laughed. “You might want to come home.”

Robbie grinned and settled back, and Dad began to read.

3

It rained for a week. Robbie was stuck inside with Mom, or with Trudy when Mom was gone. Through the back window, he watched the forest. Had Shivers claimed it? No, the trees weren't bothered by the damp and the fog. They grew quickly. Wherever branch ends met sky, there were sprays of leaves. Every day new bursts of green appeared on the Hill, till the aspen tops swayed beneath resplendent crowns. It was all happening without them.

Fristeen was never far from his thoughts. He fogged the glass with his breath and drew her running: a stick figure in the shrubs. And then she was there, on the deck outside, waiting. It was nothing but wishing—just fog and mist. So he rubbed her away, and started again. It all seemed impossible after what Mom had said.

When it was dark, he lay down, hoping for sun the next day. And when he got up, it was still raining and his vigil continued.

“Jim’s coming over to play,” Mom said one morning. “You like him.”

Robbie nodded.

He met Jim in kindergarten, but they weren’t really friends. Mom liked Jim’s mom because she was smart and taught at the University. She brought some books for Mom, and the two women talked in the kitchen. Jim stood in the living room, checking things out.

He was holding something over his heart. It was shiny and red—a plastic car. He sat down on the floor and looked this way and that—the coast seemed clear. He bunched himself up, made a grumbling sound and sprang forward, driving his car around a chair.

Robbie stood and watched. Jim had an imagination, but it wasn’t anything like his.

The car circled the sofa. Robbie followed along. Jim jumped on the cushions and drove over the top. Suddenly, from his throat came a gargling and crackling, and he raised his arm terribly and brought it down. His arm was a chain saw. It cut the sofa in two. He drove the car down the canyon, back onto the floor.

“I’ve been in the forest,” Robbie said over the noise.

The car careened past him and circled the cordwood.

Robbie pointed through the window. “To the top of the Hill.”

Jim nodded excitedly and the grumbling mounted.

“If it ever stops raining—”

“Watch me,” Jim shouted. He drove his car up the window and along the spine of the Hill.

Robbie frowned. Mom was wrong—he didn’t like Jim. And he was upset with himself. The forest was a secret. Jim descended the glass and zoomed toward the stove. Robbie turned from the race and headed for his room. *The forest, he thought, belongs to me and Fristeen.*

That evening, he was with her. “Sweet dreams,” Dad said when he kissed him goodnight, and the place he drifted into when the light switched off couldn’t have been sweeter. No rain, no Shivers, no Jim and no rules. Just a woodland wrung with yearning and Robbie in it, gazing up. Fristeen—Fristeen filled the sky, her smile like the sun, and no matter how much he drank of it, the warmth still poured down. Bedtime would never darken the spirit again. This new light had such energy that it could burn forever.



He woke the next morning feeling hollowed out, expecting the worst. But when he peered through the window, the sky was clear.

Mom left for work as soon as Trudy arrived. It didn’t take Trudy long to get absorbed in her things. She filed her nails, she fussed with her curls, then she called one of her friends. She was facing the back door, so Robbie crept out the front.

Rules and promises— Dad understood. Some things you have to do, no matter what.

Not far from the edge of the Clearing, he found a crooked path. The shrubs were dripping, and before he had lost sight of the deck, his pants were soaked. He expected a house to burst into view, but the path kept twisting. It entered a tall thicket. Could he find it? What if he never saw her again?

Then the alders parted, and there it was. A house smaller than his own, but full in the sun. Someone had painted it yellow. Half of it, anyway. The other half was brown.

Was this where she lived?

Robbie stepped around to the front, patting his thighs, very excited.

A big motorcycle, silver and black, was parked on the gravel.

Who would answer the door? Fristeen? Probably not. He strode up to it, mustered his courage, and raised his hand to knock. Then he stopped.

He could hear adult voices inside.

Robbie lowered his hand.

Suddenly, the door swung open and a dark figure barged out. Large boots and grimy jeans swept beneath a shiny black coat. The man's cheeks were bearded and a swoop of black hair beetled over his brow. In the gap between, suspicious eyes darted.

