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Out of the Woods, Part One

Summer 1989

The day was long, hot, cloudless. The sun was high in the blue sky, the air clear and thin, and a breeze carried the scent of fresh-cut grass over the park. I ran over the baseball field and clambered up the bleachers and hid in the bushes that lined the path, fleeing from and chasing a pair of neighborhood friends, who, having just graduated middle school, were both a few years older than me. It was a celebration; the school year had ended that afternoon. Mr. Gurvis cooked hamburgers and hot dogs in front of the basketball court, and the air above his grill undulated with heat. Other adults brought plastic tables and paper plates, buns in cellophane packaging, coolers stuffed with water and soda, and stood talking in small groups. The neighborhood watch and the local civic association set up tables by the tennis courts. Behind one side of the park, past the playgrounds and the courts, grey stone colonial homes stood over manicured lawns and blooming gardens. Behind the other, beyond the baseball field, woods towered above a hill dotted with ornamental trees. The taller trees in the woods swayed back and forth in the breeze. Sometimes, running in the field, I could hear the soft, familiar coursing of the creek when the wind died down and the leaves stilled. Eventually, sweating and tired, I left my friends in the field, grabbed a hot dog and a water bottle, and went to find my parents.

They were standing on the main path with police officers who had wandered down from their squad car at the edge of the park. My father was in his dress shirt and slacks. He spoke as my mother, in a block-patterned dress that drifted back and forth at her calves, pressed a can of soda into her lower lip.

“So you have no clue who might be behind these burglaries. No clue at all.”

Officer Paul raised his palm. His badge glinted on his chest. He had tucked his cap under his arm, and grey hair circled his glistening scalp. “We are pursuing every available lead,” he said. “You can trust that we are doing our due diligence in every single aspect of these cases.”

The newer cop, Officer Steven, crossed his arms over his thick chest and nodded. He was younger, with a smattering of black stubble on his chin and upper lip. His jowls hung over the collar of his uniform.

“It’s not a big deal, right? I mean, Lower Merion is one of the safest places in the country. We’ve been living here for eleven years now, ever since Troy was born, and nothing like this has ever happened.” My mother waved her hand in the air. “This situation will resolve itself, with your help, and everyone will forget it ever happened.”

“I’m sure that it will,” said Officer Paul, looking unconvinced.

I pushed myself between my parents. My head came to my father’s shoulders. “Officer Paul,” I said, “Just so you know, I’m going to help you catch these robbers. Consider me a member of your team.” I puffed my chest out, lifted my chin, and spoke in a proud, joking tone.

They all laughed. Officer Paul smiled at me. “We’ll make you an honorary officer,” he said. “You can apply for a full-time position after you graduate high school. I’m sure we’ll have a spot for you by then. Though, if your dad is telling me the truth about how well you pitch, you might want to play baseball instead. Especially if you keep growing like you are now.”

“Yeah,” my father said. “What happened to pitching?”

“I’ll do it in the offseason. When I’m not playing. Like Bo Jackson.”

“Just like Bo. Except you’ll be a cop instead of a football player.”

They all laughed again, and I laughed, too, relishing the attention. My mother slapped my father’s bicep, shaking her head. “You’re so bad,” she said. “Come on, John.”

Behind the officers, the new family from our street wandered down the path. The father, apart from being Asian, looked exactly like mine. He wore a dress shirt with brown slacks, and his wife, who was White, wore a dark dress. A tall girl walked between them, carrying a pail stuffed with what looked like pieces of chalk. Black hair hung to her shoulders, and her bottom lip thrust out in a sullen pout. Her head lolled back as our mothers made eye contact. Mine waved; she had gone to their house the previous night with a container of homemade cookies. The family angled towards us as Officer Paul, noticing my mother's shifting attention, screwed his cap back on the bright dome of his head, saying goodbye. As he left, Officer Steven trailed behind him.

"These are the new neighbors that I told you about last night," my mother said. "Sam, Christina, and Amanda, their daughter. She just finished fifth grade—Troy's age."

My father offered his hand to the approaching family. "Nice to meet you."

I watched Amanda fidget back and forth as our parents introduced themselves. When my father had finished describing the recent break-ins, using the serious tone that he usually reserved for discussions with his real estate clients, and when my mother began to speak about the local civic association, gesticulating in the air, we knew that we could leave. As we walked away from our parents, I asked her if she wanted to draw on one of the tennis courts. She nodded, following me through the open gate.

