

# ***Black Canyon***

**by Jeremy Bates, 1978–**

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This is a work of fiction. Any resemblance to actual people, living or dead, is purely coincidental.



## **The Present**

I didn't want to kill them. I loved them. But sometimes you have to do what you have to do to survive. I think you'll agree with me after you hear my account of what happened twenty-five years ago. I had no other choice. It was either them or me.

A quarter of a century seems like forever ago. That would make the year in discussion the year the Berlin Wall fell, the year Iraq invaded Kuwait, the year The

Simpsons debuted on television, the year the first webpage was published on the internet, and the year the Cincinnati Reds defeated the Oakland Athletics in the World Series in a four-game sweep. It was, I guess, a pretty great year all in all—at least, a pretty important one. On a more personal note, it was the year I kissed my first girl, the year I got a mountain bike for my birthday, and the year I broke my collarbone when I fell off that bike while biking where I wasn't allowed to be biking.

It was 1990. I was a grade-six student at Dry Creek Elementary School in Englewood, Colorado, and the people I killed were my parents.

When you say Colorado most people think of skiing. Some think of Mesa Verde, or Garden of the Gods, or Estes Park, or Cañon City. Not many think of Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Park. But they should. They should go there too, see it with their own eyes. It's a breathtaking gorge half as deep as the Grand Canyon, though much, much narrower, which, in my opinion, makes it all the more spectacular. I try to return there once a year, partly for the scenery, but mostly for the memories.

## 1990

Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Monument (it wouldn't be upgraded to national park status for another four years) is located in the western part of Colorado State, a bit south of center, making it a two-hour drive from Englewood, where I lived. My dad was behind the wheel of the eight-year-old Chevrolet Citation. My mom, in the seat next to him, was smoking a cigarette and reading one of those supermarket magazines that give you all the dirt on celebrities. I didn't have any brothers or sisters, so I had the backseat to myself. I sat with my back against one door, my legs stretched out so my feet almost touched the opposite door. I didn't have my seatbelt on, but my parents weren't the type of parents who cared about seatbelts. In fact, they didn't care about a lot of grown up stuff that other parents cared about. Junk food was okay in our house, for example. And I was allowed to come home from school whenever I wanted, as long as it wasn't *really* late. I didn't even have to call if I was staying at a friend's for dinner, which I did a fair bit because neither my mom nor dad liked to cook much.

It was Friday, October 24. My dad had told me I didn't have to go to school this morning, which was awesome. Yet with both him and my mom around it didn't feel like a real day off, like when I got to stay home sick by myself. It felt more like a regular old Saturday. Even so, a Friday feeling like a Saturday was still better than a Friday feeling like a Friday.

We didn't leave the house as early as my dad had wanted because my mom was hung over and refused to get out of bed before ten, so we were just getting to the southern rim entrance to Black Canyon now, around midafternoon. I was staring out the car window, watching the golden aspens and other turning trees disappear behind us as we entered into a tunnel of dark, somber evergreens that blocked out much of the daylight.

When we stopped at a wooden gate, my parents started arguing about something. I tried to ignore them, but this proved too hard in the closed confines of the Chevy.

“What if someone checks, Steve?” my mom was saying in the same tone she used when she was cross at me.

“Who’s going to check?” my dad replied offhandedly, annoyed, like he thought my mom was overreacting. “Camping season is over. There’s nobody here but us.”

“A ranger probably comes by.”

“It’s a waste of money.”

“It’s called the honor system.”

“What are you, a Girl Scout?”

“Don’t be so cheap.”

Grumbling, my dad opened his door. “It’s just going to sit there, you know?”

My mom didn’t look at him or say anything; she already knew she’d won.

My dad climbed out of the car and stuck his head back inside. “Or some kids are going to come along and pilfer it.”

“Kids?” my mom said, raising her eyebrows amusedly. “Look around, Steve. We’re in the middle of nowhere. And you said there’s nobody—”

He slammed his door shut and circled the vehicle. He stopped before a little wooden box sitting atop a pole. He took his wallet from his back pocket—he got the wallet as a free gift with a case of beer he’d bought during Labor Day weekend—and produced several one dollar bills.

“What’s Dad doing, Mom?” I asked.

“Paying the camping fee, hon.” She kept her attention on my dad, likely to make sure he put the money in the box and didn’t fake it. My mom was right: my dad could be pretty cheap sometimes. I’d been bugging him for a raise in my allowance a lot lately, but he wouldn’t negotiate. I got the same one dollar a week that I got when I first started getting an allowance two years before. It sucked. One small bag of salt and vinegar chips and a can of Pepsi wiped me out until the following weekend. My mom was a bit more generous. She usually gave me fifty cents, or sometimes a whole dollar when I asked her politely. I had to have a good excuse handy, like I needed to take the bus somewhere. Still, what I got from her added up, and I was no longer considered the poor kid by my friends. That dishonor went to Ralph Stevenson. His dad didn’t work either, and he was always begging everyone for a spare dime or quarter. We never gave him anything, but we often shared our lunches with him. All his mom ever packed him was a raw carrot and a couple pieces of buttered bread.

My dad stuffed the dollar bills into the slit in the wooden box, cast my mom a you-happy-now? look, then returned to the car.

“Thank you,” she told him as he shifted the transmission into first and popped the clutch.

He grunted, and we continued in silence to the campground. I never said anything when my parents were fighting with each other. I’ve learned it was best to simply “zip it,” an expression my dad used a lot, and to wait the fight out. Otherwise chances were good I would become the focus of their anger and get grounded or spanked for doing nothing.

The campground, my dad had told me earlier, contained three loops of campsites. Loop A was open year round, while Loops B and C were open spring to early fall. Being late October, I figured we must be driving to a campsite in Loop A.

A few minutes later we parked in a small clearing and got out of the car and looked around at the crowding forest. "Smell that, Brian!" my dad said, inhaling deeply and clapping me on the shoulder roughly.

I sniffed. "Smell what?" The air was cool, brittle, reminding me that Halloween was next week.

"Nature!" he exclaimed. "You won't smell that back in the city."

"Worth four bucks, if you ask me," my mom said. She was standing on the other side of the car and cupping her hands around a cigarette she was lighting.

"Bitch all you want, Suz, you're not going to spoil my mood."

"Dad," I said, "can you open the trunk?"

"All I want," he went on, ignoring me, "is a bit of peace and quiet. That so much to ask? A bit of peace and quiet?"

"Dad?"

"*What?*"

"Can you open the trunk?"

He glared at me.

"I need my tent," I said.

Reaching inside the car, he pulled a trigger that released the trunk lid. I went to the trunk, lifted the lid, and collected my tent and backpack.

The clearing was little more than the size of a baseball infield. The amenities included a vault toilet, a picnic table, and a grill. I stopped at a flat spot of ground a good distance away from the car and upended the nylon tent bag, dumping the poles and guy ropes and metal spikes onto the mat of spongy pine needles. There was no instruction booklet—or if there once had been, it had been long since lost—and it took me a solid half hour to set the thing up properly (and even then I wasn't sure I had constructed it correctly as it seemed to lean drunkenly to one side).

Still, it wasn't falling over, and that was good enough for me. I glanced at my parents. They had set their tent up next to the car and were standing with their arms around each other.

Happy they were in one another's good books again, I joined them and said, "So what do we do now?"

"Huh?" my mom said. She'd been staring off into the distance with one of her thinking faces on.

"I said—"

"Sit back and relax," my dad told me. He released my mom's waist and snatched a bottle of beer from the blue Eskimo cooler chest that sat on the ground, next to the Chevy's front tire. He twisted off the cap, flicked it away into the trees, and took a long sip.

"I hope it's not going to rain," my mom said.

I looked where she was looking and saw that the sky had smudged over with dark storm clouds.

"It won't, baby doll," my dad said. "It'll blow over."

"Can I have a beer, Dad?" I asked.

“Even if it does,” he said, hooking his arm around my mom’s waist once again and kissing her on the cheek, “we’ll just go inside the tent. It’s waterproof. And I think we can figure out something to do there.” His hand slipped off the small of her back to her rear.

She swatted it away. “Not in front of Brian, Steve.”

“Dad?” I said.

“What?”

“Can I have a beer?”

“You hear that, Suz? The boy wants a beer.”

“Can I?” I said.

“Hell no. You’ll just waste it.”

I frowned, but I wasn’t disappointed, not really. My dad had given me sips from his beers before, and I didn’t like the taste of them. I only asked for one to show him I wasn’t still a little kid. He was always treating me like I was still in grade four or something.

“Have a Pepsi, hon,” my mom said. “And bring me a bottle of wine while you’re at it.”

I removed the lid from the cooler. “Which one?” I asked. Three wine bottles floated in the icy water alongside brown bottles of beer and blue-and-red Pepsi cans.

“You choose, angel.”

I selected the bottle with the fanciest label and brought it to my mom, along with a Styrofoam cup that had been in a plastic bag next to the cooler. Then I returned for my Pepsi and popped the tab before my mom changed her mind about letting me have one before dinner.

My dad’s hand, I noticed, had found its way down to my mom’s rear again, but this time she didn’t swat it away.

I said, “What are we having for dinner?”

“Hot dogs,” my dad told me.

“Yeah! Are we going to cook them on the grill or over the fire?”

I don’t think he heard me, because he was asking my mom where she wanted the folding chairs.

“Right over there,” she said. “By the fire pit.”

He went to the car’s trunk, which he’d left propped open so it resembled the mouth of a sunbaking alligator, and carried two slat-back folding chairs to the stone ring that formed the perimeter of the fire pit.

“Dad?” I said, following him.

“What, Brian?”

“Can we cook them over the fire? The hot dogs?”

“You can cook your wieners over the fire, if you want. But you’re going to need to find a sharp stick.”

“Can I go look now?”

“That’s a great idea.”

“Don’t go too far,” my mom called

I spent about an hour wandering the woods surrounding the campground, looking for the perfect stick. I didn’t know what characteristics the perfect stick entailed, but I figured it needed to be long enough so I didn’t burn my hands in

the fire, thick enough so it didn't snap beneath the weight of the wiener, and have a thin, pointy tip. In the end I found one that sported all these requisites, plus, as a bonus, it ended in *three* prongs, like a devil's scepter, which meant I could cook three wieners at once.