"Liberty caps, Duane," a woman said from the doorway. "Don't forget."

The man nodded, folded some money and put it in his pocket. He almost knocked Robbie down.

“Hey, shorty. Watch out.”

He laughed and straddled his cycle, coat squeaking like there were animals inside. Then his machine roared to life, and the gravel was flying. Robbie turned, taking the stings on his back and shoulders.

As the clamor subsided, he realized the door was still ajar.

The woman stood watching him. She was beautiful, with long chestnut hair that fell in sleek waves, and deep blue eyes. She was wearing a robe, but it wasn't like Mom's.

“You must be Robbie.”

He nodded. The robe was short and red, and sun was caught in its folds.

“I'm Grace,” she said.

Robbie smiled hello.

Her brows twitched strangely. For a moment, he thought she was going to make fun of him. Then her features sobered, and she motioned him closer. She had something in her hand—a baggie with dried-up plants inside.

“Would you like to come in?”

Robbie nodded.

Fristeen, he thought as he stepped through the door. Honey melting in tea—it was her smell. The living room was different than his. All the stuff was on the floor where you could reach it. A mattress, some pillows and blankets. Grace pointed at a cushion and Robbie sat down.

“Fristeen,” Grace called. “Your friend is here.”

A moment of silence, then a wild squeal. At the rear, Robbie saw a door pry open. Fristeen peeked out and ducked back.

“Just a minute,” Grace said.

She disappeared and Robbie could hear them on the other side of the wall. Fristeen cried out and Grace made conciliating sounds. Then Fristeen was chattering. “No,” she insisted, “like this.” Grace made a disbelieving sound and Fristeen giggled. Still more yammering, and then the door opened and Grace stepped forward.

“The angel will be with us soon.” She sat on the mattress opposite Robbie. “Well, now. Finally.” She folded her legs beneath her and regarded him with curiosity.

It wasn’t unpleasant. Not like when a grownup inspects you. She had magical eyes, gentle and hesitant, and they drew you inside, just like Fristeen’s. And once you were in there, it was all wonder and excitement and playful surprises.

“Not so fast, Romeo,” Grace laughed. “I’ve heard about you.”

Robbie laughed back.

Grace reached for something on the mattress. It was like a tiny box of kleenex. She pulled some tissues out and stuck them together. Then she opened the baggie and put some of the dried plants inside. She fooled with it, and it turned into a cigarette. She lit it and took a deep breath, peering through the smoke at him.

“I’m mystified.” She exhaled in his direction. “Fristeen says—”

Robbie sniffed at the sweet vapor.

“—you’re *very* close.”

Robbie nodded. “I’m going to marry her.”

Grace eyed him with amazement. “In one day?”

“Yep.”

“It’s so different—” She turned aside. “When you’re older. When you sleep with the one you love.”

“I’d like to do that.”

Grace burst out laughing. “I’m sorry.” She gave him a kindly look. “I’m sure it will be wonderful when you do.”

Then something made her choke, her arms wrapped around her middle and she gave a piteous groan. “Oh—” Her eyes closed tightly, and she rocked from side to side. “I have a Romeo, too. He’ll find me, Robbie.”

Her longing went through him like an electric shock.

“Someday.” Grace gazed sadly at him.

Robbie saw the tears in her eyes. She drew on her cigarette again and unfolded her legs. Her robe parted, and he could see the inside of her thigh.

“Don’t get any ideas.” Grace gave him a reproving look and closed her robe. But she was just having fun. Her eyes sparkled like Frissteen’s and they played the same game. The sparkle drew you in, then it moved and you lost it, and you had to find it again. That’s the way women are, Robbie thought. The beautiful kind. They had little stars that played hide-and-seek with your mind.

“Are you Frissteen’s mom?”

Grace made an odd face and nodded.

Robbie wondered what it would be like to have a mom like that.

“Here I am,” Fristeen cried.

Robbie hopped to his feet.

The bedroom door swung open and Fristeen whirled out, a riot of color and flying things. Above the churning galaxy, her eyes flashed secret looks.

“Forgive us our fantasies,” Grace said. “It’s all we have.”