Amanda set down her pail, and I began to draw baseballs and bats on the hot green surface of the court. Chalk dust coated my palms. I soon grew hot and tired again, and walked off the court, lying down in the shade of a tree with wide, full-leafed boughs. I closed my eyes and linked my hands over my stomach and listened to the scratch of Amanda's chalk, beginning to drift into sleep as she continued to draw pictures of trees and mountains, of forests and caves, of red and yellow flowers rooted in the stark white lines of the court.

"Hey," Amanda said, nudging me with her foot. She stood over me. "Want to climb one of those trees?" She pointed to the distant hilltop.

I squinted. Blurred and bright, the sun sat half an inch above the tree-line of the woods. "No," I said, yawning. I closed my eyes.

"Fine, then," she said. "I guess you're just *lame*." She continued into the field. The pail of chalk jangled, swinging from her hand. I sat up, watching her walk away, her tall figure growing smaller with distance.

"Hey," I called. "I'm not lame**.**"

"Prove it," she called back.

I followed her toward the hill. The day had cooled, and the woods sent shadows over the field. The dense buzz of cicadas rose from their depths, and the benches on the hilltop were empty. Halfway across the field, I glanced back toward the rest of the park. The police officers had left, along with about half of the adults and children. Our parents sat talking at a picnic table by the larger playground. From time to time, they glanced toward the playground, then looked back at each other, smiling. They seemed to see us among the kids diving down the slide and swinging from the monkey bars, though we were now approaching a dogwood tree planted on the hilltop, its stem splitting into two a few feet up from its roots.

Amanda hooked her right leg over the first split in the stem, pulling herself up into the tree. The dogwood spread over the hilltop and the hillside, drooping with leaves. Its slender branches trembled as she climbed.

I stood before the tree. My mouth dried out, and my head teetered on its axis. I touched the scaly brown bark as Amanda scrambled in the upper reaches of the tree, and I tented my hands to see her just as she stopped moving. Looking up, the sun seemed to be sinking behind the woods,

sending sharp lines of light through the trees, past her body, and into my eyes. She sat at one peak of the dogwood, high over the hilltop, straddling the last steady branch with her thighs.

"Come on!" she called down to me. "It's fun." I thought I saw her smirk. "Unless you're too scared." She shifted her weight, and the tree shook.

I hopped a few times at the base of the tree, my right foot scraping against the bark before I pulled myself up on the other stem. The wind rose and the leaves shifted around me. Sweat glazed my forehead and armpits. When my shoes or fingers slipped, I clutched the limb beneath me until it stopped shaking. Above me, birds flocked across the sky, heading towards the blue-black line at the opposite horizon. Sunlight warmed the back of my neck.

"You can stop there, you know," Amanda said. "You're pretty high up."

I ignored her, crawling further out on a limb that arched over the edge of the field. "Screw that!" I called behind me. "I'm going as high as I can."

I heard Amanda shimmy down the tree, her hands and feet sliding along the bark. I turned to see her jump down to the ground and stand on the hill, looking up at me from the shadows. She cupped her hands around her mouth. "Troy," she called. "Come down. That looks dangerous."

As I laughed, the branch beneath me cracked. It bent forward before snapping off from the rest of the tree. I plunged into the branches below, shielding my right arm with my body.

***

Amanda appeared at our front door one evening a few days later, standing next to her mother and bearing a tray of cupcakes. My mother, who insisted on inviting them in, shared the good news. "Isn't it amazing?" she said, sitting under the yellow light of the kitchen table. "If that had been me, I would be lucky to be alive."

"They really are resilient," said Amanda's mother. A cupcake sat on a saucer in front of her. Her arms were muscled and tanned. "I can't tell you how many times I've screamed when I saw what Amanda was up to. Although that's all over now," she said, frowning at her daughter. "She's already grounded for what happened the other night. I'm going to make a lady out of her if it kills me." Her tone sharpened. "Do you have anything to say, honey?"

Amanda's lips had disappeared inside her mouth. She clenched her hands together and stared down at the table. "I'm sor—"

"It wasn't your fault," I said. "It was mine. You were the one telling me to come down."

My mother leaned over the table. "I'm sure that it was all Troy's idea. Last summer, he rode a scooter down Revere and broke his left wrist."

I blushed, squeezing my cupcake. The icing jumped out of the wrapper, falling on my hand. I stared down at it, waiting for my mother to finish.