When I returned to the campground to show the stick to my parents, I found them lounging in the folding chairs, my mom laughing at something my dad was telling her. Loud music played from the portable stereo, some old-fashioned stuff, maybe Elvis, or The Beatles.

"Look at my stick!" I said as I approached them.

"That's lovely, Brian," my mom said. She had one of her funny smelling cigarettes pinched between her fingers. The filter was smeared with red lipstick.

"Dad? Look." Four empty beer bottles sat next to him on the ground.

"Let me see that." He held out his hand.

Beaming, I passed it to him.

He snapped off two of the prongs, then handed it back. "That's better."

I was too shocked to say anything. My eyes smarted with tears. I turned around and pretended to be interested in the stick.

"Brian?" he said.

"Yeah?" I said.

"Grab me another beer, will ya?"

Rubbing the tears from my cheeks—there had only been a couple—I opened the cooler and grabbed a beer. I considered asking my mom if I could have another Pepsi, but I didn't because I knew she would say no. I brought the beer to my dad, then sat on the ground a few feet away from him.

I listened to my parents' conversation for a bit. They were talking about their friends. My mom kept calling one of the women she worked with a skank. I wondered if maybe she meant "skunk." Sometimes when she was drinking she didn't always pronounce her words correctly. And I could tell she was a little drunk already. Her face was flushed, her eyes filmy. My dad wouldn't be drunk, not after four beers, but he probably had what he called a buzz.

He cracked open the beer I'd given him, then asked my mom for the cigarette she was smoking. He didn't smoke, not every day like she did, but he would have the funny smelling ones every now and then.

I leaned back on my elbows and breathed deeply. Despite my dad breaking my stick, and despite shivering a bit in the chill autumnal night, a swell of contentment washed over me. I liked times like these, when my parents were drinking alcohol. It was weird because in the movies parents drinking alcohol always yelled at their kids, or hit them. But mine were the opposite. They didn't fight as much, and they became nicer to me, more attentive.

"Hey, is there electricity here?" I asked suddenly, wondering if I could charge my Gameboy. I glanced at the stereo. There was no cord; it was running on batteries.

"Nope," my dad said. "But there's water in case you get thirsty."

I knew that. I had seen the rusty tap poking out of the ground.

"By the way, Bri-guy," he added. "We're going to need some tinder and firewood to make the fire before it gets dark. How about you go find us some?"

"Do you want to come with me?" I asked.

"Not right now. I've had a long day. You go along."

I went, even though I figured my day had been about as long as his had been.

Half an hour later I had built a good stockpile of tinder and kindle and firewood next to the fire pit. My dad came over and joined me and soon had a fire going. It was just in time too, as the last of the daylight was seeping from the sky, turning it a muddy orange that quickly bled to red, then to purplish-black.

My mom set the picnic table with paper plates and napkins while my dad got the grill going. I slipped two slimy Oscar Mayer wieners from the package and impaled one on my stick and kept the other gripped in my left hand. Then I extended the stick with the attached wiener into the fire and turned it slowly, like a rotisserie. When the wiener had blistered and blackened, I extracted it and took a bite.

“Ow!” I yelped.

“It’s going to be hot,” my mom told me from the picnic table. I could barely see her in the dark.

I blew on the wiener to cool it down, ate it quickly, then stuck the second one on the stick and repeated the cooking process. To my dismay, it slipped off the prong and dropped into the fire and ashes.

“Dad!” I cried. “My hotdog fell off!”

“Christ, Brian.” He was seated next to my mom at the picnic table.

“Can I have another one?” I asked.

“You already got your two.”

“But the second one fell off.”

“What do you think we’re going to eat tomorrow?”

“But I’m still hungry.”

“You can have a bun.”

My parents had lit tea candles, and I could see both of them in the jittery candlelight, chomping down on their hotdogs, shadows jumping on their faces.

“Just the bun?” I said, nonplussed.

“You can put ketchup on it.”

My mom giggled, spitting food from her mouth. This started my dad giggling too. I didn’t find that solution funny. In fact, now I knew what Ralph Stevenson felt like every day at lunch with his buttered bread.

Nevertheless, I was hungry, so I joined my parents at the picnic table and ate a bun with ketchup and drank the metallic-tasting water from the tap.

When we finished eating—my dad had had three hotdogs, I’d counted—my mom lit another one of her funny smelling cigarettes and shared it with my dad and talked about the stars. I looked up too. The moon was little more than a silver hook, but there must have been a gazillion stars twinkling down at us. I wondered what it would be like to get on a rocket ship and visit distant places in the galaxy. I decided it would be pretty great. I’d invite my parents and maybe one of my friends, maybe even Stephanie, the girl I’d kissed recently. Maybe we’d run into aliens. Maybe we’d even find God hiding somewhere.

When my mom ran out of things to say about the stars, my dad told some ghost stories. They weren’t very scary because my mom kept interrupting him, saying, “He’s just a child, Steve,” which effectively ended each one right at the gooey parts.

Later, when it was my bedtime and I had to go to my tent, I read an *Archie* comic book—a Betty and Veronica Double Digest—from cover to cover. Then I

turned off my flashlight and lay perfectly still in the darkness. My parents had stopped talking and laughing some time ago, so I guessed they were asleep. The only sound I heard now was the chirrups of crickets. Then I made out a soft rustling in the leaf litter. It was quick, sporadic. I pictured a wood mouse rummaging for acorns, pausing every now and then to sniff the air to make sure nothing was about to swoop down from the black sky, or sneak up behind it. I ended up falling asleep reflecting on how crappy it would be to be stuck at the bottom of the food chain, living your life in constant danger of getting eaten by something bigger than yourself.

I woke at dawn. The fire had winnowed to nothing but a pile of smoldering coals. My dad was crouched next to it in the murky half-light, trying to set fire to some crumpled up newspaper pages by rubbing two sticks together really fast. He soon gave up doing this and used my mom's bronze Zippo with the picture of a tiny airplane on it. He set kindle atop the burgeoning flames, then larger sticks.

He was whistling and seemed to be in a good mood, so I approached and said, "What's for breakfast, Dad?"

I almost expected him to tell me he wasn't made of food when he grinned and said, "Pancakes." He grabbed a box of pancake mix from next to his foot and tossed it to me. I caught it and looked at a smiling Aunt Jemima. "Don't even need eggs or milk," he said. "Just add water. What will they think of next?"

"Can I have three?" Two of anything was usually all I was ever allowed.

"Aren't you listening to me, boy? It's just mix and water. Have five if you want."

"Five!"

"Now come here and help me out."

I followed my dad's instructions, pouring half the box of pancake mix into a plastic bowl, then adding water from the tap. I stirred the mix until it became thick and gooey. Then I poured three circles onto the oiled grill.

"All right, all right. Give me some space here, Brian," my dad said. "I'll tell you when they're ready."

I retreated to my stump by the fire and continued to watch my dad cook the pancakes. He was a handsome man, I thought. He still had all his hair, which I knew he was proud of, because he always made fun of bald people. When he combed his hair and shaved, my mom often told him he looked like a movie star. Now his hair was scruffy and unwashed, and stubble pebbled his jaw. He wore a pair of Bermuda shorts and a red tank-top with a picture of a setting sun on the chest. His feet were bare.

Sometimes when my mom wasn't around, and it was just my dad and me like this, I didn't know what to say to him. I was worried about saying the wrong thing, upsetting him. He wouldn't yell at me or anything, not usually, but he'd go quiet, or ignore me altogether. That's when I knew I'd annoyed him.

He used to be an air conditioner repairman, my dad. But then last month he was fired. He got in a big fight with my mom about this. They still argued about it a lot. My mom wanted him to get another job, and he said he was looking. Once he told her he was going to drive trucks. I thought that was neat. But she didn't want him to, because it meant he would be away for long periods of time and there would be nobody home at nighttime to look after me when she went to the bar



where she worked. She told me she was a waitress there, but I think she was a dancing waitress because my dad was always talking to her about quitting her dancing.

He cocked an eye at me now. "What are you looking at?"

"Nothing," I said.

"You ready for the hike today?"

"Where are we going?"

"The north pole, where do you think?"

I didn't know and got nervous.

"To the canyon!" he said. "Did you think we were just going to sit around here all day?"

"Awesome!"

"You bet it's awesome. You're going to keep up, right?"

"Yeah."

"Hope so. Now come get your pancakes."

I grabbed a paper plate and held it in front of me. My dad flopped three pancakes onto it. I doused them with maple syrup, then returned to my stump. While I gobbled the pancakes down, I noticed my mom stir in her tent. My dad had left the door unzipped and I could see inside as she kicked the sleeping bag off her, got up, and started to fuss through the clothes she had brought. She was wearing nothing but a pair of skimpy panties. Her breasts were medium-sized and nice-looking, like the ones you saw on TV sometimes. A tattoo of a unicorn decorated her right thigh. A much smaller dolphin circled her belly button. I frowned at the ugly bruise the size of an apple on her left biceps. She always told me the bruises were from bumping into things, but I knew that wasn't true. They were from my dad, when he hit her.

She was old, thirty I think, but she was still pretty. When we went to a restaurant for dinner, other men would look at her. Also, the waiters were always flirting with her, or at least my dad said they were. Some of my friends had weird crushes on her too. They told me she was hot. I told them they were gross.

A moment later she emerged from the tent dressed in a pair of short canary-yellow shorts and a tight white top that made it obvious she didn't have a bra on. Her hair was messy, and her face was free of makeup. I liked her face better like this. I thought she wore too much makeup sometimes. Without it she looked more like my mom.

"Hey, Mom," I said with a full mouth, smiling at her.

"Morning, hon. Mmm. That smells good. Did you help your father with breakfast?"

"Yup! And he said I can have as many pancakes as I want."

"Hold on there, Brian," he said. "Three's plenty. There's not as much mix as I thought. We need to save some for tomorrow."

I glanced at the small triangle of pancake left on my plate and wished I hadn't eaten so fast now. My mom sat on a stump next to mine and lit a cigarette. She was rubbing the corner of her eyes like she did in the mornings when she drank wine the night before.

"Baby doll?" my dad said. "How many pancakes?"

"I'm not hungry."

“You have to eat something.”

“Brian can have mine.”

“All right!” I said.

“I just told him—”

“Please, Dad?”

