

THE WATER CAVE

Lannie Bishop sees Jeremy Ryder standing over his bike by the pumps at the Quik-mart. He says, Hey, you wanna ride together, and Lannie says OK.

She knows Jeremy from Stonegate Elementary. But since he is a boy and weird, she's never talked to him much. Once in their fifth grade class, he brought in a board pinned with dragonflies—their brittle wings outstretched, their armored abdomens and whiskery legs exposed.

Where is everybody, Lannie says as they pedal toward Dogwood, their knees rising and falling in rhythm like a swimmer's stroke.

On vacation, most likely, Jeremy says.

Lannie peers over at him. Maybe Jeremy Ryder has changed since she last saw him their last day of elementary school. But, no—he looks just the same. Same bell-shaped hair brushing wire-rimmed glasses. Same eager grin exposing the gap between his front teeth.

They bike together to the playground on Willow. They lean their bikes on either side of an old sycamore tree. The playground is deserted too, as if everyone has stolen off to some secret place.

You ready for school, Lannie says, squatting and stirring the mulch with a fallen stick. In thirteen days they will both be starting at Wakefield Middle. Their fifth grade class took a field trip there, given tours by tall, eighth grade girls with 'hello my name is' stickers stuck onto their chests.

I figure the class-work should be do-able, Jeremy says.

That cafeteria—did you see how big? And the locker area, or the locker commons, or whatever they call it...Lannie touches the base of her throat, the hollow spot where freckles collect.

Jeremy looks out over the playground where no one plays, squinting and pushing his glasses back onto his head.

I'm glad everything will be different, he says.

Later Lannie slides open her sliding glass door and the bright sound of laughter startles her. It's coming from neighbor's patio, which runs alongside her own with only a low row of planters between. A girl named Sara Parson lives next door.

Sara Parson is thirteen, two whole years older than Lannie. Sara lounges out back on a long lawn chair, mirrored sunglasses covering her eyes; in their shiny twinned surface, Lannie sometimes sees her own self reflected.

Today a group of girls are arranged around Sara's patio, all facing the sun like giant sunflowers. Lannie's door squeaks on its track, and together the older girls turn to look. Lannie wants to go back inside, but it seems weird, so she sits alone on her own porch beside them, even as the older girls turn back to the sun.

Sure, the water cave, a dark-haired girl says loudly. The one way out by the water tower.

Another girl says no, the cave is actually in Powhatan State Park. A mile

or so up the road from Clive's, and east toward the parkway.

A third girl interrupts. She knows for a fact it's in the other direction, in a big cow field near a rock stuck out like a thumb.

West, Sara says, then for a moment the girls all go quiet.

When they start up again, it's in an excited murmur, about the things they can all agree on. They agree, for instance, that next to the rock, there's a pool of water. They hold their arms out to show its dimensions, as if hugging an enormous invisible thing, or performing ballet. They agree that there's no way around it: you have to swim underwater to get there.

The water's freezing, even in August, Sara says and Lannie shivers in the heat.

The next morning, when Lannie goes outside, Sara waves her over to the other side of the patio. Without sunglasses on, Lannie can plainly see Sara's bright gray eyes. Ten o'clock and it's already too hot out. A thin sheen of sweat sparkles on Sara's skin.

You know it's not real, right? Sara says. That cave we were talking about.

Lannie almost says, It is real. Is so. But she catches herself.

Maybe Sara is just looking out for her, like a big sister would. Maybe Sara is just the kind of girl Lannie hopes to become.

Then Sara's family leaves town too, packing up early Friday morning.

Lannie watches from her bedroom window as Sara's father puzzles beach chairs and duffel bags into the back of their truck. Sara's mother appears, hair still wet, wearing a high-waisted sundress. Sara is the last to walk out of the townhouse. She is listening to music, her eyes half closed, thin white headphone cords tangled in her hair.

After they pull away, Lannie strings her house key around her neck and sets off on her bicycle. She ventures out almost every day, despite her mother's warnings, delivered on the way out to work:

Don't go past Ridge Street.

Don't talk to strangers.

Don't you know what can happen to a girl out there on her own!

Lannie answers to herself silently: I won't, I don't, how could I?