"Troy does enough stupid stuff on his own. No one needs to encourage him. And since no one was seriously hurt, let's just thank God and move on." I looked up to see my mother bite into her cupcake. Amanda's mother took a first bite into hers, a relieved smile spreading over her face. And, in the corner of my eye, I saw Amanda glance at me with a small grin.

As our mothers discussed association meetings and potential bike rides and my mother's writing for the local paper, I excused myself and, in the bathroom, looked at myself in the mirror. The cuts and scratches on my face and arms were beginning to heal, but my right shoulder, the one that I had landed on, sent bolts of pain through my body with its every movement.

I left the bathroom and walked towards the back of the house, stepping through the patio doors. Laughter carried through the open kitchen window. Arborvitae stood on the right side of the yard, and the black metal pitchback stood on the left, before the brown slats of the fence. The

air was thick with humidity, and grey clouds drifted in the dark sky. The community watch's SUV passed in the street.

Walking into the grass, I picked my glove off the ground and rolled its baseball against my pants. Climbing the mound, I looked up at the window that faced the yard. The glass glowed with white light from my father's new computer, flowing around the dark shape of his figure. He bent before the screen, tapping at the keyboard, and I imagined the sound of clicking keys drifting through the second floor of the house, mixing with the voices rising up the staircase.

I propped my glove on my hip. The head bent further forward. I wanted him to sense me outside, to come to the window, discerning me in the thin illumination of the patio lights. I tossed the baseball into my glove. When his silhouette failed to shift, I stepped into my windup, planting my right foot against the rubber and lifting my glove over my head and back down again, delivering to the taut black net of the pitchback. I raised my glove to catch the ball, wound, and delivered, again and again. I clenched my tongue between my teeth to avoid grunting or screaming. Between pitches, I repeated what my father had told me, that pitching through pain built up strength.

One of the patio doors clanked open. Amanda advanced into the light. "Hey, Troy," she said. "Your mom told me to come get you. We're about to leave."

"Okay," I said. I sighed. I stood on the mound and wound and delivered for the last time. The pain felt like jagged pieces of glass ripping open my arm and cutting through my back. That pitch, though, was the fastest one I threw all night, and it sped through the pitchback, snapping a small square of netting, before slamming against the fence. A sound like a gunshot rose into the sky. I turned to Amanda, my right arm hanging at my side.

"Huh," she said. "You must be pretty serious about all that stuff."

"I'm going to be a major league pitcher when I grow up."

"Cool," she said, nodding. She smiled. "Anyway, I just wanted to thank you for sticking up for me in there. I appreciate it. And I was going to say that I hope you feel better, but I guess that you're already feeling better." She eyed me, then laughed. "Don't hurt yourself again."

"I won't," I said, dropping my glove on the grass and following her in. We joined our mothers on the porch, and my mother and I watched them as they crossed the street, heading back towards their bright, lighted house.

***

Three more houses were robbed on the Saturday before the Fourth of July, when about half the township lay sprawled on beach chairs in Ocean City or Avalon. All of the houses sat on Revere Road, the street that corkscrewed next to the park and ran through the neighborhood like a backbone. A few minutes after he heard the news, my father reversed his car down the driveway, slowing as he parted the thin crowd of people standing and talking in the road before he turned and accelerated away. My mother stood at the phone in our kitchen, wrapping her hand with its curly white cord, biting her lip and speaking over the dishwasher's muted roar.

Our neighbors regrouped in the street. Their voices rose and fell in a rough jumble of sound, and I walked around them, heading for Amanda's lawn. She sat on its edge, her forearms draped over her knees, her sneakers flat on the asphalt. She looked up when she sensed my approach.

"Hey," she said. "Did you hear about what happened?"

I nodded hello to her parents, who were standing a few feet away. "Yeah," I said, sitting down next to her. "Crazy, right?"

She shook her head. "I don't understand what everyone's so upset about," she said. "When we lived in Boston, there were robberies in our apartment building every few weeks."

In the street, Mr. Gurvis said that the burglars were Black, not that it mattered, and when Mrs. Smilansky said that they had been wearing black but were actually White, he shook his head as if she were hopelessly naive. Mrs. Berg said that they had loaded the stolen items into a big white van, the ones that house painters usually use, and Ms. Lee said that they had driven off in a flat-bed pickup truck. Several men said that they would be joining the community watch, and a few families discussed the merits of various home-security systems. Mrs. Thomas, brandishing an index finger, punctuated the conversation by declaring that she would be terrified to fall asleep that night.