He looked at me for a long moment, but I held his eyes, refusing to look away, and finally he shrugged. “One more, Brian,” he said, turning back to the grill. “But that’s it. What do you think, I’m made out of food or something?”

According to my dad, there wasn’t going to be much shade at the canyon, and the sun, even in October, would be intense at the high elevation we were at. So we filled our water bottles with water from the tap and slathered on sunscreen from an old brown Coppertone bottle that was almost empty and kept making farting noises every time I squeezed it. Then my dad clapped his favorite trucker cap on his head—“Fuck Vegetarians!” was written across the front in gothic lettering—and we set off through the forest. Along the way guideposts described the trees we passed. There were sagebrush and pinyon pine and Utah juniper to name a few, all of which were apparently well-adapted to growing in the thin soil and harsh climate.

I was walking next to my mom, searching the woods for the squirrels and chipmunks that seemed to be everywhere, when my dad said excitedly, “Look at those!” He was pointing at a pair of animal tracks in the dirt. “Reckon they might belong to a bobcat, or mountain lion.”

“What did I tell you about scaring Brian, Steve?”

“I’m not scared, Mom,” I said.

“I’m not trying to scare the boy, Suz,” my dad said.

“Last night with the ghost stories—”

“He’s not a goddamn baby.”

“I’m not—”

“Quiet, Brian!” She frowned at me, touched her temple. “Sorry, honey,” she added more softly.

“I’m not scared, Mom,” I assured her.

“That’s good.” She turned to my dad. “I’m going to go back.”

“Oh for fuck’s sake, Suz.”

“I have a headache, and I’m not going to spend the day arguing with you.”

“I’m not arguing. I just said they were fucking bobcat tracks!”

“We’re camping in the middle of nowhere. We haven’t seen another soul since we arrived. Brian’s eleven. He doesn’t need to worry about bobcats and mountain lions.”

My dad’s eyes darkened, his face tightened. But then he said, “You’re right, baby doll.” He turned to me. “Brian, I made a mistake. They’re probably deer tracks. You’re not scared of deer, are you?”

“Steve,” my mom said.

“Look,” he said, coming over to her. “Today’s supposed to be fun. I don’t want it to be ruined. So I’m sorry for whatever I did.” He cupped her cheek with his hand, then kissed her on the lips. “Okay?”

She hesitated.

“We’ll stop in a bit, roll a spliff,” he said quietly into her ear, but not so quietly I couldn’t hear. “That’ll clear up your headache.”

“I suppose it might help...”

“Good,” he said, and broke into a wolfish grin. Then he scooped her into his arms and ran along the path, ignoring her laughing protests to put her down.

I skipped to keep pace, and when my mom was back on her feet, I said, “What’s a spliff?”

My mom ruffled my hair. “Just a cigarette, honey.”

“The funny smelling ones?”

“That’s right, angel. The funny smelling ones.”

Roughly ten minutes later we emerged from the shadowy forest and found ourselves standing under the bright blue sky and staring out over Black Canyon. My immediate impression was that the far side of the crevice seemed very close, and this made the two-thousand-foot rock walls seem all the more impressive. Large sections of them were blanketed in shadows, which, I guessed, was the reason for the canyon’s name.

“Oh wow!” I said, shading my eyes with my hand to lessen the sun’s glare.

“How’s this for something?” my dad said proudly.

“Awesome, Dad!”

I hurried toward the edge.

“Don’t go too close!” my mom called.

She didn’t have to worry, though, because the ground didn’t drop off suddenly. It angled downward from one rocky terrace to the next for some distance, each one covered with scrub and boulders.

I stopped at the edge of the first terrace and looked west along the canyon rim. “Hey!” I said to my parents, pointing to a promontory that stuck out over the lip of the canyon, almost like the tip of a ship about to sail off the end of the world. “Is that a lookout spot? Can we go there?”

“Sure, Brian,” my mom said, coming up behind me. “But you’re to stay with your father and me. No running off.”

The lookout point was fenced in to prevent people falling to their deaths. I approached the fence hesitantly and looked down. I swallowed, and my stomach felt as if it had left my body. The bottom of the chasm was impossibly far down, the river that created it little more than a squiggly blue-white line.

I stared, mesmerized at how small everything looked. I’d never been this high above anything in my life, not even when my parents’ took me to the top of the Space Needle in Seattle for my mom’s birthday dinner in March.

My dad, his arm hooked around my mom’s shoulders, said the view was gorgeous and started laughing.

I frowned because I didn’t get what was so funny.

Apparently my mom didn’t either because she said, “What’s so funny?”

“The view! It’s gorges!” He spelled it out: “G-o-r-g-e-s.”

My mom groaned.

“I don’t get it,” I said.

“Your father thinks he’s funny, Brian. I just hope you don’t develop his sense of humor.”

“Why not? I think Dad’s funny.”

“Thanks, Brian,” he said, leaning casually against the railing in a way that made my nonexistent stomach queasy. “Now, who’s up for hiking to the bottom?”

“The bottom?” my mom said, her eyebrows lifting above the frame of her sunglasses. Her mouth made a pink O.

“Why not? People do it all the time,” he told her. “There’s gotta be a trail.”

She joined him at the fence and peeked over the railing for the first time, hesitantly, like she thought something might streak up from the depth of the canyon and bite her nose off. “Are you serious, Steve? You want to hike all the way to the bottom?”

“We have all day. What else are we going to do?”

“We’ll have to climb back up too, remember.”

“I never forgot that in the first place. Look, Suz, it’ll only take us a couple hours to get to the bottom, then a couple to get back up. The exercise will be good for us. You’re always telling me to exercise more, right?”

“I’m never telling you to climb a mountain.”

“It’s not a mountain. It’s a canyon.”

“I don’t know...”

“Brian’s up for it. Aren’t you, Brian?”

I wasn’t. I was scared senseless by the idea. But I nodded my head.

“See?” my dad said. “Bri-guy’s game.”

“You sure you want to do this, Brian?” my mom asked.

I felt my dad’s eyes on me. “Yeah, Mom. Totally.”

She sighed. “I guess that means I’m outnumbered.” She moved away from the railing, dusting her hands on the rear of her yellow shorts. “All right, Steve. Lead the way.”

We continued the trek west, to the lowest saddle on the ridge, where we found a trail that descended below the rim into the inner canyon. This excited my dad, who increased his pace and kept shouting over his shoulder for my mom and me to keep up.

The trail switchbacked through Douglas fir and sunburst aspens before coming to a junction where a sign with an arrow pointing left read: *River Access. Permit Required.*

My mom frowned. “You didn’t say we needed a permit, Steve.”

My dad shrugged. “I didn’t know we did.”

She harrumphed.

“It’s true,” he said. “Besides, you probably only need one during the summertime, when it’s busier.”

“How much did they cost?”

“Jesus, Suz. I just told you. I didn’t know we needed one. So how am I supposed to know how much they cost?”

“What if a ranger catches us down here without one?”

“You and your rangers.”

“We’ll get fined. And the fine will be a lot more than the permit that you were too cheap to get.”

“I didn’t know we needed one!” he snapped.

I moved away from them and pretended to study a bush that had little red flowers sprouting among the green needles.

"If you had simply told me," my mom said, "I would have paid for it."

"Suz, I'm warning you..."

"What? You'll hit me?"

A long pause. Then my dad, softly: "You don't talk about that."

"Oh God," my mom said, and it sounded more like a moan than words. "What am I doing?"

"Don't say that..."

"Maybe we need a break..."

My dad's voice hardened. "You're going to do this? Right now?"

"It's not working, Steve. *We're not working.*"

"You're going to throw away eight years together over a *camping permit?*"

"This isn't about a permit!"

Another long pause. I blinked away the tears welling in my eyes.

"Listen," my dad said. "I'm going to be working soon. I'll have money. We won't need to worry about shit like this. I'll take care of you."

My mom chuckled. "You're going to take care of me? Baby, I make more with my tips—"

"Honest money, Suz. Honest fucking money. You can get out of that shithole. You just give me a bit more time, you'll see."

My mom started making strange noises, and I finally turned around. My dad had his arms around her and was stroking her back. Her head was buried in his shoulder, and she was trembling. When she lifted her face, to wipe the tears from her eyes, she saw me watching them and said, "It's okay, Brian. Your father and I are just having an adult talk. Everything's okay. We're working some things out. Okay?"

"Okay," I said, and returned my attention to the bush.

The trail steepened immediately, weaving through more thickets of oak scrub and evergreens. Some sections squeezed between huge boulders, forcing my parents and me to progress single file. Other sections tiptoed along dangerous drops of ten or twenty feet. My dad walked bravely along the edges of these, tossing rocks over them now and then, while my mom and I kept our distance.

About three quarters of the way into the canyon we came across a flat rock outcrop where we stopped for lunch. Ravenous from walking all morning, we ate the peanut butter and jelly sandwiches we'd brought with us. We drank most of our water too. I could have easily finished the rest of mine, but my mom cautioned me to keep some for the hike back to the top of the chasm.

My parents were lying on their backs now, staring up at the sky, talking nicely to each other again. Adults are weird, I decided. I didn't know how they could hate each other one minute, then love each other the next. When I got in a fight with my friend Richard Strauss last month because he wouldn't give back the skateboard I'd lent him, I didn't talk to him for a full week. And I still didn't talk to Johnny Bastianello after he squeezed an entire bottle of glue into my pencil case, and that had been last year in grade five.

Anyway, I was glad my parents could make up so easily. I didn't want them to get a divorce. Sampson Cooper's parents divorced last year. At first it sounded cool because suddenly he had two homes where we could play, and his dad's place was in a new-smelling building with a swimming pool and tennis courts. But Sampson said moving between his parents' homes every weekend wasn't as fun as it sounded, and the swimming pool and tennis courts got boring after a while. Also, his dad had a girlfriend who was always trying to act like his mom, which he really didn't like.

My dad rolled onto his side and kissed my mom on the mouth. His hand rubbed her thigh up and down, then cupped one of her braless breasts. She moved it away, and he lay down again on his back.

