

A Fun Thing To Do On King Street

Martin says the monkey bars can rip your fingers off if they get too cold. *Look*, he smiles, *it goes like this*. If the bars are frozen solid, he says, and you get your fingers over their tops, you can get stuck. And if you try to pry your fingers away and jump down, your body will come down without them, a clean fall to you. And there they'll be, not dangling or *swish-shooshing* along the bar, just pressed into them, laid down all neat. Martin says it happened to his brother's friend, long before any of us were even able to jump up to the monkey bars. He says in the middle of January is when it happened. Then his brother and his brother's friend didn't talk as much anymore, he guesses.

Nobody believes him. I don't believe him, not much. At four I have to go home, and all of us will leave this place and scurry out like a bunch of rats, but right now, Martin looks at us with this open grin. He knows we think he's full of it. We usually do think that, and he usually is. Martin started fibbing in second grade, after he moved houses on Rochester Street, the 1100 block. None of us had really ever gone to play with Martin over there, but after he moved, Chester said his parents told him that Martin's dad still lived there, I guess, and his mom took Martin to live somewhere else, I think the 600 block. That was second grade, and Martin's been fibbing ever since.

I'm in between Chester and Lucas now, sort of tucked behind each of their shoulders, as they started to throw loogies at Martin. I'm trying not to think of his brother's friend, the fingers stretched out and running cold on the metal bars. I think if it had happened to me, I would scream, and maybe the whole town would hear me, even the attendants at the gas station off the highway. Martin dodges the two with all he has, which is unlucky because he doesn't have much on him. He takes a few to the cheeks and forehead, he kinda shakes them off like a dog would, and Lucas says it's four. And now, nothing really matters to any of us besides having to walk home and getting out of here so we don't have to look at the ugly, painful walls of the school any longer.

Chester keeps talking about Lynne as we walk home, which Lucas and I both try to ignore while seeing who can make the deepest mark in the snow with their shoes. He says she and him made a code a while back, with symbols and other things, to write notes to each other in class. He says today, he read a code she wrote him and he was too shy to respond. *It's code for I love you*, he says. Lucas and I stop stomping into the white slush around us, and Lucas starts to noogie Chester and they go into it. *That's code for you're a loser*, Lucas says. I laugh, maybe too much to stay out of it, and suddenly I'm getting noogied too, though I'm not sure what for. It takes me a second to sort of get that it doesn't really matter, in the end.

Chester cuts from us on J, which he does sometimes. It means he needs to get home, stat. I wonder what for. He learned the word *bitch* last week, and he got home from school, and he walked into his room, and he saw his sister there, and she was playing with his old legos, and I think he called her *bitch*. I wonder if he got in trouble for it. *A code*, Lucas laughs to himself. I laugh some too, and we wave bye at the fire hydrant. But I don't think he wants to go home. I think he'd live with us if he could, or even at school.

Once I'm home, Mom asks if I was with Martin after school today. *No*, I say. It's a lie, but I've told those before. *That's fine*, she says. She doesn't like for me to play with Martin, I think because he's a fibber. I didn't tell her that, though. She told me I can't go to his old house, where his dad lives, and neither can Chester or Lucas, which I still don't know what for because he doesn't go there either. She asks me how school was. *It was okay*, I say. That's not a lie, or at least most of that is true. We have enough fun between the three of us that the days seem shorter sometimes, and seem like forever and ever when one of us isn't there.

Lucas misses school a bunch, but not on purpose, I don't think. He gets bruises all up and down his arms. He won't really say why, and it doesn't happen when he's with us, but one time when Mom was out shopping, Dad brought me into his office and said his daddy did it. He said his daddy sometimes got mad and made bruises on Lucas if Lucas had done something wrong. I didn't really know why Dad was telling me, and I didn't really know what I was supposed to say, so I ended up just picking lint from the carpet while he told me what his daddy had done. I asked Dad if he would ever make bruises on me if I did something wrong, and he said *never never never*. Then it was quiet. Dad usually tells me things like this when Mom goes out shopping.