The sky darkened. Gnats began to swarm the streetlights. Amanda smelled like pollen, and dirt lined her fingernails. I ripped a handful of grass off the lawn and tossed it at her, and she tossed it back at me, laughing. When someone said that the police would be making an announcement at the civic meeting that evening, the crowd flowed up the street, heading for the ancient Quaker meeting house, and I looked to Amanda. She shrugged, and we rose, trailing the crowd.

Officer Paul and Steven were waiting in the center of the meetinghouse. A decent number of people had already arrived, and they turned to watch the crowd filing in through the narrow doorway. I pulled Amanda up to the bench just in front of Officer Paul. He had again taken his cap off his head, and he passed it back and forth between his hands as he waited for everyone to sit down.

“Officer Paul,” I said, “When I catch those robbers, are you going to make me a real officer?” I spoke in the same loud, ironic tone that I had used a few weeks earlier.

Officer Paul shook his head, looking at me. “Troy, don’t joke about this,” he said. “This is serious stuff. Stay out of it.”

“Jeez,” I said, wounded. “I was just kidding.”

"I'm serious," he said. His eyes bored into mine.

"Okay," I said. I rolled my eyes, slumping in my seat. Before long, I was listening to him project his voice over the crowd. Beside me, Amanda slouched in a similar way, her head resting on the back of the bench.

"Thank you for coming, everyone. We're here to let you know that we are doing everything that we can to apprehend the perpetrators of the robberies this afternoon."

"Do you have any suspects?" someone called from behind us.

"Not at this time."

"I can tell, you, though, that when we do catch them, we'll make sure that we treat them appropriately," shouted Officer Steven. He smacked his black baton against his open palm.

A smattering of nervous laughter rippled through the crowd.

If you see anything or anyone suspicious, anybody who doesn't look like they belong here, we're just one phone call away. If you want to help, join the community watch." Officer Paul screwed his cap on his head. "Now, I would love to chat, folks, but we've got four more neighborhood meetings, and it's getting late." The officers walked together out of the meeting house. Their shoes clacked on the floorboards and their handcuffs jingled at their waists. After they left, the civic meeting began, and Amanda and I slipped away.

"Well, that was boring," she said, swinging her arms in wide circles as we jaywalked across an empty street.

"I can't believe that Officer Paul talked to me like that," I said, following her. I clenched and unclenched my fists. "He knew that I was just kidding."

She snorted. “He’s scared,” she said. “Adults always do that when they get scared. They get way too serious.” She saw my confused expression. “Like my mom. As soon as she figured out that your mom didn’t blame me, she was all nice to me again.”

I turned that over in my mind. “Officer Paul isn’t just any adult, though,” I said. “He’s been around forever. And he’s really smart.”

She shrugged. “Okay.” We turned onto our street. A pause stretched out between us. “You know him better than I do.”

“He’ll figure it out,” I said. The words felt hollow in my mouth. “He’ll find the robbers.”

***

My mother began shouting as soon as I walked in the house. She had been worried sick, she said; where had I been? Sent to my room on the second floor, I watched the road outside. From time to time, returning cars pulled into the driveways of dark homes. Amanda’s house was lighted, as were most of the other houses on the street. Below me, I could hear the television blaring, its sound spreading throughout the house. Waiting for my father to come home, I slipped on pajamas and walked around my room, practicing my pitching motion. When his car turned into our driveway, its headlights flashed through my window, blinding me for a moment. A full moon climbed the sky. It was at least an hour past my bedtime.

His trunk slammed closed as my mother opened the front door. The screen door whined, and he stepped into the house. The floorboards creaked beneath his boots.

“John. What’s in the case?”

“Where’s Troy?”

“He’s sleeping.”

“Troy!” My father climbed the stairs. His footsteps shook the house. “Wake up!”

I stood in my doorway, blinking, as if I had just woken up. “What?” I said, yawning.

My father knelt on the landing, setting out a black case. Gleaming metal lined its edges, and silver buckles held it shut.

My mother stood at the top of the staircase. Her fingers were white on her empty wine glass. “John,” she said. “I hope that’s not what I think it is.”

He flipped it open. The upper half thumped down on the carpet. Inside, on a bed of black foam, lay a long brown shape, wide at one end and tapered to two steel joints on the other. Alongside it were two long, dark cylinders. My father snapped the shotgun together.