I was sitting cross-legged about ten feet away from them, and I decided to lie down on my back too. I closed my eyes and enjoyed the warmth of the sun on my face. My mind drifted to Stephanie, the girl I'd kissed and was sort of dating. I couldn't wait to tell her that I'd hiked all the way to the bottom of a canyon. She thought I was super athletic, even though I wasn't, not really. She probably assumed this because she always watched me play fence ball at recess, a game that anybody could do okay at. Pretty much all you do is throw a tennis ball at a chain-link fence. If the ball gets stuck between the links you get five points. If it goes through, you get ten. If it rebounds without bouncing on the ground and someone catches it, you get out.

Stephanie and I had met last month in September. She was the new kid at our school and didn't have any friends. During morning and afternoon recesses and the hour-long lunch break in-between, she would sit by herself on the portable steps that faced where my friends and I played fence ball because the grade sevens always hogged the basketball court.

I knew what it was like to be the new kid, because I'd been in that same position only two years earlier when my family moved and I changed schools. So on the third or fourth day I'd seen her there, I worked up the nerve to go talk to her.

"Hi," I said, pounding the mitt of my baseball glove with my free hand nervously.

"Hi," she replied, smiling.

"Do you have any friends yet?"

"Not really."

"Do you want to play with us?"

"No, thank you."

"Oh."

I waited with her until the next fence ball game started, talking about nothing, making a bigger and bigger fool of myself. Then I went back and played my hardest in the new game, showing off. When the bell rang, I caught up to Stephanie and said, "Do you like this school so far?"

"It's okay."

Ralph Stevenson and Sampson Cooper and Will Lee ran by, singing "Brian and Stephanie sitting in a tree..."

I felt my cheeks blush. But I also felt special. I was talking to a *girl*—a pretty one too. They hadn't been brave enough to do that.

"Where do you live?" I asked her.

"On Amherst."

“I live on Cherokee. Do you want to walk home together?”

“Okay.”

We started walking home together every day after that conversation. Stephanie’s house was nice, much bigger than mine, white stucco with brown wood trim. On the third day she invited me inside. I was nervous. I had never been in a girl’s house before. She showed me the kitchen, then the living room. We sat on the sofa for a bit, watching MTV. But all I could think about was whether I should sidle closer or take her hand, and whether her parents were going to come home and get us in trouble. Before I left she showed me her swimming pool in the backyard. I couldn’t believe she had one. Sampson Cooper was my only friend who had a swimming pool, but he had to share it with everyone in his dad’s building.

When Stephanie invited me to go swimming the next day in her pool, I said sure, but I purposely forgot to bring my swimming trunks to school. I was a skinny drink of water, as my dad called me, and I didn’t want her to see me without my shirt on.

I’d been saving my allowance the last two weeks because I wanted to take her to the movies, and I figured I would probably need to pay for both of us. I currently had enough to buy the tickets, but I was going to keep saving until I could afford popcorn and Pepsis too.

My eyes fluttered open. The sun was getting hot on my face. Squinting up at the towering cliffs, the blue sky and white drifting clouds, I spotted a raptor wheeling back and forth on invisible air currents. Then, faintly, I heard what might have been rocks tumbling down the canyon walls.

I didn’t mention this to my parents, because it might scare my mom. She might want to turn back. Then she and my dad might start fighting again. He might hit her this time; if I tried to stop him, he might hit me too, like he did two years ago, after my baby sister Geena died in her sleep. And if I’d learned anything from that experience, it was that fists hurt a heck of a lot more than the usual ruler or belt across your backside.

With our stomachs full and our thirsts quenched, we embarked on the final leg of the descent. The canyon walls blocked out most direct sunlight now, and the sound of the churning river became louder and louder. Then, abruptly, the drainage channel we were following came to a steep drop-off.

“Give me a fucking break!” my dad said, arming sweat from his brow. “A dead end!”

My mom plopped down on a rock. “Can we rest here for a bit before we head back?”

My dad seemed surprised. “Head back? We’re almost at the bottom.”

“Do you plan on flying the rest of the way, Steve?”

“Maybe we can monkey down or something.”

He started toward the drop-off.

“Steve, be careful!”

“Stop worrying so much.” But he was indeed being careful, taking baby steps, testing each foothold before progressing forward. He looked like a man walking on thin ice who expected it to break beneath him at any moment.

Then he was at the edge, peering over it. He whistled. "Not too far to the bottom, fifty feet maybe. But it's a sheer drop." He turned back to us. "Let's look for a different route—"

Loose talus and scree shifted beneath his feet. A surprised expression flashed across his face. His arms shot into the air. Then he was gone.

My mom shouted. I would have shouted too, but every muscle had locked up inside me, so I couldn't move, breathe, make a sound.

"Steve!" my mom cried. She took a step forward, almost lost her footing, stopped. "*Steve!*"

He didn't answer.

"Oh God! Oh God! Oh God!" She repeated this litany over and over.

"Mom?" I managed in a tiny, breathless voice.

"He's gone!" she said. "He's gone!"

I'd never seen my mom so scared before, which in turn made me all the more scared. Finally my body responded to my thoughts and I started instinctively forward, to peer over the edge, to determine how far my dad had fallen.

"Brian!" my mom shrieked, grabbing my wrist and yanking me backward. She pulled so hard she tripped and fell onto her bum, pulling me down with her. Then she was hugging me tightly and sobbing and whispering a prayer, and when I got past the shock and bafflement of what just happened, I started crying as well.

It took my mom and me an hour to find an alternative route to the canyon floor. At first my mom kept crying, albeit silently, like she didn't want me to know she was crying even though I could see the tears streaking her cheeks and could hear the occasional muffled sob. She kept telling me that my dad was okay, that he wasn't replying because he probably hit his head and was sleeping. I didn't believe her, the way I didn't believe her when she told me she wasn't angry at my dad after they'd had one of their fights. Which left one alternative: my dad was dead. But this proved impossible for me to comprehend. He was my dad. He couldn't be dead. He was my dad.

My mom was moving so quickly I had to half jog to keep up with her. To the left of us the canyon wall soared to the sky. To the right the river splashed and frothed, filling the air with a thunderous roar and a fine damp mist.

Soon the rocky ground turned to burnt grass, then to hardy shrubs—then to poison ivy, a huge patch that stretched from the chasm wall to the moss-covered rocks along the riverbank. I recognized what it was it right away because I'd contracted a rash from it two summers before while my parents had been visiting their friends at a cottage in Colorado Springs. It had spread to every part of my body, from my face to my toes, and itched like crazy. The worst was when it got between your fingers and toes and began to bubble. I popped the bubbles, which leaked a yellowish puss and probably spread the toxin to other parts of me as well.

And those poison ivy plants had only come up to my shins. This stuff easily reached my waist and had leaves as broad as pages from a book. They ruffled in the slight breeze, almost as if they were beckoning me to come closer.

My mom had stopped before the patch. She was looking for an alternate path. Finally she said, "This is poison ivy, baby. We have to go through it."

"No way!"



“We have to, Brian. There’s no way around it.”

I glanced at the river. The poison ivy stopped at the rocky bank. “Maybe we can walk along the edge of the river?”

“Those rocks look really sharp, hon, and they’re covered with moss. If you slipped on them, you could cut your leg wide open. Or get washed away by the river. Now, all you have to do is hold your hands above your head, like this.” She demonstrated. “If you don’t let the leaves touch your skin, you won’t catch anything.”

“But the poison will still stick to my clothes.”

“There’s nothing we can do about that, honey. And I’m not leaving you here by yourself.”

She pioneered a path through the poison ivy patch. I followed, holding my hands above my head as instructed. When we reached the far side, I examined my hands, half-convinced I could already see welts forming. I was wondering what Stephanie would think if she saw me covered in yucky red splotches and pussy bubbles when my mom stifled a yelp, then burst into a run. I looked up and saw the yellow of my dad’s jacket in the distance.

He was lying on his back beneath the skeletal branches of an old, twisted tree that looked as though it had been dead for a real long time. Bloody gashes and ugly purple bruises covered much of his body, almost as if someone had shoved him in one of those industrial dryers at the coin laundry alongside a handful of razor blades and put the machine on permanent press.

Nevertheless, he had a pulse. He was alive.

My mom had a fully stocked first-aid kit in her backpack, and we spent the next half hour plucking pine needles and clumps of dirt from his wounds, dousing them with iodine, then taping bandages over the larger ones. I thought we did a pretty good job, but my mom was worried about broken bones and other internal injuries we couldn’t see.

“How are we going to get him back to the top?” I said, staring up the canyon walls. They looked impossibly high when you were at the bottom.

My mom didn’t reply.

“Mom?”

“Do you know how to get back to the campsite, honey?”

“It’s just up, then... that way.” I pointed east.

She didn’t say anything.

“Mom?”

“We walked for a long time, Brian. I wasn’t paying any attention. I let your father take charge. I’m not sure I remember where we came out of the woods the first time.”

“The first time?”

“When we saw the canyon for the first time. If I can’t find our car...”

“I can find it,” I said. “I’m sure I can.”

“No, baby. You’re going to have to stay here with your father.”

“Without you?”

“You have to be here in case he wakes up. If he does, he’s going to be scared and in a lot of pain. You need to keep him calm, tell him I’ve gone for help, I’ll be back soon.”

“You don’t want me to come with you?”

“You have to look after your father. You have to keep a fire going too. I might not be back until dark, so you need to keep the fire going so I can find you. Can you do this?”

“I want to come with you.”

“No, Brian, you have to stay here. Now, if your father does wake up, he’s also going to be thirsty, so give him some water—but not all of it. Not right away. You have to make it last.”

“But I can get more from the river.”

She glanced at the river. I did too. It was roaring and frothing and moving really, really fast, reminding me of the rivers I saw people white-water rafting down on TV. Suddenly I wasn’t so sure I wanted to get close to it. I didn’t even know how to swim.

My mom took my hands in hers and looked me in the eyes. “You will *not* go near that river, Brian. Do you hear me? No matter what. It’s a lot stronger than you think. It will sweep you straight away. Do you understand me?”

“Yeah, Mom.”

“Tell me you won’t go near that river.”

“I won’t go near the river.”

“Promise me.”

“I promise.”

“I’m trusting you, Brian.” She stood. “Now c’mon. Let’s find some firewood and get that fire going.”

We scavenged a good stockpile of sun-bleached deadfall, along with bark and fungi for tinder, and twigs and smaller sticks for kindle. Then my mom started a fire and gave me her bronze Zippo and showed me how to restart the flames if they went out. Finally she hugged me, kissed me on the cheek, told me to be brave and to stay away from the river, then left the way we had come, back through the poison ivy patch.