Mom asks what I'll be doing later. She wants me to take Ben along tonight, which I know because when I walked in the door, she asked me in a different voice. A voice that was less like hers, and more like a girl my age. When I walk in the door and that voice comes on, it means she wants me to take Ben along with me wherever I go. Ben is seven now, but he still looks three-and-a-half. He's built like a strawman and sorta looks like one too, all dopey. He's my only brother, and sometimes I wonder what I would do without a brother. Or what Ben would do without me. If Ben got *his* fingers stuck on the freezing monkey bars, who would help him besides me?

I guess we'll go back to the pond on King Street tonight. *It's something to do when there's nothing else to do*, Chester usually says, and he said it today at lunch, and we all nodded, and so that's the plan, I guess. It's an old pond that turns wildly green in the summers and then amber leaves start to cover it after that, before it comes around to right now, and it's covered by a thick sheet of ice. Last year, in the middle of third grade, we all came down and threw rocks until they cracked into the ice. Pieces of it flew up, higher than us, but the rocks went deep down until you could hear some sort of big thud, like kicking your feet at something, and you could tell they went deep down because we all looked at each other in some way, like we had done something. Like we woke up something living down there, or shifted the earth under us and caused an earthquake on the other side of the world.

I hope Chester invites Lynne. Lucas and I will snicker at him and push him around for it as long as we can, but I like her. I mean, I like having her around. Girls at school don't talk to us anyway, but sometimes she does. If we play four-square at the blacktop, she joins us. She has a really interesting way of focusing on you when you talk to her. Sometimes it feels like the clouds move in and everything gets dark around her so she can only see you. Chester likes her in another, better way, but I think she's nice to all of us, too. Maybe if she threw rocks with us, she'd hear the boom of the bottom of the pond too. Maybe we could teach her how.

Mom throws me some dirty clothes and tells me to put them in the washer. *You can't wait in life for your rags to become your riches*, she says. I don't know what she means, and as she says it Dad overhears from his office and laughs, which makes me think it's not really anything. *Bullshit* is a word he taught me for things like this, I think, but I won't say it, because Ben is with me now. He brought boots from upstairs. It'd be easy now to shoo him off, sort of, tell him that we throw big rocks with splashes like thunder deep below us where the pond monsters live, which is true except for the pond monsters. But Mom already used her young girl voice and Ben has his boots. The front door closes behind us almost as soon as we open it.

Lucas is alone when we get to the pond. I start to ask him why he's there early, but then he could ask why we're early, and my answer would be *I don't know*. Maybe he doesn't know, either. Chester comes a few minutes later than us, even though he lives closest to the pond, which is funny, I guess. He didn't bring Lynne, which maybe means she didn't want to go, which would make sense in some way. I wonder if they used that code they made at school: *#&W(#!* could mean *Do you want to go to the pond tonight?* and *++* could mean *Yes* and *+ -* could mean *Maybe* and *- -* could mean *No*. I wonder if Lynne said *- -*.

It feels different every time we're here. We don't really talk about it, but someday we're all gonna get older, and our skin is gonna start to look big on us, and our feet are gonna get all purple and black like the feet of people I see on TV, or walking through Pembrose Avenue, where all the older people live in the same house. That's sort of what I think about when the rocks hit the ice, as they start to move through the water, deeper down to the Earth. It feels different because every rock feels a little closer to the loose and charred skin that I see from the house that the old people live in. I'm not scared of that, mostly because Mom and Dad have told us that it will happen to us, and to everyone. Dad started getting silver hairs and saying, *It's coming!* and he was joking but I know that it is, or at least that's what they told me. I look at Chester, and at Lucas, and at Ben, but I can't imagine even one wrinkle on their foreheads.