Lannie pedals down Main Street, drifting through a few old neighborhoods where old people sit out on screened-in porches, their faces blurred behind the tight pattern of mesh. She passes her old school, Stonegate, and then the Middle school, which will soon be her new school. She heads over to Dogwood. Jeremy said he lived near there. She spots him circling his bike in a cul-de-sac.

Jeremy is going slowly, hands off the handlebars, balancing. His bicycle is iridescent green, like a fly's back, with knobby tires, and an odometer neatly ticking off miles. Jeremy is looking out ahead, concentrating, his bright pink tongue curled up on his lip.

The first time Lannie passes, he doesn't see her. But on her second run, he calls out her name.

Hey! Wait up! he calls to her, his hands back firmly on his curved handlebars

Together they bike out toward the Quik-Mart. Together they turn onto Willow, just like that first day. All the carports they pass are overfilled with rusted lawn tools, streaked canisters, tricycles turned on end.

So, there's this place, Lannie hears herself saying, Out in Powhatan: a water cave or something.

A water cave?

Yeah, a water cave.

Lannie and Jeremy are biking side by side now, so slowly their wheels wobble. The shadows of their bikes nearly touch.

Caves are so dark, Jeremy says, you can't even see your hand in front of your face.

Yeah, well, Lannie says, this one's near Clive's Country Store. Exactly one mile from there, and west. Lannie has a flash of how, back in the fifth grade, Jeremy used to line his pencils up in a perfect straight line at the edge of his desk.

We could bike a mile easy, Jeremy says.

The problem would be, Jeremy goes on, getting to Clive's—on our own, I mean.

Lannie thinks she doesn't actually want to go to the water cave, and not

with Jeremy Ryder; or she wants to have already gone and come back.

She touches her mouth like a reflex.

That is the problem, isn't it, she says.

Monday morning, out of nowhere, Jeremy rings Lannie's doorbell. When she cracks the door open, he explains right away how he waiting for her mom to drive off. Lannie wants to be annoyed, but there is something she appreciates about him waiting and knowing to wait. They sit on the stoop together.

So I was thinking, Jeremy says, there's this kid I play World of Warcraft with. He's older. His grandmother has a truck. She supposedly lets him drive everywhere...

The bowl of Jeremy's hair is parted and pulled open like curtains, offering a rare view of his forehead, his eyebrows rising half way between doubt and hopefulness.

This kid, Jeremy says, His name is Ray. He goes to school with my brother. He's an all right player, I guess. Anyway, it was me who invited him into my clan: The Avenging Angels, Av-e, for short.

They're pretty big, actually, Jeremy adds after a moment. Lannie looks out at the empty spaces in the lot.

The point is, Jeremy says, this kid Ray pretty much owes me big time. I bet I can get him to take us and our bikes to Clive's. We could just bike from there; that'd be better, more authentic, than getting a ride the whole way, doncha

think?

You ever hang out with him? Lannie says.

Who, Ray?

No, your brother. You said you have a brother.

My brother's way different than me. He's this big basketball star I guess.

His name is Samuel, but they call him Sly—which is the stupidest name ever.

Seriously.

Lannie looks at Jeremy. Behind his glasses, his eyes are big and dark; she hadn't noticed before.

At least, she says softly, you have someone, someone around.

I think, Jeremy says, me and you should go to the water cave. I think we should go and not tell anyone at all.

The final Thursday before school starts, Lannie wakes up early and stands at her bedroom window. Sara's family must have come back in the night. Their truck is parked out front, a beach umbrella strapped on top. Lannie thinks maybe she will see Sara on their joining patios. She thinks maybe Sara will invite her to sit over on the other side for a while.

Lannie listens to her mother leaving for work before coming out of her bedroom. Then alone she lies on her mother's half-made bed, flipping back and forth between cartoons and court shows, eating dry cereal out of a mug. She decides she will look out of the window at ten o'clock exactly; if Sara is outside,

then the water cave is real and they will find it. She waits and looks. No one is there. Still she isn't sure.

Lannie bikes over to the playground a few minutes before the hour. She is supposed to meet Jeremy at eleven sharp, but he isn't there. Finally, at a quarter past, he comes barreling down Willow, hollering her name out as if she might otherwise miss him, ditching his bike recklessly against the curb.

Geez, I'm right here; I've been waiting, Lannie says.