As soon as she disappeared from sight a heavy cloak of fear and loneliness settled over me as the seriousness of the situation hit home. I was on my own. My mom was gone, my dad unconscious. I was in a strange, unfamiliar place. I felt tiny and helpless next to the grandeur of the canyon and the power of the river. I didn’t have any food and only a bit of water.

What if something bad happened? I wondered. What if my dad had a heart attack? What if there was an avalanche? I recalled the sound of the tumbling rocks earlier. What if one crushed my dad’s head, or mine? My mom would return with help only to find us dead, our brains splattered everywhere...

*Stop it.*

I settled next to my dad, rested my chin on my knees, and watched him for a bit. His face appeared pale and shiny in the bright afternoon light, like the flesh of a slug. His breathing was slurpy, like when you sucked the last dregs of soda through a straw. His chest moved up and down, barely.

I touched his forehead. It was really hot, and I didn't think that was from the sun. I touched my forehead to compare, and his was definitely hotter.

Did that mean he had a fever? I pondered this, because I thought you could only get a fever when you had the flu.

A fat black ant crawled up his neck and onto his chin. I picked it off, squished it between my index finger and thumb, then tossed its broken body away. Shortly after another industrious ant, smaller than the first, crawled up over his ear and along his jawline. I was about to pick it off as well, but then it beelined toward the wound below my dad's right eye. I decided to watch it, to see how it would react to the bed of exposed liver-red meat. Ants ate other insects, which made them carnivores. But this one simply stopped before the wound, its antennae twitching, feeling, then turned away. I pinched it between my fingers and dropped it on the gash. It shot straight off, like it was scared, though I didn't think ants could get scared. It ran up over my dad's closed eyelid, over the ridge of his eyebrow, and disappeared into his greasy, clotted black hair.

Feeling bad for letting it find refuge in his hair, I promptly squished any other ants that came close to him. There turned out to be a good number, and I searched the ground until I found the sandy-hole entrance to their subterranean dwelling. I stuck a twig in the hole, so the twig stood erect like a flagpole, effectively blocking any more ants from emerging.

I didn't want to look at my dad any longer, so I took one of my *Archies* from my backpack and tried to read it. After a few minutes of staring blankly at the same page, I forced myself to focus on the words in the speech balloons. They weren't funny or interesting. They were just words.

I closed the comic book and stared the way my mom had gone, willing her to come back soon.

Night came first, and quickly. The strip of sky overhead turned yellow, then pink, then red, then purplish-black, like a giant had pummeled it with its fists, leaving behind a broken mess. The Milky Way glowed impossibly far away, but the starlight didn't reach the canyon floor, so it was pitch black outside the circle of firelight. I knew this because when I went to pee I couldn't even see my feet. Only darkness. Emptiness. A void. Like I was a tiny organism at the bottom of the ocean. That's how it felt anyway.

The drone of the now invisible river continued unabated, and my stomach kept growling hungrily. I hadn't eaten anything since lunch on the rock outcrop, and that hadn't been much, just the peanut butter and jelly sandwich, and the apple.

My thirst, however, was even worse. I had about three inches of water left in my water bottle. My dad had less. I'd taken a sip from mine after my mom had left, but that was all. It needed to last me until she returned... whenever that was.

And why wasn't she back already? According to my wristwatch, it was 10:07 p.m. That meant she had been gone for nearly eight hours. It should only have taken her two, maybe three hours to return to the campground, fifteen minutes to drive to that town we passed on the way in, Montrose, or whatever it was called. Another two/three hours to bring help to us. That was seven or so hours in total. So where was she? Had something happened to her? Had she fallen off a cliff like my dad had?

No, I wouldn't let myself think that. She was coming. She would be here any minute now—

My dad was staring at me.

I was so startled I cried out and toppled backward.

Then, just as quickly, I scrambled forward.

“Dad?” I said.

“Where's... your mother?” His voice was dry, raspy. He spoke softly, as if each word was an effort.

“She went to get help. She'll be back soon.”

“When...?”

“When did she go? This afternoon, about eight hours ago.”

“Eight...?”

“She'll be here soon, Dad.”

“Water?”

“Here.” I grabbed his water bottle and tipped a bit of water into his mouth. His Adam's apple bobbed up and down. His tongue slithered over his cracked lips, probing for every last drop.

“More,” he said.

“Mom said we have to save it—”

“More!”

I poured a bit more into his mouth.

“More.”

“Mom said—”

His hand moved amazingly fast, snagging my wrist

“Ow!” I cried.

“Let go,” he said.

I obeyed. The bottle toppled onto its side. My dad released my wrist, retrieved the bottle, and finished what was left.

He smacked his lips weakly. “Where's yours?” he said.

“I—It's finished,” I lied.

“Show me.”

“It's all gone.”

He tried to grab me again, but I scuttled out of the way this time.

He maneuvered himself onto his elbows. In the firelight his face was a severe mask of strained muscles and hard angles. Sweat beaded his skin, making it shinier than ever. His dusty eyes swept the area, locking onto my water bottle, which was propped against my backpack a few feet away.

He held a shaking hand toward it. “Give me it, Brian.”

“Mom said we have to save what we have.”

“Give it!”

I hesitated. Under normal circumstances I would never oppose my dad's wishes like this. But my dad wasn't acting like my dad. He was acting like a stranger.

“Brian,” he said more gently, as if realizing he was scaring me. “Please. I'm... de'drated.”

I retrieved the water bottle and handed it to him. He finished all the water in two gulps, tossed the bottle aside, and lay back down. He closed his eyes.

“Dad?”

He didn't reply.

"Dad?"

Nothing.

"*Dad?* Are you okay?"

"I'm not your fucking dad, Brian."

I stared at him, confused, waiting for him to explain what he'd meant. But he didn't. He fell back to sleep almost immediately, once again making that slurpy breathing sound.

*I'm not your fucking dad, Brian.*

In the nightmare my dad and I were in some kind of treehouse, a big one like in the *Return of the Jedi*, only ours was a lot closer to the ground, and bad people were trying to climb the tree to get in. I could see them huddled together below, conspiring. My dad kept shouting orders at me, getting angrier and angrier because I didn't understand what he wanted me to do. At one point he got so mad he hit me. When he tried to hit me again I knocked aside his arm with mine and realized I was stronger than him. I shoved him to the ground and told him to stop hitting my mom. I was telling him this in a reasonable voice, but I was shouting too. A part of me kept waiting for him to say he wasn't my dad, for him to tell me to go away, but he never did. He just kept yelling at me to stop the invaders—

I woke to blackness, disorientation, my dad hissing dangerously, telling me to wake up.

"I'm awake, Dad," I whispered. "What's wrong? What happened?"

"Bear. There."

His words zapped me like an electrical shock. I looked in the direction he was looking, past the still-burning fire. I didn't see anything but darkness.

"Where...?"

A forceful expulsion of air startled me, louder than that which any human could make. A second later I saw the bear. I had been staring right at it, though it was little more than a black patch against the black night.

*Holy crap!* I thought, sucking back a mouthful of dread.

My mind reeled.

*Why's it just standing there?*

*What's it doing?*

I wanted to ask my dad these questions, but my throat was suddenly too small, my tongue too thick.

"*Brian?*" my dad hissed.

"What?" I managed.

"Scare it away."

*Scare it away?*

"I can't."

"Brian!"

The bear—which had been investigating my mom's backpack, I realized—now swung its huge round head toward me. Its eyes shone silver. It snorted and made deep throaty sounds while pawing the ground with its long claws.

"Go away!" my dad said, waving his arm weakly. "Ga! Go away!"

The bear lumbered into the firelight. Its short glossy hair was a bluish-black, and it was skinny, with disproportionately large shoulder humps. Its ears stood erect and rounded, its muzzle narrow and grizzled brown, ending in a broad black nose.

It roared, flashing yellow canines, which dripped with saliva.

My bladder gave out. I barely noticed.

“Ga!” my dad croaked. “Go! Scat! Brian!”

The bear roared again, shaking its head from side to side.

Instinct screamed at me to run away, but I knew I couldn’t. If I ran, the bear would chase me, like dogs do. And bears were fast. Someone once told me they were faster than people. So it would catch me, rip me apart, eat my guts.

“Go away!” I yelled, flapping my hands madly.

The bear reared up on its hind legs and roared a third time, reminding me of a bear I had seen at a circus a few years ago.

This gave me a crazy boost of courage—*it’s just a stupid animal*—and before I knew what I was doing I was springing toward the fire. I snatched a burning stick from the flames and threw it at the bear. It bounced off its head.

The bear chuffed, as if surprised.

I flung another stick, then another, shrieking nonsense all the while.

The bear started huffing and clacking its teeth while backing away. Euphoric with anticipated victory, I scooped up a smoking log and heaved it at the monstrous thing. When it struck the ground it exploded in sparks.

The bear fled.

“Will it come back?” I asked my dad, who was staring in the direction the bear had gone.

“More wood, fire,” he rasped. “Now!”

I chose a big fat log from the stockpile and dumped it onto the bed of smoldering ashes. For a moment I was afraid I had ruined the fire. But then flames appeared, licking up the sides of the log. I added some smaller sticks and dry pine needles and anything else that would burn. As I was doing this I detected an icky, sulfuric smell. A moment later I noticed that my hands and forearms were waxy smooth. I’d burned off all the small dark hairs when I’d stuck my hands in the fire to grab the log.

My dad rolled onto his side and began coughing. It sounded like he had a really bad cold, like he was hawking up phlegm... and then I saw it wasn’t phlegm, it was blood.

“Dad!” I rushed to his side, but he shoved me away. Finally he stopped coughing and eased himself onto his back, groaning with the effort. His mouth was smeared bright red, as if he had been pigging out on strawberries. He folded his hands together on top of his chest and closed his eyes, looking eerily how my dead grandma had looked in her coffin at the funeral home.

“Dad? Are you okay?”

He didn’t reply, and I wasn’t sure whether he was ignoring me or sleeping.

“Dad?”

Silence.

I checked his pulse. It was faint, but beating.

That night seemed to stretch forever. I had never been so frightened or jumpy in my life. Every unexplained sound sent my heart galloping. I knew bears were supposed to be more scared of people than people were of bears, yet the one that had attacked us was awfully skinny, which meant it was probably sick—and desperate. It wouldn't hesitate to eat my dad and me. I was one hundred percent sure of that.