My mother gasped. “John,” she said. “John. He’s only eleven, for god’s sake.”

My father held the gun out to me.

It was heavier than it looked. The light shone on its dark barrel. Hefting it, staring down its length into my room, a sense of power surged through my body.

“Listen, Sarah. We agreed that there would be no guns in this house when we thought that this was a safe neighborhood. Not now, when who knows what kind of people are breaking into our homes.” When I lowered the gun and turned towards him, I saw that he was looking at me. “Tomorrow,” he said, “I’m going to take you to the gun range.”

“John. The cops would be here in two minutes if anything happened. This is not fucking necessary.”

My father took the gun back, breaking it apart and laying it in the case. “I think that it is,” he said. “How long did it take those idiots to get to Revere?”

***

He slept in the basement that night. The next day, after going to church and the gun range, the sound of gunshots still thick in my ears, my father and I opened the back door to find my mother lacing up her biking shoes. A pink band bound her hair in a ponytail.

"Sarah, I don't think it's a good idea to go biking with Christina today."

"Well, I don't think it's a good idea to take our eleven-year-old son to a gun range."

"Sarah—"

"I don't want to hear it. Stop talking." She shook her head. "Just shut up."

I stood behind my father, looking between them. "I'll go with you," I said. "If that's okay. I haven't been biking in a while, anyway."

Soon we were off, skidding to a halt at the stop sign that stood at the end of our street. Amanda, who decided to come when she saw me waiting with my mother in her driveway, wore a pink helmet. Bright tassels hung from her handlebars. Unlike my mother, who wore the shorts and shirt she might have worn to the gym, Amanda's mother wore skintight biking gear, her hair braided under her helmet. The wheels on her bike were thin, and its handlebars curved inward, as if encouraging the rider to narrow her shoulders.

Amanda rolled her eyes. "She wouldn't listen to me," she said. "I told her it wasn't going to be one of her super serious exercise things."

Long grey clouds scudded across the sky, and the light strengthened and waned as the sun emerged from and disappeared behind them. My mother's frustrated voice carried through the tree-lined streets. We went down Meetinghouse Lane, biking through a few streets before spiraling up Revere. At the top of the hill, about ten feet from the rear entrance to the park, Amanda and I stopped. Our mothers were slowly walking their bikes up the hill; their distant voices carried around the curve of the road.

"I don't understand what the big deal is," I said, glancing at Amanda. "Nothing's changed."

In the park, kids swarmed the jungle gyms, teenagers crowded the basketball court, and the ping of an aluminum bat rang out across the wide field where, at the base of the hill, families spread quilts across the ground and picnicked with young children. There were more adults around, maybe, but everything else seemed unchanged.

"It's like I told you," Amanda said. "People are freaking out for no reason."

As we stood there, the sun emerged from behind the clouds, and we pedaled into the park, following the hilltop path. Looking into the woods, I stared at the roots and the vegetation overspreading the ground. Thin saplings and shrubs grew in every inch of space and sunlight. Any opening or gap was soon filled with new growth.

"Hey," Amanda said. "What's this?" Behind me, she had stepped off her bicycle. To the right of the path, steel chain-links, stretched between two trees, hung a brown sign over the faint outline of a trailhead. TOWNSHIP PROPERTY, it read. DO NOT ENTER.

Amanda took a few steps toward the sign, wrapping her hands around the chain and peering down the slope. "Troy," she called. "Come here!"

I parked my bike and stood beside her. She pointed to the trail: a thin, eroded line switchbacking down the hill, banked by a few inches of mounded dirt at each turn. At the bottom, it became muddled and indistinct, crowded out by vegetation. A cloud drifted in front of the sun, and the woods darkened.

Amanda leaned over the chain, pressing it into her belly. "Have you ever been down there? It's like a forest!" She paused. Under birdsong and the flat crack of twigs snapping on the forest floor, the sound of the creek crept towards us through the still air. "And there's a stream down there! Can you hear it?" The chain squeaked under her weight.

"Yes," I said. I heard the creek. It was the same creek that flowed through the rest of the township, the creek that I had passed every day on my way to school, the creek that I had visited, in other parts of the township, as a small child. At that moment, beside Amanda, it seemed like I had carried its sound within me my entire life, just as I carried the sound of the ocean in my ear.

Amanda straightened up. She turned to look at me. "Will you go with me?"

"Of course I'll go with you," I said instinctively. "I've been to the creek before," I added.

