

PROLOGUE

Nell claims the taller maple, scrambles up higher than her brother. Eight, she is fearless and fast, laughing, egging him on. In the upper branches that bend beneath their weight, they lean and push to make the trees sway, riding the supple limbs. Billy is a daredevil, swinging by his hands, legs churning the air. Nell imitates him and creates such a snap she loses her grip. A lower limb breaks her fall, knocking the wind out of her.

Billy is hollering before he reaches her. She wants to say: don't shout, it hurts me, but has no breath. Opens her eyes, he swims before her, the tree above quivering green. She tries to sit up, can't, blood drips from her nose. Shakes her head to try to clear it, more blood.

It is soft in the grass, the damp already seeping into her shirt. Billy, frantic, are you hurt, runs his hands over her arms and legs, looking for broken bones. Why does he keep asking her that? Didn't she answer him? She tries to think what happened. Was it an hour ago? Longer?

Billy swears under his breath, wipes the blood from her face, shhh, shhh, he says, as if she is crying, but she doesn't think she is. Why doesn't it hurt yet? She feels as if she is floating, that she could float away into the sky, and he is holding her to the earth. She would like to put her arms around him but her limbs won't do her bidding. She would like to listen to his heartbeat, rest there.

She moves her hand, finally, to her face, searching for her

glasses. Gone. There is a deep cut above her eye. Why can't she talk? She rolls to one side, vomits, coughs. Billy gets his hands under her, drags her away.

"Not a fair fight," he says. She tries to smile at him. There's blood all over his hands. "Mom's gonna kill me."

"We won't tell her," she manages to croak. Lifts a hand to her throat, "Why can't I . . . ?"

"Got the wind knocked out of you. Bruised your ribs maybe. Windpipe."

It seems ages before she can sit up, propped against the trunk. Billy goes to the stream for water, uses his T-shirt, works in circles swabbing her face and neck, the cuts and scrapes on both arms and legs.

Shuts her eyes, opens them, wants her hated glasses, knows she's in for it, having wrecked them. Are both eyes working, she needs to ask, but can't put words to that fear. Did she really feel broken glass? Longs for the comfort of their secret language, a magic circle that kept everyone else out, until she had to give it up to go to school. She had to wait three years to follow her big brother onto that yellow bus; she would have promised anything.

Maybe he'll sing to her. Her head droops, she topples again. He's not much of a singer. Not like Brendan or Sheila or their father. Still.

She puts her head in his lap.

"Sing," she commands.

He wipes his nose, tries to push the bloody hair off her face. The birds are making a racket.

"Can't compete with that," he says.

"Sing."

He sings until she sleeps. Lets her be. She's got to get her legs under her. It's a long way home. Canada warbler overhead. He imitates its call, then whistles back and forth with a black-bird.

The blood scares him. He keeps forgetting how little she is.

He touches the wound. It's a nasty gash, pieces of glass above her eye, needs tweezers, a bandage, maybe stitches.

Nose seems to be intact. Her skin is cold. He cups his hands around her face.

He'll be beaten for this even though his father doesn't have the heart or the stomach to beat his kids. A trial and a cross.

She'll be teased at school for being clumsy even though she's anything but. Always a little apart, too serious for other children; too wild for other girls. Except for Megan Alsop who has no sense when it comes to danger and will do anything to impress him. Strip naked when other girls lift a skirt or pull down their shorts behind the barn. Turning slowly, that sweet little kid body, freckles all over her chest, until her father catches them, just about jerks her arm out of its socket as he hustles her inside. They can hear the strap he uses on her bare bottom. Counting the blows before they disappear into the woods. Not a sound out of her.

Nell moans, wakes, the sun low in the sky. The walk to the lake is long, how can it be so far, her feet, flap, flapping like clown's feet, they hardly seem to belong to her. Everything hurts. It's hard to take a deep breath, when she does something stabs her chest, grips and lets go. Her head aches: the wound above her eye is on fire.

She keeps lagging behind, not realizing, eyes on the ground, until she looks up, can't see him, tries to call out, her voice still not working right. Stops twice, woozy. Feels Billy's impatience, the dark falling fast.

He waits for her, takes her hand. "Almost there," he says. How can he find the way, she wonders. He always knows the way.

Tucker's Point, finally; the boat hidden in the weeds. She's swaying on her feet as he rights the rowboat, steadies her as she climbs in. She curls up on the lifejackets in the stern, watches him row. Sees for the first time that he's scared.