As the minutes inched by, I found myself wondering what I would do if the bear returned and I couldn't scare it away again. I could run. But what about my dad? I couldn't leave him here... could I? Yet what else *could* I do? He couldn't walk. I couldn't carry him. I'd have no choice. I'd have to leave him.

*And he isn't really my dad.*

I frowned. Was this true? After all, my dad had been sick when he'd told me this. He'd had a fever. Maybe he didn't know what he was saying. Maybe he was... what was that word? Delirious? Yeah, he was delirious. Of course he was my father. I looked like him, didn't I? That's what my mom was always telling me. "You're just as handsome as your father, Brian. You're going to break a lot of hearts one day."

I went over to my dad, knelt beside him, and studied his face. My frown deepened, because now that I was looking at him, really *looking* at him, I didn't think I resembled him at all. We both had dark hair, and we both had eyes a comparable shade of gray. But that's where the similarities ended and the differences began. Like his eyebrows, for example. I'd never paid any attention to his eyebrows before. They were thick, tilting upward at the outer ends. Mine were thin, arching in the middle, like upside-down smiles. And his nose was long and straight. Mine was curved slightly, like a ski jump. And his jaw and chin were square. Mine were oval. And his head was proportioned normally to his body, while mine was too big. It's why my friends sometimes called me Bighead, or Humpty Dumpty, or Brian the Brain, even though I wasn't that smart.

"Dad?"

He didn't reply.

"Dad?"

No reply.

I pressed my ear to his parted mouth and heard his wet, raspy breathing, almost like he was gargling mouthwash. I should have been relieved, but I wasn't.

I was angry.

"Why don't I look like you, Dad?"

No reply.

"Why haven't you ever liked me?"

No reply.

"Are you my dad, my *real* dad?"

No reply.

"Why do you hit Mom?"

No reply.

"I've heard you. When I'm in my room, and you think I'm sleeping, I hear you yell at her about Geena dying, and hit her. I hear her cry. She tells me the bruises are from other things, but I know they're from when you hit her."

No reply.

“I don’t think you’re my dad.”

No reply.

“I don’t think you are.”

I stared at him for a long, silent moment, then went back to the fire to keep watch.

I must have fallen asleep at some point because when I opened my eyes the sun was high in the sky and it was warm, the way it had been yesterday around lunchtime.

Squinting, I glanced about for the bear, half convinced it would be hanging out somewhere nearby, watching me. It wasn’t. However, I was startled to discover about a dozen crows perched in the bare branches of the old, twisted tree. Every one of their beady black eyes seemed to be trained on my dad and me.

When had they arrived? And what did they want?

My dad? Did they know he was dying? Were they after an easy meal?

“Go away,” I told them.

They remained, staring greedily.

I tossed a stone at the closest one. It cawed, which almost sounded like a bray of witchy laughter.

I turned my attention to my dad. He was in the same position he’d been in earlier, only his hands were no longer clasped together on his chest; they were sprawled to either side of him, as though he were making lazy snow angels in the dirt. His skin appeared pale, sickly, almost yellow. His face seemed thin and older than usual.

My hands were itching and I scratched them absently, thinking about how hungry and thirsty I was, and how there was no food or water.

And where was my mom? She definitely should have been back already. She’d been gone for almost a full day.

“Mom!” I shouted, my voice cracking and echoing throughout the chasm.

She didn’t answer.

“Mom?” I repeated, though more to myself this time.

I picked up the water bottle my dad had tossed aside and upended it to my lips. No water came out. Not a drop.

I looked at the river. My mom had warned me not to go near it. She’d said it could sweep me away. I didn’t doubt that. But I didn’t have to go in it very deep, did I? I could stop at the edge, just close enough to fill the water bottle...

My ankles began to itch. I snuck my hands beneath my pant cuffs and scratched—and realized the skin there was lumpy. I yanked my hands away as if I had been bitten. I rolled up the cuffs.

Red splotches marred my skin. They resembled puffy red birthmarks.

Poison ivy!

“Shoot!” I said, resisting the temptation to scratch more. “Shoot!”

“Water...”

I snapped my head toward my dad. His eyes were open but hooded.

“You drank it all!” I said.

“Water...”



“There’s none.”

“River...”

“Mom told me I can’t go near it.”

“Brian...” He cleared his throat. “I need... we need... water...”

“I promised Mom I wouldn’t go near it.”

“I’m lying.”

I frowned at him. Lying about what? About not being my father?

Something shifted inside me. Hope?

“Water...” he said.

Lying or dying? I wondered. Maybe he said he was dying...

That something inside me vanished.

“Brian...”

“What?” I griped. I felt hot, tired, confused.

But he had closed his eyes again.

The minutes ticked by. The sun beat down on the back of my neck. I worked my mouth to generate saliva, then swallowed with difficulty, as if my throat were clogged with a roll of pennies. I rubbed my hands on a large rock that jutted from the ground, thinking that by doing this I wouldn’t spread the poison ivy to other parts of my body. I rubbed my ankles on a different part of the same rock. I tried not to think about my dad who wasn’t my dad dying, or the crows, waiting to fight over his corpse. I tried not to think about the long, bleak day ahead of me, or about spending another night here if my mom didn’t return.

I tried not to think about any of this, but in the end it was all I could think about.

After a bit, I got up and went to the river.

My mom had been right. The mossy rocks were slippery and sharp. I kept to the pebbly ground when I could and only stepped on the rocks when I had to. Then I was at the edge of the river. I had become so used to its continuous drone I had stopped hearing it, but now it sounded as loud as a million bees buzzing in unison. And it was moving so fast! I glanced east, then west, searching for a calmer section, but it was swift-moving and frothy for as far as I could see in either direction.

I stood on a large slab of rock that sloped downward into the water at maybe a forty-degree angle. I lowered myself to my bum, then butt-hopped forward. Stretching my right arm as far as I could, I submerged my water bottle into the rushing water, pointing the mouth upriver. The frigid water stung my hand and tried to tear the bottle from my grip. I held onto it tightly until it had filled up. Then I raised it in the air triumphantly.

That wasn’t so hard, I thought.

Tucking it in my pocket, I attempted to fill my dad’s bottle next. Almost immediately, however, it slipped from my grasp. I cried out in dismay, lunged forward—instinctively, stupidly—and skidded down the rock into the river.

I was waist deep in the freezing water before I knew what was happening and still sliding on the slick surface of the rock. Then my feet touched flat ground. I tried to stand. The current yanked me along with it, away from land.

“Dad!” I shouted. “Help!”

I was pin-wheeling my arms, trying to keep myself upright.

“Dad!”

I could see him by the fire. He was propped up on his elbows, watching me.

“Dad! Help!”

He didn’t move.

I flailed toward shore. Top heavy, my feet shot out from beneath me. My head dunked underwater. I opened my mouth, to cry out, and swallowed icy water. Then I was moving, pushed and dragged by the current. I somersaulted, didn’t know up from down. My eyes bulged with fear, but I couldn’t see anything... or could I? Yes, the sky! It was rippled and blurry and blue. I reached for it, kicked and kicked.

My head crashed through the surface of the river. I sucked back a mouthful of air and spat it out again in a fit of coughing. My throat burned. My lungs ached inside my chest.

As I struggled to remain afloat, I gagged on more water, gasped for air. My body suddenly felt as if it were made of lead. I was going to sink. I was going to drown—

I smashed into a rock. I tried grabbing hold of it, but it was too slippery, there were no handholds, and then it was behind me.

The river spun me twice, and when I was facing forward again another rock reared up in front of me.

Somehow I managed to clasp onto this one and not let go. Water crashed over my shoulders, roared in my ears.

The rock that had stopped me, I noticed with relief, was the first of several that protruded from the water in a line like well-worn molar teeth.

Moving from one to the next, I made slow but steady progress toward shore until I could stand once again.

Thankfully the riverbank here was not as steep as where I’d slid in, and I was able to clamber onto dry land, where I collapsed onto my chest and spewed my guts out.

Back at the campsite my dad was still propped on his elbows, still watching me.

“Water...?” he said.

“I lost our bottles.”

Something flitted across his face. It took me a moment to realize it was fear. Then a kind of loathing filled his eyes, a kind of hate. I was convinced he was going to jump up and smack me before I remembered he didn’t have the strength to do that, even if it’s what he wanted to do.

Instead he slumped onto his back.

“I can go get some,” I said. “I can bring it back in my hands?”

He didn’t reply, and I didn’t persist. I didn’t really want to go back to the river anyway.

I turned my attention to my right hand. A half-moon gash split my palm from thumb to pinky finger. I didn’t recall when or how it happened, but it must have been when I’d grabbed onto one of the rocks.

I scavenged the first-aid kit from my mom's backpack and tended to the wound. The white cotton bandage bloomed red immediately. I unwrapped it and applied a fresh one, securing it more tightly. It turned just as red just as quickly.

"Dad," I said, "my cut won't stop bleeding."

He didn't reply.

"Dad!"

He mumbled something. I caught "guy" and thought he was saying "Bri-guy."

"Huh?" I said.

"Guy... knocked up your mom..."

"Who?"

"Left..."

"Who?"

"Because... you..."

"Me?"

"Didn't want..."

"What—?"

But I understood.

*My real dad didn't want me. That's why he left my mom. Not because of her. Because of me.*

*Because I was born.*

Over the course of the day the old twisted tree had become host to at least fifty crows. The black birds had taken up residence on every rotting branch, turning the tree into a living monstrosity, like something out of a dark fairytale, or a haunted forest. Aside from the odd caw, or the leathery beat of wings, however, they remained eerily quiet.

The last of the sunlight had faded to dusk a few minutes ago, and although I could no longer see the ghastly tree or the greedy crows, I knew they were still there, still watching my dad and me with their unreadable black eyes, biding their time until they could feast.

The gash across my palm had stopped bleeding some time ago, so I was no longer worried I was going to bleed to death. But my poison ivy was worse than ever. It had spread everywhere. To my ankles, my stomach, my upper arms, my neck, behind my ears. Even to the dreaded area between my fingers. The itching there was so intense, the small puss bubbles so intolerable, I wanted to chop off my hands.