A smile broke out across her face. She seemed to regard me in a new light.

I smiled back. I didn't know what to say.

"Troy!" My mother had dismounted from her bicycle and was walking toward us, Amanda's mother close behind. "What are you doing?" she said. "You scared me half to death, disappearing like that." Standing before us, she glanced into the woods and exhaled in a short, hard puff. "Amanda, I understand if you wanted to go down there, but Troy, you know better. All those animals and who knows what people. Don't act like such a child."

"We weren't going down there," I said. Remembering what Amanda had said about scared adults, I tried to steel my voice, but it still cracked. "Swear to God."

After a few long moments, Amanda and I mounted our bicycles and followed our parents back home. We remained silent as the cars rushed past us on the road, drowning out the chatter and laughter coming from the park.

***

In the following week, one of my father's realtors was assaulted in a house on Winding Way a few blocks from our street. By the time the police found him, he was barely conscious, lying on the carpet in the living room. Tom Blaser's pockets had been emptied. Bruises dotted his cheeks and lumped his skull. Scheduled to give a showing in the middle of the day, he had surprised

someone who'd broken in, and everything of value, save the carpet, had disappeared from the house. The local news station sent a camera crew out to the scene, and they discussed the incident for the rest of the week, featuring interviews with the chief of police, my father, and Tom, pictured in a brown chair at his home: "I unlocked the door, walked in, and something hit me…. that's the last thing that I remember."

My father bought a 9mm and a holster and applied for a concealed-carry permit. He began to sit on the porch and stare out at the street. When he was not out with the community watch at night, he slept on the couch in the basement. My mother, on the other hand, wrote columns advising residents to leave everything to the police. She told me that I would not be going to camp, or even outdoors, for the time being. When I complained, she fixed her eyes on me: "I'd rather have you whining than dead or kidnapped." And so I read and played video games and listened to music that summer, watching the street through my bedroom window.

***

Officers Paul and Steven arrived during dinner one evening, parking in the street as families emerged from their houses, gathering on their porches. From ours, next to my father, I watched Officer Paul raise a bullhorn to his mouth. It gave his voice a muddled, guttural tint, making it difficult to understand him. I only caught his last words: "We appreciate your support in this difficult time." As he lowered the bullhorn, his eyes passed over our porch.

Mr. Gurvis, across the street, shouted after them as they pulled away. "Go down to South Ardmore if you want to catch them! Or Philly! God knows this shit isn't coming from inside of our community!" He stared, red-faced and indignant, after the departing vehicle.

A few of our neighbors shook their heads, and my father cursed under his breath. His handgun made a small lump at his hip. "Troy," he said. "Where's the shotgun?"

"Under the desk in your office," I said. "The key is in the hall closet."

He exhaled. "Good man," he said, pulling me closer to him. The top of my head now came to his neck.

On the other side of the porch, my mother stepped away from us. When we all returned inside, she walked into her study, locking the door behind her. Her salad, sodden with dressing, sat on the table long after my father and I cleared the dishes.

Amanda and I talked on the phone later that night, while my father typed at his computer upstairs and before my mother emerged from her study, slipping on her rubber gloves to finish the dishes. Amanda told me about her life in Boston, when she had lived in an apartment and gone hiking every other weekend in the pine forests of New Hampshire, and I told her about how, just a few months before, I placed first in the district in the forty-yard dash. But our conversations, like rainwater trickling through the divots and ruts of a driveway to course down the street, always returned to the woods and the creek running through it.

"I can't wait to go into those woods," she said, her voice pitching with excitement. "I just can't wait. What are they like?"

"I've only been to the creek," I said. "I only know what people have told me about the woods."

"Tell me everything you've heard," she said. I could hear her breathing.

I recounted scenes with deer and foxes and hawks as I stepped closer to the hook on the wall, cupping my hand around the receiver. I told her stories about the trees, about the creek, about the sunlight slipping through the thick canopy of leaves. I talked for so long that I wondered whether I was reciting what I had heard or what I wanted to be true.

Amanda listened to me. "Wow," she said. Her voice quavered. "When are we going?"

"Soon," I said. "Very, very soon."