The tornado whirled to a halt. Fristeen lowered her arms and they came to rest on her dress. It was emerald green, but it seemed to have burst. There were pieces cut out of it, and things attached. Swatches of fabric, pictures from magazines and books. Glued and pinned, or hanging loose on green yarn. Her hair was even crazier than before—a confusion of knots on top, with bows on either side.

Robbie swallowed. “I thought about you.”

“Oh, my,” Grace murmured.

Fristeen smiled, but something made her hesitate.

“Give your prince a hug,” Grace said. She reached out to catch a photo of a bird as it fell off its thread, but when she moved to re-tie it, Fristeen drew back. “We were up nights working on it,” Grace told Robbie.

“It was my idea,” Fristeen said stiffly, eyeing the cigarette.

Grace stood with the smoke coiling up from one hand, and the detached bird in the other.

“Would you like to go out?” Fristeen asked.

Robbie nodded uncertainly.

Fristeen clasped his hand and wheeled him away from her mother. When Robbie glanced back, Grace was smirking and shaking her head.

She followed them to the front door. “Where will you be?” Grace asked.

Fristeen gave her a long-suffering look.

“Don’t mind me,” Grace recanted. And then, “Robbie—”

He turned, hearing the suspense in her voice.

Grace’s eyes glittered. “Set the woods on fire.”



They hurried along the path away from the house.

“I like her,” Robbie said.

Fristeen made a witless face.

“Does she make you brush your teeth?”

“She doesn’t make me do anything.”

“That man on the motorcycle—”

“Duane.”

“Is he your dad?”

Fristeen looked irritated and shook her head. Some passing thought held her captive for a moment. “Dada doesn’t live with us right now. Do you want to see our farm?”

“Sure.”

She took a jog in the path. They threaded through low brush till they reached an unsettled place where the earth had been churned into hummocks. Fireweed was everywhere. In

the middle was a tractor. It was rusted and caked with mud, and one of the tires was flat.

“We grow corn and melons—” Fristeen said. “All kinds of things.”

They returned to the path and hurried along it, their excitement mounting as they started up the Hill.

“Go from tree to tree,” Fristeen reminded him, “and don’t stop between.”

Everything had changed. The red currant fans sheltered broods of tiny blooms, and the bushes had gone crazy. All the buds had burst, and everywhere they turned there were bunches of leaves. And when the wind lifted, each was a galaxy flashing—they all did just what Fristeen had done with her dress.

High above, the aspen crowns seemed about to touch. Their leaves fluttered like the wings of invisible birds. You couldn’t hear the sound indoors, but here beneath them it was really loud. No need to touch their trunks now, their thoughts were gushing: a million strange secrets all whispering at once, thrilling but soothing, like the sigh of the spout when you’re filling the tub.

As they reached the top, the magic sound ceased. When they turned to look, the leaves were perfectly still. The wind had stopped, and across the slope, all the invisible birds had flown.

“It’s like someone’s watching,” Fristeen said softly.

“Are you scared?” Robbie turned, scanning earth and sky.

“No sign of Shivers,” Fristeen observed.

Robbie's brow crinkled. "Let's see what He Knows says."

They clasped hands, followed the Bendies and scrambled under the Fallen Down Trees. On the far bank of the stream bed, He Knows was waiting, looking grizzled and damp, squinting and glaring over his ragged goatee.

Robbie stepped forward. "Is it a good day to explore?"

"Warm, warm . . ."

Fristeen nodded. "The sun's going to shine."

"Hide, hide, hide, hide . . ."

That bothered Robbie.

"I like to hide," Fristeen shrugged.

"If something bad's going to happen, you better say so."

"No, no, no, no . . ."

"See," Fristeen laughed. "Relax."

"Pass, pass, pass, pass . . ."

So they continued along the bank, scooted over the log bridge, and climbed the incline, pausing by the gate of stumps at the start of Where You Can See.

The way was clear, and there was hardly a breeze.

Robbie stepped onto the ridge, feeling brave. There wasn't any reason to be afraid. "Come on," he motioned, and Fristeen caught up with him. They stood together, looking down on either side. There were more trees than you can imagine, and not a branch was bare now. It was an ocean of leaves.

"If we jumped, do you think they'd catch us?"