My mom had yet to return, and I'd resigned myself to the fact that I would be spending another night just me and my dad who wasn't my dad.

*My dad who wasn't my dad.*

I glared at him in the firelight, and for the first time in my life I felt nothing for him. No love, no fear, no respect. Nothing.

Actually, that wasn't true, I realized. I did feel something. I felt cheated. He was a phony, an impostor, a stranger who'd only pretended to be my dad to make my mom happy. He had been lying to me for my entire life—or, at least, since I was three. I knew this because there was a photograph in my baby book that showed him and my mom and me together at my third birthday party.

So what happened to my real dad? Did he really leave my mom and me because I was born? Where did he go? Why didn't he ever come back to see me grown up? Did he try? Did my fake dad send him away...?

A noise distracted me from these reflections. I glanced about, surprised to find the night had already deepened to an ebony black. I didn't see anything.

It could have been my imagination, or a falling rock, or the crows.

*Or the bear.*

I waited, listened.

Nothing.

Not the bear.

But it would be coming. I was sure of that. It would be coming because it was sick and starving and knew it had an easy meal—an easy *two* meals.

I stood decisively. Maybe I should just go, just start running. But which way? What if I ran straight into the bear? By myself? Without a fire?

I looked at my fake dad. He resembled a corpse. He wasn't one, not yet. Sometimes his breathing would go real quiet, and sometimes it would go real loud. Now it was real loud. It almost sounded as though he were snoring.

Could the bear hear him? I wondered. Was it coming for us this minute? And when it arrived, who would it attack? My dad was helpless, yeah, but the bear didn't know that. Chances were, it would go for me, because I was smaller.

I added another log and more sticks to the fire, feeding the flames. All the while my eyes kept drifting to my dad.

*Maybe if he was farther away from the fire, the bear would go for him first. Maybe it would stuff itself silly, and it would leave me alone...*

"Dad?" I said, stepping quietly toward him.

He didn't reply.

"Dad?"

His hair was drenched with perspiration, plastered to his head like when you get out of a swimming pool. His eye sockets seemed to have grown bigger, while somehow sinking into his face. Black stubble covered his jaw, forming a thick tangle that could almost be called a beard.

I seized one of his ankles in each hand and dragged him away from the fire, toward the river. He was heavy, and it took all my strength. I stopped after twenty feet or so. I didn't want him too far away in case the bear didn't see him and came straight for me.

I dropped his legs and was about to return to the fire when his eyes opened and he said, "Brian...?"

"You're not my dad."

"What, doing...?"

"You're not my dad."

I left him.

The bear arrived an hour later. I couldn't see it; the night was too black, the shadows outside the reach of the fire too thick. But I heard it grunting and snuffling. I crouched next to the flames, statue-still, hyper alert, praying it ignored me.

A scream. Weak. My dad.

Another one, so high-pitched it sounded like it belonged to a woman.

I plugged my ears with my fingers and kept them plugged long after the screams had stopped.

It took the bear forever to eat my dad. It kept making strange chuffing sounds, like when you swallow too quickly and the food gets stuck in your throat. Above the constant rush of the river I heard bones breaking, cartilage crackling, like when you tear a wing from a barbecued chicken, only much louder.

Then, finally, the munching sounds stopped.

Later, I tried to sleep. I couldn't. My body was exhausted, but my mind was wired. I rolled from side to side, from back to front. The poison ivy itched maddeningly.

I ended up pacing to keep warm in the dark, frigid morning for what seemed like hours. Then, in the silvered light of breaking dawn, I made out my dad... or what remained of him. For a moment my brain couldn't recognize what it was seeing because my dad no longer conformed to the shape and form of a man. He was more like a pile of clothes tossed haphazardly on the floor.

I went closer.

His red tank-top was split down the middle. His stomach was slit open. White ribs, several snapped in half, jutted into the air, glistening wetly like a mouthful of monster teeth. Everything they used to protect, all his organs and guts, were missing, leaving an empty, sagging cavity. Both his legs were chewed to the bone. Oddly his left forearm and his face were perfectly intact, though covered with blood splatter.

His eyes stared blankly at nothing.

I returned to the dying fire, shrugged my backpack over my shoulder, and went looking for my mom.

I found her on the other side of the poison ivy patch, a little ways along the steep path we'd followed to reach the canyon floor.

"Mom!" I shouted, waving my hands over my head ecstatically.

She stood there for a moment, as if she didn't recognize me, or thought I was a mirage. Then she called my name—*shrieked* it, actually—and ran toward me.

She scooped me into a mammoth hug. I think she tried to lift me off my feet, but either I was too heavy or she was too weak and we collapsed to the ground. She started laughing and crying and kissing me all over.

My mom looked as bad as I felt. Her hair was messy and knotted, her face and clothes streaked with dirt and sweat, her hands enflamed with poison ivy. But she was smiling like she'd just won a million bucks.

"Oh baby, oh God, oh baby," she cooed. "I couldn't find the car... then night came... then I got even more lost..." She stiffened. Her smile faltered. "Where's your father, angel? Why'd you leave him by himself? What happened?"

I told her.

Well, not everything. I told her a bear ate him. But I didn't tell her I dragged him from the fire to use as bait. I said the bear did that, dragged him away.

I wasn't sure how I'd expected her to react to this news, but she surprised me by not reacting at all.

Face impassive, she stood, ordered me to wait where I was, and went to confirm my dad's death for herself.

When she returned I could tell she was super upset because she didn't say anything to me. In fact, she barely looked at me, just marched past where I was waiting, back up the canyon wall. I fell into line behind her, relieved to be with her again, and even more relieved to be returning to the campsite.

After five or ten minutes we came to an eighty-foot-long iron chain that had been installed in the drainage passage we were ascending.

"Why's this here, Mom?" I asked. "To help people climb?"

She didn't answer me.

"Mom?"

No answer. She was breathing as heavily as I was. Perspiration saturated her white top, making it cling to her shoulder blades and her bare breasts. She drew a hand across her forehead.

"I don't think this is the right way," I went on. "We never saw the chain on our way down—"

"Shut up, Brian! Please! Just... shut up!"

I frowned at her. She was looking at me in a way she had never looked at me before. I didn't know if she was sad or angry or what. Then her legs gave out and she dropped to her knees. She leaned forward and vomited.

I stared, terrified. I had never seen her puke before.

When she finished, I tried to help her—but she pushed me away.

My eyes narrowed. "What's wrong, Mom?"

She glared at me sidelong. "Did you move him?" she asked quietly. A string of saliva dripped from her mouth. She didn't seem to care.

"Huh?" I said.

"Your father. Did you move him?"

"No," I said, telling myself I wasn't lying, because she didn't ask me when I moved him. And I didn't move him today. So I wasn't lying, not really.

Besides, how could she know I'd moved him?

"There were footprints," she said, as if reading my mind.

"Footprints?" I said, pretending not to understand. But I thought I did. My insides turned to mush.

"Next to... drag marks. He was dragged. You dragged him."

"The bear dragged him."

"They were your footprints, Brian!" she blurted, and I thought she might throw up again. She didn't. She just kept looking at me, but in a pleading way now, as if she wanted me to tell her she was wrong.

But what could I say? How could I explain why my footprints were next to the drag marks?

"Did you do something to Geena, Brian?" she said.

Geena? Why was she asking me about Geena?

"No, Mom, Geena died in her sleep," I said earnestly. "I didn't do anything to her. I swear."

Geena died one month after her first birthday. My parents had gone to the neighbors who lived four doors down the street. I was only nine then, too young to babysit, but my parents didn't want to pay for a real babysitter so they left me in charge. Geena had already been fed and put to bed. All I had to do was keep an eye on her, and if there was any trouble, to call the Applebee's. Their telephone number was stuck to the fridge with a Budweiser magnet. My parents said they would be home around eight o'clock. They didn't return until midnight or so. I'd fallen asleep on the sofa in the living room, and I was just waking up, clearing the fuzz from my head, when my mom started screaming hysterically from Geena's room. Then she was shouting, and my fake dad was shouting, and I was asking what was wrong, but nobody would tell me.

An ambulance arrived a few minutes later. The serious-looking paramedics took Geena to Craig Hospital. No one there could save her though. She'd been dead for too long.

Over the next couple of days specially trained police officers came to our house to comfort my parents and me while Geena's death was investigated. At one point a detective asked me if I had been alone all evening, if anyone had come over, if Geena had been behaving differently, and a bunch of other questions. I told him Geena had been sleeping quietly. I had been watching TV, then I fell asleep. That was all that happened, all I could remember. I think he believed me. *I* believed me.

Since then, however, I've always wondered whether maybe I did do something to Geena after all. Because every once in a while I would have the same memory, sometimes when I was awake, sometimes when I was asleep. I'm standing by Geena's crib, looking down at her, and I hate her. I mean, I really, really hate her, for no reason at all. I hate that she is so small. I hate that she is so unaware. I hate how she looks at me with her big black eyes. I hate how she kicks her pudgy legs and arms. And in the memory I see myself reaching down, into the crib, and pinching her nose between my index finger and thumb. And when Geena begins crying loudly, *squealing*, I cover her mouth with my other hand. And then I begin counting Mississippi to fifty...

"Geena died in her sleep, Mom," I said again. "That's what the doctor said—"

"And I believed him!" my mom said, pushing stringy hair from her face. "I believed him, I believed him. You were her older brother, you would never do something to hurt her. Why would you? You wouldn't, so that's what I believed. She just stopped breathing..."

"That's what happened, Mom."

"I don't believe you, Brian! God forgive me, I don't, not anymore..."

Convulsions shook her body.

"Mom..." Her crying made me want to cry too. I patted her head.

"Don't touch me, Brian!" She batted my hand away. "Why did you drag your father away from the fire?"

"I didn't."

"Don't lie to me! Stop lying! Stop it! I saw your footprints!"

"Are you mad at me, Mom?"

"Mad at you? Mad? *You murdered your father—*"

“He’s not my dad!” I shouted, tears bursting from my eyes.

Her mouth gaped wide in surprise.

“Not my *real* dad!” I plowed on. “He told me! *You* lied to me! You both lied to me! He’s not my real dad, that’s why he’s never liked me—”

“He stopped liking you, Brian,” my mom snapped, almost wearily, “because he thought you killed Geena! Everybody thought that! Don’t you remember the police, the family court, the judge? Don’t you remember any of that?”