Ice match, Lucas says, and he charges at Chester, and the bruises on his wrist glow from the streetlamp, and Chester doesn't really back up at all, which Mom calls *flinch*, and suddenly they're both on the ground and laughing and punching each other and fixed on making more bruises, and Ben and I just sort of stand there, we stand and watch, and Chester gets up, and he pulls Lucas up with him. *Look*, one of them says. They point and we look. A thin crack, probably shorter than one of Ben's boots, replaces the marks and shapes their bodies made on the ice. Mom always asks us not to make those when we go to the pond, not to go out there and make cracks in the ice. I wonder if, when we go home, she'll ask if we made any cracks. Would she know it was *bullshit* if we shook our heads *no*?

Lucas looks to Ben and I and says, *who's next?* I can tell he's laughing at least a little bit because his head is sort of tilted down when he says it. He grabs Ben's arm and says, *hit me*, which Ben doesn't really hear, so Lucas says it again, *hit me*. He's laughing now, which makes Chester laugh and then me and then Ben. *Hit me*. Ben flicks his fingers towards Lucas and barely whacks the dust off of his jacket. *Hit me*. Another weak flick from Ben, like he's shoo-ing off a ghost. Chester is laughing. *Hit him! Right in the kisser, Ben!* I've never seen my little brother put his cold little fingers together to make a fist, but he does, and he throws it toward Lucas' jaw.

Lucas doesn't flinch at all, and he's laughing more than any of us. *Hit me! Hit me!* Ben puts all of his weight on one foot and throws himself forward, now with two fists he's made. Chester and I are laughing at each other and at Lucas' jaw and at the ice and at the words *in the kisser* and at my little brother, laughing so hard that the two of us don't see Ben fall under the ice. All we see when we look in front of us is Lucas, whose face has turned white and cheeks all red, looking down at a pool in the ice and reaching his hands down there. *He must've* -- I never thought of this before and I don't know why I would have, but when everything around you falls down, you can't hear much at all. I know Chester is asking me what to do, and I know Lucas is digging his gloves into the water and screaming for my brother and shouting curse words, but I can't hear anything more than the sort of pressed, numbing sound I hear when a train comes by and Dad says to plug my ears.

Chester starts to run, back to his house I guess, and Lucas has his full arm wedged in the pond, between the slush. I suddenly say, *STOP!* I've never used my arm like I do to force his out of the water. He looks at me, dropping lines of tears which look like blood on his red face. He can't say anything to me, and I can't either, or I wouldn't know what to say. I'm not thinking of Mom, or Dad, or even of myself. Not of Chester, who just ran away from something he probably should have stayed for. Not of Lucas, who I know feels like it's his fault, like he'll get bruises, or worse, or he would have run, too. I can only think of Ben, pushing his fingers together, making two fists, jumping forward, falling down, pushing through, floating deep, no sound, nobody to hear him or see him or feel him or help him. I look straight down to the thick black of the opening in the ice and it burns my eyes.



On Saturday, Mom has to help me with the buttons. She makes sure they're real nice, and she keeps straightening my shirt and pulling my collar and pinching my skin. It hurts, but for some reason I won't, I can't say anything. After a minute, she turns to meet my eyes. *Be good,* she says, *and go.* I don't know what to go out there, I just want to be with her, but she pets the back of my hair where my birthmark is, and tells me I have to. *Okay,* I say. She's so weak it takes her another try to pull open the door to the main hall of the building. But it's open, and I drift my eyes from my uncles and aunts to my schoolteachers and neighbors to people I've never seen before, that I'm sure Ben never saw or knew, though I guess that's not the point. I turn back to say *I love you* but Mom has closed the door.

I sort of realize that no one will look me in the eye. Everyone that passes by me almost passes through me: they say *sorry* and they say *it's terrible* and they ask me *are you okay* and they say *i'm over on L Street if you ever need a hand* but all these people feel like they'd never give a hand to me if I needed it. If I could've given my hand to Ben as he start to sink down. If I could've reached my hand all the way down, if I could've cut through the black water with my blue coat and made a ripple in it, I could've tucked my feet in and taken a big, deep breath like they do on TV, I've seen it, I could've taken a big breath in and plunged down and looked up and seen the rest of what I knew disappear slowly, I could've just seen the ice above me as it turned into the sky and down I would go and Ben would see me and I'd grab his hand and I'd hold him, too. I know I would. Nobody wants to look at me because they know I would, too.