Robbie glanced at her, and they both laughed.

They hurried up the crestline, passed the place they'd stopped at the week before, reached the high point of the

ridge, and then continued along it, descending. A confusion of hills and valleys opened before them.

“Nobody’s ever been here before,” Robbie said, recalling Fristeen’s words.

She smiled. “We’re the first.”

Which way now? He pointed to the left. A slope was covered thickly with little trees. They started down. You had to hold on, and you kept on slipping, but it wasn’t that hard. The branches were covered with tiny white dots, and the leaves were sticky. Fristeen started singing, “Dot Trees, Dot Trees.”

Robbie laughed. Long droopy things hung from the leaf clusters, covered with golden dust. “Shake them, shake them.”

So they shook the branches, and the air sparkled as they descended. The Dot Trees were merry and liked that very much.

At the bottom of the slope, they came out onto a small meadow.

“What’s wrong?” Fristeen asked.

“I’m thinking,” Robbie said, turning.

“About what?”

“Getting lost.” He eyed Fristeen’s hair. Her bows were too small to see through the leaves. “Maybe—” He ran his hands through the paper and fabric adorning her dress.

Then he noticed: he was wearing white socks. He sat down, removed a shoe, and took one off. He tied it to a Dot Tree so it was in clear view.

“Perfect,” she exclaimed, turning to embrace the meadow before them. “It’s the Perfect Place.”

Robbie regarded her. “It’s perfect because you’re here.”

Fristeen glowed. They held hands and crossed the lush flat.

At its edge, wands rose from the soil, crinkled and thin. They were heading right through them when Fristeen cried out.

“They’re covered with needles.”

Robbie yelped as one jabbed his leg.

He could see now—every wand was bristling—so they backed out and scouted along the edge of the patch. The plants grew thickly, there were impossible tangles, but Robbie found a place where a shadowy tunnel seemed to go through.

He dropped to all fours and wriggled forward. Fristeen followed close behind. The tunnel turned and dipped and rose toward the light. A stray needle stuck Robbie and he sucked his breath. Then his elbows emerged and he scrambled out.

“Made it.” He gave her a victory grin. “Some of your things came off.” He eyed her dress.

“It scratched you.” Fristeen touched the scarlet squiggle on his arm.

“Yep.”

She bent her head and kissed it.

Robbie reached out and stroked her hair. When he gazed into her eyes, they deepened and the stars didn’t shift. No hide-and-seek now—no laughter, no fear. Just hope, and hurts that must be shared. The one you yearned for was here, and she yearned just like you did. Joy made love smile, but pain made it pure.

“Look—” Fristeen turned her head up.

Robbie peered into the sun.

“White,” she said.

“Yep.” It blasted your eyes.

“Now close,” Fristeen said.

“Red,” Robbie announced.

“And white,” Fristeen flared her lids. “And red,” closing again. “And white and red, and white and red—”

“And white and red—” Robbie joined in.

Faster and faster, open and close—your head was full of flashes, a pot boiling over. And then it did, and you fell down, clutching blindly for the other, euphoric and giggling.

Before they left, Robbie removed his other sock and marked the spot.

From there, a ledge stretched on the level, awned with thin aspens. They hurried along it, leaves Jiggling above. A breeze cooled them and pleased them, and then they reached water—not a lot, just a Trickle—and they hopped across.

Something rasped in their ears.

Robbie scanned the trees. A squirrel was scampering along a branch. When it reached the end, it rasped again.

“What do you want?” Robbie asked.

The squirrel just stared.

“Is it Shivers?” Fristeen wondered.

The squirrel wiggled its nose.

Robbie shook his head. “He’s talking to us.”

The squirrel twitched its tail, shrilled and made a chucking sound.

“What did he say?” Fristeen laughed.

The squirrel sprang from its perch into an alder nearby, and went vaulting through the leaves.

“Follow me,” Robbie cried, and went racing after him.

The pursuit led them splashing through Trickle. The water kinked and raveled, and then suddenly it vanished, and the ground dropped before them. They were on the rim of a bowl surrounded by low willows. On the branch of one, the squirrel sat, gazing down. The bowl was full of leaves.