Stars glitter, smudged without her glasses. The lake is a mirror, the wooded shore black and unbroken. The oars grind and splash; he's working hard, breathing hard.

The pain fades in and out, she feels absolved and free, content to skim the water with her brother, the earth turning, sun gone, moon rising, the boat rocking, rocking. As if it doesn't matter which way is home or if they will ever get there.

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The last thing he remembers: two grunts and a stretcher materializing through a covering shroud of white phosphorus, getting crammed into a chopper full of the dead and dying, the medic finally stabbing him with morphine. He doesn't regain consciousness until the sixth day on the hospital ship. A blessed blankness while his burned skin peels away from half his upper body, leaving pain in its wake no narcotic can touch.

Was it mercy or a mistake to have hauled him off that mountaintop? He woke fifty miles from shore in the South China Sea with the scent of his father in the bed beside him: cigarette smoke, Old Spice, the sensation of being held against Jack's chest.

Billy had been sure he would die on that ship. Prayed for it some days when the pain stripped him of hope and dignity, his spirit diving into the sea to escape; the lure of water, colder and colder as he descended, becoming a slow, silken creature of the deep; fins and gills and unblinking eyes.

The transfer to the Army hospital in Japan: the bruising landing, the shock of December cold. He'd passed out as he was moved from the stretcher to a bed, IVs taped back into place, his body like a side of beef, waiting for the next round of surgeons and the next as they set and reset bones in his forearm, elbow, shoulder, picking out shrapnel with each surgery, waiting, always waiting for the specialist to arrive and begin to reassemble what's left of his hand.

He'd survived long enough to be wheeled into this hallway, club-footed Sam dialing the phone, negotiating with the operator.

The second he hears Nell's voice he can see her: jeans and boots, almost eighteen, no longer a kid. Sunlight spilling across the beat-up linoleum in the kitchen, her schoolbooks piled on the table, an apple, an orange, Jack's red plaid scarf around her neck, Flanagan waiting on the porch to go out.

Maybe he should've held on to that Saint Christopher medal she'd given him. He'd worn it looped around his neck with his dog tags. His first sight of the sea in Vietnam, he'd waded in, pulled the medal over his head, touched it with his

lips for luck, and dropped it into the water. The water flat calm, soupy, shimmering in the heat. Jets taking off from Tan Son Nhut, a radio wailing on the beach, barbecue and diesel washing over him. Somehow there was cold beer, USDA hamburger flown in from God knows where, soldiers dancing in their skivvies, running into the sea, sunburned and stoned, taking a break from the war before heading back into the jungle.

How often he thinks of Nell on the day she fell from the tree, falling asleep beside her, waking to find her staring at him, face drawn, the pain registering. No whining, not a word of complaint. Struggling to her feet, one sneaker missing. How calm she was, retreating deep inside herself like the soldiers do. In shock or stoic, they endure the running, jostling panic as they are loaded on stretchers, carried onto the medevac chopper or simply boosted or shoved aboard, the scream of its rotor blades the sound of salvation.

How many die on his ship; he promises himself not to count. Focus on the bird, getting in, getting out. He gets a reputation, doesn't want one. Don't call him lucky, don't call him anything, draw no attention to the bubble he flies within. Illusion, faith, skill, sooner or later it will shatter, like the glass they picked out of the skin around Nell's eye. Another

millimeter, their mother kept saying, just a fraction of an inch and she would have lost that eye.

In the hospital hallway, he looks at his hands. His mind hits a snag every single time. Reaches to hang up the phone, drops the receiver. It swings on its black cord, banging against the wall.

He wants a cigarette, wonders if he'll ever roll a smoke again. Looks out at the lights dotting the parking lot, a dog sniffing the perimeter of the fence. From this vantage point the hospital looks like what it feels like: a prison compound.

He must've fallen asleep. The dial tone grows louder, or begins again, changes to a thin wail that wakes him. Out the window the shifts are changing, the able-bodied walking to their cars. Soldiers stir in the rooms behind him, waking to the news of their losses over and over.

It's time to piss off home.

The VA hospital in Syracuse is a sprawling, shabby redbrick building. Yesterday's snow still fills the parking lot; the walkways are rutted with ice. The facade appears to weep in the weak sun, snowmelt from the roof and broken gutters.

Nell pushes through the revolving door, her mother's fury trailing her. Billy insisting that she come alone, her mother relegated to the parking lot. Nell wonders how long she'll last. Waiting is not Marion's strong suit. Billy always puts her in the middle: the chosen one and the buffer, too.