Hit me. Hit me, Ben!

I don't actually find Dad until near the very end, two-and-a-half hours into the three that he and Mom paid for. I thought he would be nodding and shaking hands and tapping his feet and listening to people all around like Mom is. But I see him just sitting on the lawn outside the building. His face is perched up towards the street, but I can't imagine he's looking much at anything. He's humming, but it doesn't sound like music; it sounds more like he's trying to match a sound with his voice, a sound that buzzes in his ears that he keeps on thinking about. He turns back so fast that I almost fall back. *Come here. Come on over here for a hug.* But he won't say it. He just looks at me, he can't recognize me, he is trying to place me. I turn back inside. *In that moment, I had no Dad, and he had no Me,* I think to myself.

Hit him! Right in the kisser, Ben!

I have to ask Father Ralph twice, but I don't know why, because I'm sure he's been asked the question before. *Sometimes God has to,* he takes a gulp of his own spit and keeps going, *has to be able to take us in even our lightest, or even our most vulnerable times. Death is a natural part of — my Mom said not to use the word 'death' — right. Ben has passed onto the afterlife, his very own, and that's a natural part of how we exist. But why, Father? Well, because — what's vulnerable mean? Because God wants us to have an Afterlife. But what's vulnerable mean? Vulnerable means...weak. Helpless.* He takes another gulp. *God blesses and loves your brother, he loves Ben, but Ben in that moment was helpless.*

Vulnerable is weak. God loves Ben but he was helpless. Vulnerable is weak. Weak.

Hit me.

Even when someone is gone forever, people can't stay and talk about it forever. The last to leave the main hall are Mom and Dad and me and Grandpa, who has something like dementia, which means he's really just here but doesn't get it, I think. Dad piles him into a taxicab, and the yellow of it pierces through me, the brightest color I've been able to see since the pond. That's what everyone's been saying, *since the pond*, the pond accident, last week at the pond. No one's able to talk about what happened, so they say where and when and everyone sort of has an image to fill it. That's probably the same everywhere, I guess. When someone dies in their own home, maybe their relatives just tell people *Abigail's room, right before sunset.* Or if someone gets too hot on a public bus and overheats and melts into a little stream, people just say *Uptown Metro, 110 degrees, noon.* People can fill those images pretty quick if they can close their eyes and draw it up. Problem is, I can't draw it up if it's already been painted in front of me.

He must've--

I'm in my bed but feel like I'm nowhere, I feel like I'm laying down on my back on top of nothing, and in front of my feet under the covers is nothing, and on my ceiling where my Commando poster was is now nothing, just nothing, and I feel the nothing on the hairs on the back of my head, the pillow is no longer there, the pillow has left, and all I want to do, all I can

really do is pull the covers off of myself and move my feet to the ground and start moving to the window and fidget with the latch and finally open it and start to climb out of it and move slowly to the top of my roof which is one more story high and climb that story and get to the top, all the way to the top where I can see the market and the Chambers house and the fire hydrant and at least part of the preschool where I used to go, before I got older, before I was here, before what happened, and see all of it below me and shake my shoulders and wipe the hair out of my face and put my hand on my beating, beating chest and scream

STOP!



Now the days feel like when I drag my back leg behind me as I walk. Bumping on the concrete, shoes stuttering and prodding against the ground. Moving, but feeling like I'm moving so slow I could be going backwards. That's what days feel like now. The teachers don't look at Lucas' bruises or yell at Martin for fibbing about homework again; now they feel the weight of my legs when I walk into the room. They change their voice and put their hands on my shoulders and move their glasses up from their eyes, high on their own face so they blur themselves from mine. I know they're different when I'm there. When I leave the room, their shoes must re-tie themselves, their hair must part again, their t-shirts un-tuck from their pants. Dead skin from their legs reveals itself, and picks itself off, and their knuckles in all their fingers must go, down the line, one pop at a time. I know they're different when I'm there, which makes some sort of sense, I guess.