Guess what, Jeremy says, racing to catch his breath so he can tell her. I confirmed everything. Ray's definitely gonna drive us. But we have to make it to his house by noon.

Jeremy holds out something that looks like a treasure map. It is drawn on an envelope, pulled from his backpack, which hangs crookedly on his back.

What else you got in there, Lannie says.

Supplies, Jeremy says earnestly, but a second later he cracks a grin, showing his gap. Back in the fifth grade, he would have kept his mouth straight; he would have laid each item out to show her.

Lannie takes the map in her hand and turns it over. On the back, there is another drawing, done up in ballpoint pen: a girl with freckles dotting her heart-shaped face.

Jeremy tugs the envelope from her fingers and tucks it away neatly.

You ready, Lannie Bishop, he says

Lannie frowns.

She does not like the way he holds her whole name in his mouth.

Lannie tries to settle into riding, but her bike seems to have shrunk, or else she has grown too quickly. Pedaling hurts her knees. She suspects that she is ruining herself in some permanent way that she feels powerless to fix.

Even so, Lannie is faster than Jeremy. He falls behind as she muscles up a hill. They bike through one subdivision strung to another, then cross a bigger road. Jeremy calls directions from behind her, until winded they arrive at a clump of gray apartment buildings.

Jeremy has written down the building number on the envelope, but he is not sure which door. We could call, Jeremy says, but Lannie does not want to use her cell-phone. It is for 'emergencies only.' Her mother would ask about the call when the bill came. So they leave their bikes and knock on several doors. No one answers until they reach the highest landing.

Man oh man, am I glad to see you, Jeremy says.

It is hotter on the top floor of the apartment building. The boy standing in a doorway is stocky with a big head and acne scars along his cheeks. Behind him Lannie can see fans on high rattling in windows.

Hey Ray, it's me: Jeremy.

The boy is barefoot and shirtless, wearing only ragged cut-offs; the inner white pockets flapping out at his thighs.

You know: Swiftfoot, Jeremy says. Av-e clan. The boy's face doesn't

change. Lannie clutches at her elbows.

C'mon, I'm Samuel's brother, Jeremy says, and finally the boy animates; he shakes his big head, grinning, as if just remembering something funny and wrong.

Oh, Sly's kid brother, the boy laughs. Still he does not move from the doorway.

You said you could drop us off today at, you know, the store we talked about.

Today?

Yeah, today. Don't you remember?

With that, Jeremy steps forward, wriggling into the apartment, leaving a space so that Lannie can enter too.

There are two girls sitting on the bed in Ray's room. It takes Lannie a moment to realize that one of them is her neighbor. Sara's hair is different, lighter in streaks. Her face is very tan except around her eyes: a sunglasses-shaped paleness. There are ovals of pink peeling skin on her shoulders.

Lannie starts to say hi, but she catches herself. She decides she will wait for Sara to speak. Sara is wearing cut-offs, too, and a pink halter, her boobs cradled in the two small triangles of fabric.

Who are they? the other girl says, jabbing a finger towards Lannie. She was one of the girl's on Sara's patio, the tall girl with dark wavy hair. Today her

hair is up in a high ponytail, like those Barbie heads where you pull hard and synthetic locks comes out in lengths. The dark-haired girl narrows her eyes at Lannie, gesturing with the can of beer in her hand.

Another beer sits open on the windowsill near Sara. It probably belongs to Ray, Lannie thinks, or maybe it's empty and has been sitting there forever.

Lannie watches Sara look through the whirring window-fan at blurred slices of the parking lot. She notices how Ray is watching too.

Hello Ray, the dark-haired girl says. That was a question. She snaps her fingers in front of his pockmarked face.

Chill out, already, Girl, he says.

He gulps down the rest of a beer, crushes the can, and starts to rifle through pockets of clothing covering the floor.

I'm just saying: who are these babies anyway? If I'd wanted a bunch of babies tagging along, I would've brought my kid sister. The dark-haired girl blinks angrily. Thick mascara coats in clumps on her lashes.

Ray laughs but only because he has found his wallet, a set of car keys chained to them. He pulls on a t-shirt. I'm just dropping them off. No big deal, he says.

But it is a big deal because Lannie's mother has warned her that she should not, under any circumstances, get in a car with someone who has been drinking. If she does, she'll end up dead on the side of the road, with everybody discussing her stupidity at great length.