I frowned, because I didn’t. Not exactly. It was foggy, dreamlike, like the memory of standing at the crib, looking down at Geena.

“I was the only one who believed you, Brian. I’ve always believed you. But now...not now. You killed Geena. You killed your father. My boy, my baby boy... why...?”

She covered her face with her hands and curled into a ball.

I studied my mom coldly, processing what she had told me. Everyone knew I’d killed Geena? Was that really why my dad never liked me? Why we moved to a new neighborhood shortly after Geena died? Why I started going to a different school?

If this was true—everyone knew I’d killed Geena—and my mom told the police I dragged my fake dad away from the fire so the bear would eat him and not me, then they’d probably believe her over me. They might even go to my house to search for clues and stuff. They might check my fort in the backyard. If they did that, they would find the squirrel heads. I got rid of the bodies, tossed them into some bushes in Cushing Park, but I kept the heads in a shoebox so I could look at them now and then. They had dried up and were just bones and teeth and tufts of fur. But if the police found those, they would know I liked to kill things, and they might change their minds and arrest me for killing Geena, and for helping the bear kill my dad.

They might put me in jail and throw away the key.

I didn’t want them to do that.

I couldn’t let them do that.

I chose a rock the size of a baseball and approached my mom from behind. She was still folded into a ball, still holding her head in her hands, crying. I didn’t want to do this. I really didn’t. But she had forced me to. She was going to tell on me. And maybe she would be happy being dead. She would be with Geena and my fake dad.

I swung the rock.

I hit her squarely on the top of the head. The impact jarred my hand and caused me to drop the rock. Instead of dying, though, my mom sat up. Her left hand went to the top of her skull and she stared at me in shock and horror. Then she was pushing herself away from me.

I scanned the ground for the rock, saw it a few feet away. I snatched it up and turned back to my mom. She was still trying to get away from me and trying to stand at the same time. Luckily she didn’t have the strength, or the balance, and she kept falling to her side.



I raised the rock.

“Brian!” she said, protecting her head with her arms.

The first blow deflected off one of her forearms. The second struck her in the same spot as before.

“Brian!” she cried.

Furious that she was proving so hard to kill, I swung the rock a third time with all the strength I could muster. This blow was the best yet, cracking open her skull. She collapsed to her chest. Blood gushed down the visible side of her face. One scared eye stared at me, fish-like.

I didn’t think I could strike her again, not with her looking at me like that, and she would probably be dead soon enough anyway. She had a hole in her head.

I tossed the rock aside, grabbed her ankles like I had my dad’s, and began dragging her.

I dragged her all the way to the canyon floor. Moving her was a lot easier than moving my dad had been. One, it was downhill. Two, she was smaller than he was, my size, and just as skinny. Even so, it still took me most of the morning to get her to the river. She was awake for the first bit. She kept trying to talk to me, but she wasn’t making any sense. Now she was quiet, her eyes closed. I figured she had finally died.

I rolled her body into the raging river and watched it wash her away.

I made it to the original campsite shortly before night descended. Everything was as we’d left it. I’d forgotten to search my mom’s pockets for the car keys, so I broke one of the Chevy’s windows with a rock to unlock the trunk and get to the food. I was so hungry I wolfed down four Oscar Mayer wieners raw and an entire box of salted crackers. I also drank the three remaining Pepsis, then about a liter of tap water. Later that evening, I nibbled on Oreo cookies and read an Archie until I fell asleep in my tent.

When Ranger Ernie found me two days later I was filthy but in otherwise fine shape. Nevertheless, I pretended I was worse off than I was and made myself cry while I explained how a bear had killed my parents. I’d tried to help them, I insisted—that’s why I’d gotten blood all over me—but my mom told me to run away, so I ran away.

I spoke to a lot of police officers after that. I even had to speak to the same detective who’d questioned me about Geena’s death. I really didn’t like him, especially now that I knew he thought I’d killed her. I stuck to my story, however, and he soon gave up badgering me. After all, my dad had clearly been eaten by a bear—I couldn’t fake that—and my mom’s body, discovered far downriver, had been too bashed up and decayed to determine the cause of death.

The police never searched my home as I’d feared they would, never found the squirrel heads, which I packed with all my other stuff when I moved into foster care, where I lived with other kids who didn’t have parents.

I missed my mom at first, but gradually I forgot what she sounded like, then what she looked like. After about a year I didn’t miss her at all.

I never gave my fake dad a second thought—except when I replayed in my head the bear eating him, and when I did that, I always made it daytime, so I could watch it all happen again.

## The Present

When I had first approached the young Swedish couple thirty minutes earlier, they had been friendly and chatty. I told them I was camping in the lot one over from theirs, and they told me to join them for a beer. Their accented English was close to fluent but sometimes difficult to understand. From what I gathered they had both been hired as ski instructors at Aspen for the winter season, and they had decided to camp in Black Canyon to save money on their accommodation until they had to report to the ski resort. The man had introduced himself as Raoul. He was handsome and blond, the hair on one side of his head cropped short, the hair on the other side wavy and chin length. The woman, Anna, was an impish brunette with a thin yet voluptuous body. In fact, she reminded me of my old flame Stephanie. I'd never had a chance to see Steph again before I was shipped off to foster care, but I'd tracked her down through Facebook a couple years back. She was married, a stay-at-home mom with two young boys. She didn't remember me when I knocked on her door late on a Tuesday morning. But she remembered when I mentioned our elementary school. It had been nice to hear her say my name again, which she did over and over as she begged unsuccessfully for her life.

The once-chatty Swedes, who had been so eager to hear my Black Canyon story, had become fidgety during the last quarter of it, and now, after its conclusion, seemed downright uncomfortable.

"So you see," I told them, opening my hands expansively. "I really had no choice. I had to kill my parents. It was either me or them."

Silence ensued, pleasantly uncomfortable.

"You know, that is a good story," Raoul said finally, clearing his throat. He was sitting across the campfire from me, next to Anna. He ran a hand over the side of his head that had hair. "But, well, it is late. I think we will go to bed soon."

"Yeah, sure. Bed, sure." Never one to overstay my welcome, I stood and smiled, to show there were no hard feelings for the not-so-discreet send off. "Well, thanks for listening, guys. It really is a good story, isn't it? I like to tell it. You can psychoanalyze me tomorrow. Nature or nurture, right?" I tipped him a wink, Anna a smile. She returned the smile nervously, looked at her feet.

"Right," Raoul said, though I don't think he understood what I was talking about.

I strolled east, cutting through the forest. When I had gone fifty feet, I stopped and faced the way I had come. Although Raoul and Anna would not be able to see me in the thick shadows, I could see them in the firelight. They were leaning close to one another in conversation. Raoul was gesturing quickly. The next moment they got up and ducked inside their tent.

Still watching them, I undid my shoelaces, slipped off my shoes, then my socks.

Raoul and Anna emerged from the tent carrying their backpacks. Raoul opened the backdoor of the old station wagon they were driving and tossed both bags onto the backseat.

I shrugged out of my jacket, then pulled off my T-shirt.

Raoul and Anna returned to the tent and began dismantling it.

I retrieved the twelve-inch hunting knife from where it had been secured snug against the small of my back and clenched it between my teeth. I unbuttoned my jeans, unzipped the zipper, then stepped out of the legs. I shoved my boxers down my hips, stepped out of them too.

Naked, I started forward, transferring the knife to my right hand.

Raoul and Anna were making too much noise with the tent to hear me approach. When I was fifteen feet away, however, Anna looked up from the stake she had pried from the ground and saw me. She froze, like a hare that had just spotted a predator.

She said something in Swedish to Raoul, who jerked around.

I went for him first, closing the distance between us in a burst of speed. He sprang to his feet and bumbled backward into the tent as I plunged the blade into his heart and tugged down.

People don't die easily. My mom taught me this. But if you don't mind the mess, slitting open the heart will always get the job done.

Blood fountained from Raoul's chest and struck my shoulder with wonderful force.

Anna wasn't screaming, not exactly. I don't know how to explain the sound she was making, because it wasn't really human. Warbling? Yowling?

She ran.

I gave chase. For thirty-six I was in great shape. I went to the gym five days a week and was lean as a barracuda.

I caught Anna before she had even decided which way she wanted to flee.

I sank the knife into her back, into her heart, and twisted the blade sharply, blending the vital muscle into puree.

She expelled a jet of blood from her mouth and belly-flopped to the ground.

I gripped a fistful of her hair, tilted her impish head back, and slit her throat from ear to ear. Then I returned my attention to the boyfriend. He was still on his feet, his hands trying to stem the fountain spurting from his chest as he tottered back and forth on legs that would never ski again.

I finished him off.

I know all about famous serial killers. I've read about them in books and on the internet. I've watched documentaries on *A Current Affair* and *60 Minutes*. I've rented biopics on Netflix. I don't look up to the Gacys and the Bundys of the world. I don't idolize them, or want to imitate them. I simply relate to them. They're my kin. Yet as similar as they and I may be, we are all equally unique in regard to what tickles our fancies. Dean Corll, for instance, only tortured and murdered young boys. Bruno Ludke was into young women, and necrophilia. Gerald Stano strangled and shot hitchhikers of both sexes, provided they were Anglo Saxon. Personally, I didn't care much for the demographics of my victims; I just liked feeding them to bears.

After Raoul bled out, I rinsed the blood from my skin using the campground tap, then collected my clothes from where I'd shed them in the woods. Back at my car I dressed, then drove to the Swede's campsite. I parked fifty feet from their bodies, cut the engine, but kept the high beams on.

The bear arrived thirty minutes later. It never took bears long to show. They were always hanging around campsites, even in the off-season before they went into hibernation, in the hopes of scrounging a last-minute meal. They had amazing noses too. They were like bloodhounds and could zero in on a fresh kill from miles away.

This one came from the west. It stood at the perimeter of the campsite, on all fours, sniffing the air as if for a trap. It looked directly at me, but I knew it couldn't see or smell me in the darkened cab.

Eventually it waddled toward the dead ski instructors, into the throw of the headlights. It sniffed the hunks of meat, then made a loud mewling sound, calling its two cubs from their hiding spot among the nearby vegetation.

I leaned forward with anticipation as the mama bear and her kids got ready to chow down.