The hospital is hot and airless. She unzips Billy's hunting jacket, waits at the information desk. It smells musty and damp; the hallways, half-lit, stretch forever. Catches a glimpse of a girl exiting through the door at the opposite end of the building, a boy's watch cap hiding her hair. Megan? It can't be Megan; how would she even know Billy is home?

The man who finally appears can't find Billy Flynn.

“Admitted last night,” she tells him, “from Japan.”

He shuffles folders.

“Burned. Where’s the burn unit?”

He runs his finger down the list of floors and departments. Finally: “Floor 6. South Side.”

Nell takes the elevator, follows the arrows to the South Side, walks through corridors with soldiers waiting everywhere: in wheelchairs, on gurneys. Those who are awake watch her pass. The doors to all the rooms are open. She’s afraid to look inside, can’t stop herself. Boys missing arms, legs. She stops looking, looks at the floor instead.

The smell is overpowering: bleach, urine, vomit.

Two soldiers in wheelchairs, arms and hands intact, chase each other down the corridor, shouting. A radio, something about a radio. They will not be stopped, no matter who yells at them.

Nell flattens herself against the wall as they flash past. The soldier on the gurney beside her reaches for her hand. His bandage covers the top of his head, one eye, his jaw. The gauze is pink with blood, frothy, the sheet soaked. She lets him grip her hand, then turns to him.

“What’s your name?”

He licks his lips. “Scotty.”

“Are you waiting for surgery?”

“Just waiting.” His voice is scratchy.

“I have to go. My brother is here.”

“Come back. Come see me.”

The burn unit is through a set of double doors. First impression: it’s so much quieter than the ward she just walked through. She takes a breath, tries to calm the panic she feels. Intermittent moans, cries. The crash of a metal pan.

A wife visiting in high heels and lipstick, purse held tight against her belly, stops next to Nell, coat over one arm, eyes darting. Wearing her best dress, the one for church or maybe

Friday nights, slim gold band on her left hand, hair flipped and lacquered. How'd she get through all that snow in those heels? Where's her mother? What made her think she could face this alone?

Nell finds Billy's room, crowded with six beds. She takes shallow breaths against the smells, tries to reconcile the thin, bandaged man pinned to the bed with the exuberant animal Billy has been all his life. Thinks, then, of building wings together; their stubborn belief that if they could just solve the practical problems, they'd be able to fly.

The side of his face, his neck and ear are bandaged in gauze and an elaborate dressing covers his hand, arm, shoulder, and torso. It's his right hand. No, she thinks. *No*. She slips between two beds to reach him, careful not to jostle the other soldiers. Registers that one of them is dead, eyes staring, mouth open.

Billy is asleep. She rests her hand on his chest, afraid to hurt him, needing to touch him, to reassure herself that he is breathing.

His heartbeat is slow. There's an IV in his good arm, delivering fluids, morphine? The bag is nearly empty. She hears water spilling to the floor, turns to see urine pooling beneath the bed by the window, the collection bag overflowing.

He opens his eyes. "Nell."

He is so pale he seems to come from another world.

"I want to hug you, but I don't want to hurt you . . ." she says.

"Plenty of time for that."

He looks at her, assessing the changes, she knows, noticing everything.

"Your hair like that," he says. "I wish I could draw you."

"Quit it."

"It's your neck."

"What's wrong with my neck?"

"You're like a fucking swan."

“A freak of nature, then.”

“Just don’t tell me how I look.”

“You look good to me.”

“At least I’m not in a box,” he says, which makes them both laugh. “How’d you manage Mom?”

“She’s in the parking lot.”

“How’s Megan?”

“She’s good.”

“Did you tell her I’m back?”

“Not yet. I thought . . .”

“Boyfriend?”

“He’s a jerk. It’s . . .”

“It can’t be serious.”

“No.” He doesn’t need to know it’s been going on since September.

“There’s something you’re not telling me.”

“She’s running with a different crowd.”

“Megan?” He tries to sit up, can’t. “Tell her I want to see her.”

“Okay.”

“Water over the dam, Nell, you tell her.”

“I will.”

He shuts his eyes against the pain. He is whiter than the sheets he lies on, as though his blood has turned to water, losing color and the power to heal. It about kills her that she can’t take the hurt away.

As darkness begins to fall, Nell thinks about standing in that kitchen in East Syracuse more than a year ago: the same watery half-light; the same sense of being suspended in time; something begun, but not yet finished.