The counselor, Mr. Something, is talking to me. He says something about losing his brother, who fought in a country called Iraq, which I know because he shows me on his map where his brother died. *Somewhere in here*, he points somewhere on the map. I'm looking down. He must think I'm nervous or afraid to look at him. That's what everyone said to me before Mom was fixing my buttons. They asked if I was scared. Or something. But I look down because his feet are moving up-down up-down under his desk. I think Mr. Something is nervous because he's asking about my little brother dying to me, and because I've never seen him or had to see him or know his name. I think the map was supposed to be for me, but I think it's for him, in some way.

It turns out that when Chester ran away from us that night, it wasn't just to his house. It was away from me, and the memory of me, for however long he needed. His parents and my parents did their talking thing, like they all do, and maybe they decided that Chester shouldn't talk to me, for him or me or themselves. I still have Lucas, and we do the pretending thing, the talking about other things thing, which is maybe the right thing, but Chester isn't there with us. Maybe, at some point down the line, we'll be able to talk again and walk over the masses of leaves in the fall and make each other popcorn for sleepovers and laugh and talk and be like we used to. But I don't think that will happen, not for a little while.

Mom picks me up from school now, which is fine with me except that she parks a block away, and as soon as I step into the car she puts her foot down to make it go fast. She leaves the

house in the morning after I do, and sometimes she's in her pajamas, although she doesn't seem sick to me. When we get home, Dad stays in his office and Mom gives me a big kiss on the forehead and says *I'm going to change the sheets* or *I'm going to take a bath* or *I'm going to find my old music box* and then she goes upstairs and I don't really see her until dinner or until I go to bed, and she only comes into my room for a minute before leaving. I'm not sure she can look into my eyes without thinking my pupils are tiny little black ponds staring back at her.

Something happens in the middle of the night. I can't say that I get myself out of bed, because that would be fibbing sorta. I feel like my feet are floating and the bedsheets fall under them as they move me towards the door. My fingers turn the knob and I watch them go around so I hear the clicking in front of me and the door is open and here I am in the hall of my house but I do not feel the pull of my feet to the carpet. Every step I take, I can sort of feel the sting of my knees as they bend and the ache of my stomach as I get to the front door. Nothing in me is want or should. I don't know what I'm doing but I know I have to because my feet are pulling me to it.

It's so cold that when I get to the pond I cough, right away, and for a very long time. I tug my own shoulders and hold in my own breaths to quiet myself. If I'm going to be here, I can't speak. I can't hear myself step out onto the ice. I can't hear the splash when I throw my feet down and into the water below. It would be wrong to hear anything. My shoes drop in first, and my bare ankles, and the cold makes me want to scream, but I can't. When it's up to my collar bone I don't feel it anymore. I can feel things get wider below me when my feet kick and the sound of frogs die out when the water's up to my ears, and filling them, and filling around me, and when the water's completely past my ears, I can hear myself disappear.



It replays and replays and replays. My eyes are blinking from the brightness, and if I dare to fully open them I'd see only white and have to close them again. The sand is searing my feet underneath it, and now that I look I notice Dad covered my legs with it. Mom is in the water, and hardly looks like herself. She looks like she's on TV, sort of like there's spotlights on her. She smiles over to me and puts her hands in front of her to stop the wave. But she's far, and Dad and I are alone on the beach. He sort of looks over to me and keeps sort of looking like something's funny. It's silent, what Mom calls a *good* silent, until he takes me around his arms and hugs me. He says, *I love you, Tom*. I ask him, *Will you ever stop saying that?* He says, *Never never never*.

He doesn't let go, and I don't want him to. Maybe, if I close my eyes really tight and wish it hard enough, he never will.