“It’s a secret place,” Robbie said.

Overhead, a lattice had been woven by the trees’ pale arms, and at every joint catkins were bursting, like a web of cracked pipes spraying liquid sun.

“What’s that, over there?” Fristeen pointed.

Through the tangle of boughs, a hundred yards distant, dark islands seemed to drift. The trees on them were spiky and black, and each grew to a point. And there was space in between them, as if profusion was banned there, or some scourge had struck.

The squirrel chattered, calling their attention back.

“It’s where you hide,” Robbie said, remembering the words of He Knows.

“How far down does it go?”

Robbie dropped to his hands and knees. “Let’s see.” He started to descend.

Before long, he was thigh-deep in twigs and leaves. “It’s crunchy on top,” he tossed the litter in the air, “but it’s soft beneath.” Then he kicked up his feet, and slid to the low point. “Come on,” he cried.

Fristeen skied on her bottom to join him. Robbie pushed the leaves aside to make a space, and once they'd bedded in, he covered them over.

"It's warm," Fristeen giggled, squirming against him.

"Sh-h-h. We can't make any noise."

She bit her lips to seal them. Robbie caught his breath. Her red lips, and the white teeth pressed deeply— The sight set something churning inside him. "The Hiding Hole," he whispered.

"Nobody knows," Fristeen said.

"We can do whatever we want." He looked into her eyes.

"What should we do?"

Out of nowhere it came to him. "Count your teeth."

"Alright," she consented.

"Lay back."

She did as he said.

"Now open your mouth."

Her jaw parted and her teeth appeared.

"Okay. Here I go."

He began to count, using his forefinger to touch each one. They were hard and gleaming, with strange pits and points. They were all fascinating, but when he reached the first molar, other sights distracted him. The insides of her cheeks were silky and smooth, and led back to a cavern that descended into darkness. You could roll a marble down there, like the one he lost down the bathroom sink. Her tongue lay limp, like a little pillow, but when he touched it, it twitched and curled around his finger. That gave him a jolt.

“How many?” Fristeen wondered.

Robbie blinked. “I forget.”

“Crazy boy.” She poked his belly.

He laughed, pinched her nose, and slid back beside her.

“Can you really fly?” Fristeen raised her finger and drew a trail through the clouds.

“In my dreams,” Robbie said.

“Will you show me how?”

“Sure. It’s easy to glide and turn,” he explained. “And if you want to come down, you coast. Getting *up* there—that’s the hard part. You have to catch the wind just right.”

“You need wings—” She made a skeptical face.

Robbie shook his head. “Arms work fine.”

She laughed. “I’m going to kiss you again.” She raised herself, shook the leaves from her hair, and was halfway to his cheek when his expression stopped her.

“Fristeen—”

She waited for him to speak.

“Let’s sleep together,” Robbie said.

“Here?”

He nodded.

She thought for a moment. “Okay.”

A coarse rasp sounded above them. The squirrel was hunched in the willow lattice, watching, and as they spotted him, he launched through the branches, chattering for all he was worth.

“He’ll tell everyone,” Fristeen warned, then she curled next to Robbie with her cheek on his shoulder. “That’s nice.”

Strands of her hair webbed his face. He could feel her breath.

“Did you ever have a girl for a friend?” she asked.

“No,” he said. “Did you—”

She put her hand on his chest. “You’re the first.”

Robbie could feel her warmth all down his side, and then her lips pressed against his cheek. His hands were trembling. He had a presentiment, a feeling of anticipation unlike anything he’d experienced. Something really important was happening, but he wasn’t sure what. “When you love someone, and you’re sleeping with them—” He could barely speak. “You put your arms around them.”

“You do other things, too.”

“Yep.” Robbie took a breath. “You kiss their lips.”

“They’re here,” Fristeen said.

“Who?”

“Listen,” Fristeen whispered.

Robbie listened, but he couldn’t hear anything.

“Mister Squirrel and his friends.” She lifted her shoulders and gazed around the Hole, pointing at different places on the rim. “Mousies and weasels— And nosy Miss Fox.” She squealed, scooped some leaves up, and hurled them at the lattice.