***

We met on my lawn a few weeks later, two hours past midnight, hiding beneath a bush. We watched the street for the squad car. Though our neighbors were once again talking to each other on their lawns and in the road during the day, a squad car rolled regularly down the street, crunching acorns beneath its wheels. At night, the officers inside were usually Officer Paul and Steven, Officer Steven holding a half-burned cigarette out of the window like a flare. The community watch often passed after sunset. They liked to park at the top of the street, turn off their lights, and watch the road. If they saw anyone unfamiliar out late or early, they drove up beside them, hopped out of the car, and peppered them with questions. Sometimes these encounters ended in citizens' arrests. When they called the police on a Black homeowner, he threatened to sue, but, in a televised address, our police commissioner staunchly defended the watch: "When asked about his activities, the suspect behaved suspiciously. I stand by our watch's decisions, and I hope that they would make the same ones again."

We scrambled down the road, moving from shadow to shadow. The moon was a waning crescent above the slanted rooftops, and cars sat silent on both sides of the road. We crossed the street to the park under a burned-out streetlight, scurrying across a dark patch of asphalt. The stars appeared as we entered the field. My sneakers swished through the grass and squished in small patches of mud. Amanda's hair, clumped with sweat, clung to her cheeks. As we climbed the hill, stepping into the thick shade of the woods, a faint breeze pressed at our backs. I blinked as my eyes adjusted to the deeper shade of darkness. An owl hooted ahead of us, and our sneakers tapped on the concrete path. A squad car rode along the park, and, giggling, we flattened ourselves as the headlights swept over us.

I went first on the trail, extending my arms to balance myself in the open air. It was only a few inches wide, and I walked with one foot in front of the other, grasping trees or leaning against the slope when my sneakers slipped. Sweat covered my body. The trees leaned against each other in the canopy, and a plane rumbled overhead, blinking red. A train whistled in the distance. The breeze returned, coursing through the woods, and the trees shifted above us. Seeds and twigs dropped to the ground, and a few rocks skittered down the slope. I clung to a tree, only moving when Amanda's hand tapped my shoulder.

We lost the trail at the bottom of the slope. The vegetation spread out over the ground, thick in every direction. We paused, listening for the slow smooth rush of the creek and, when we heard it, we tramped toward the sound. Weeds flattened beneath our feet and shrubs scratched at us with spines and thorns. We ducked under and pushed away hanging branches. The woods smelled like dirt and decomposition, and the moon was visible in the thin cracks between the leaves.

The creek grew louder as we moved through the woods. We passed through shafts of moonlight and wide swaths of darkness, we slipped through narrow gaps between trees, we panted, we breathed, and, suddenly, we stood at the bank of the creek. We knelt and dipped our arms into its cold current. The shallow water ran calm and dark over rocks and down inch-high waterfalls. White foam appeared when we cupped our hands and splashed each other. We laughed and shouted and jumped from the boulders on the bank to the smaller rocks in the middle of the creek. The air was fresh and cool. We pushed each other, then pulled, then wrestled, and I brought her beneath me, her face illuminated by the light falling through the open space above the creek. She closed her eyes as if she expected a kiss, her chest and neck and shoulders tense, but instead I leaned

down past her and scooped mud from the bank, smearing it on her face. She opened her eyes, gasping. “You—you—”

I stood up, laughing, and she chased me on the bank and over the boulders and through the creek. After catching me, she dragged me back to the water. She pasted cold mud over my chin and neck and shoulders until I pleaded for her to stop, shivering with shock. Then we lay on the bank, exhausted. The creek continued to flow below us. The cicadas buzzed in the trees. We fell asleep. By the time we woke, the moon had disappeared.

We were careless coming back. We walked through the woods without listening for other sounds. Our feet crashed on the ground. Mud covered our exposed skin, molding to our bodies like dark pieces of armor. I sometimes pulled Amanda to me, or she pulled me to her, but we never kissed; we just absorbed the warmth of the other’s body. Robins trilled in the trees. We trudged back up the narrow trail as the first hint of yellow light seeped over the edge of the sky. I had just ducked under the sign when I noticed the squad car parked in the distance.

Someone bludgeoned me across the face, and I staggered back towards the woods. Hands pressed me into the dirt. My arms twisted behind me. Amanda screamed. A baton struck me, and then another, both landing on my shoulders. A knee pressed into my back. I gasped for breath.

Voice faint, as if he were calling across a great distance, Officer Paul cried out. “No!” he shouted. “Stop, Steve!”

I turned my head against the ground and saw him grabbing at the man on top of me. His cap was fixed on his head, and his badge, pinned to his chest, glinted in the light.

“It’s mud! *It’s just mud*! They’re just children!”