“What do they want?”

“We’re the show,” she fretted. “They’ve come to watch.”

Through the falling leaves, Robbie saw them—snouts probing the lattice, whiskers twitching, beady eyes eager to see.

They settled on branches, crouching, hanging, chins sunk in crutches, teeth bared and grinning. Word had traveled fast.

“What should we do?”

“Don’t let them.” Fristeen shook her head. “They’ll have all kinds of bad thoughts. Don’t let them see *anything*.”

“Get down,” Robbie said. He grabbed her and drew her back beside him. Then he used both arms to sweep the leaves over them.

“That’s good,” she said, and she swept leaves too.

“Sh-sh-sh—” Robbie stopped her, and turned his ear to listen.

The forest was suddenly quiet. Not a creature peeped.

“I’m scared,” Fristeen whispered.

Robbie rustled his arms around her middle. She did the same, and they pressed each other close. His heart rose and he put his lips to hers.

“Oo-oo-oo,” said the wild things. “Ah-hh-hh-hh.”

Robbie glanced up. They were craning forward, bobbing their snouts. There was clicking and grunting, then heads turned as they conferred.

“See?” Fristeen whimpered. She pulled him back down, and continued heaping leaves, covering their heads, burying them completely.

“It’s okay.”

She was clasping him desperately, chest heaving. When he touched her cheek, he could feel her tears.

“They think I’m like Grace.”

“We’re hiding.” He stroked her temple. “It’s okay.”

“Dream boy—” She barely got the words out. Her tears came in a flood.

They lay in each other’s arms for a long time. The animals grew bored. A couple of them spit insults at the squirrel.

Gradually, peace grew around them, like a soft cocoon.

On the rim above, branches clacked in the wind. Or was it the sound of the beasts departing? Their fur was sleek and the sun in the west flashed on their backs. One hitched its whistle to a flying breeze. That was the last thing Robbie heard. Or had he already dozed off?

In a gray limbo, midway between asleep and awake, backlit clouds rotated in the gathering darkness. Where he lay, day was ending. It was damp and dreary, and the gloom was encroaching. But there, in that distant place, something promised awaited him. A great exultation. A dream like no other. The clouds were dissolving now, rays of fierce light speared through—glints of an eye, giant, all-seeing. A fierce flowering of the energy he felt with Fristeen. And Dad’s great understanding, magnified a thousand times. Magic of magics, secret of secrets. Fearfully strange, but familiar, too. Like a memory rising from deep within you. Or an invisible companion, finally spied.

“Not that it matters,” a deep voice murmured. “When you dream, there’s no outside or in. Your mind is an unimaginable bloom. A willow catkin as big as the moon. With billions of anthers, shaking pollen like stars. It may seem strange, but in this boundless place— You’re not alone.

“I’ve been watching. I know what you want and who you are.

“Your home is a prison. Your mother’s a drone. Those wild seeds of your father’s will never get sown. Fate sent you Fristeen, and you like to explore. ‘The cosmos,’ Dad says. Baby steps, Robbie. Baby steps—nothing more.

“When your baby teeth are gone, who will you be?

“One who waits to be eaten? Food for despair? Or one who broke free?

“Look into my eye. I’m your dreams reaching out. The Fristeen you yearn for, that thrill, that ache— When you’re full to the brim with her? That’s just a taste. I’m here. I’m waiting. But I’ll be moving on soon.

“This time is yours—summer’s ahead. Until the trees yellow, the dreams are on me. No thoughts of leaving. Not yet. Just feel free. Dream, Robbie. Dream. What shall it be? A pram up Raging River to where day and night meet? A cable-ride in a basket between Venus and Mars? A flight through the heart of an exploding star? You and Fristeen— Take every chance, awake or asleep. Find the door, spring the hatch, pry the gap between sill and sash.

“Dream, Robbie, dream. Right here, right now. Anything you choose. Crack the sun open and paint your face with its yolk. Cast the fragments from you and turn the world to smoke. Pull the tacks from the night and roll the sky up. A new universe? Say the word—I’ll make one for you. You, just you and little Fristeen. I’m the Dream Man. Bid your curled body goodbye, and come with me.”