You said you were taking us to the river, the dark-haired girl says, darting in very close to Ray. Like a reflex he grabs her elbow, quick and strong.

Owwweee, she says.

Lannie is afraid that when he lets go, the dark-haired girl will say something more. Then Ray will start explaining. And Sara will find out where he is taking them. But instead, when Ray lets go, the dark-haired girl rubs her elbow silently.

Ray ushers everyone out of his room and out of the apartment, leaving the fans to turn over hot air. On the way down the stairs, he leans into the dark-haired girl's peach-colored face.

Don't worry baby. I'll drop you off first and be right back. His voice is slippery and low.

At the landing, Lannie runs her hands over her pockets. Her cell-phone is missing; she must have set it down somewhere. She feels like big baby, but she has to find it, so she asks Jeremy, pulling him back by his sleeve. Jeremy tells Ray but Ray just shakes his big head. You think I'm walking up all those stairs again in this heat? Then Sara says, Give me the keys. I'll take her.

They find the phone on the bureau. On their way back downstairs, Sara stops Lannie before the last floor.

Hold up a sec, Lannie, Sara says. Lannie turns and Sara peers steadily into her eyes.

I'm going to tell you something. She touches Lannie's shoulder. But you absolutely cannot ever tell another living soul.

Lannie promises she will not tell: not now, not ever. She looks up at Sara, crossing her heart with her finger.

Don't do that.

Do what?

Don't do that cross your heart thing.

Then Sara leans in closer to Lannie, whispering. The thing is, Sara whispers, someone special has been emailing me...

A boy, Lannie interrupts, but Sara just shakes her head, bright hair falling over her mostly tanned face.

My mother.

Your mom? I don't get it. Why can't she just talk to you regular, like mine does to me?

No, listen, Sara says, blowing air out impatiently; her new bangs fly up like a wing. That woman we live with is not my mother. I'm taking about my real mother, okay?

The two girls stand frozen in the August heat, Sara's long arm extended, her hand resting on Lannie's shoulder blade.

School's starting up again, Sara says, and Lannie says, I know it is.

Tell me, Sara says, what are you and that boy even doing here anyway?

Lannie looks down. She isn't sure what to say. She doesn't say anything.

Finally Sara withdraws her hand. Sara looks out over the ledge, down to the pavement, the waves of heat rising from it.

You know what: this is stupid, Sara says. Just forget this conversation ever happened.

The other kids are waiting on the last landing, just out of the sun. Together, they follow as Ray approaches a battered blue pickup, as if it's a dog he knows but doesn't quite trust. There are inner-tubes lining the truck bed, tied with twine so they won't flop out.

Ray, Sara, and the dark-haired girl sit up front, leaving Lannie and Jeremy to hoist the bicycles up. They pull and push and struggle at it before squeezing in themselves. Then Ray turns the key and truck rumbles to life. They drive through town, cross the railroad tracks, then turn onto Route 20, which winds and turns. Wedged in an inner-tube, Lannie bounces and grips the side of the truck. Her hair whips back and her voice vibrates in her chest before getting swept away with the wind. She is thinking, Please God, don't let me throw up.

At the same time, Sara's secret gusts around inside her. Maybe she should have said something different on the landing, but even so... Lannie keeps her eyes on Sara, sure that Sara will give some sign of their new connection. All the windows are down and Sara's hair is blowing around, too. Sara turns and looks back once, but she doesn't look at Lannie exactly. She just looks at the road, disappearing behind them; she pulls a tangle of hair from her mouth.

A few miles into the state park, they slow and pull off at small gravel lot. The dark-haired girl wants Ray to carry the cooler and the supplies to the river. Ray tells Jeremy to sit tight, then the older kids disappear down a shady path.

Some ride, huh? Jeremy tells Lannie, wiping his hands on his shorts. I thought I was going to barf or something. Jeremy jumps out, and starts lifting up rocks around the parking area. Look! Black fly larvae, he calls.

Great, Lannie says. She flips open her cell phone. It's two o'clock already.

When Ray gets back, he tells Lannie and Jeremy to sit up front. Nice and cozy, he says. The pickup has a single bucket seat and Lannie ends up in the middle. She finds herself studying the sore-looking places along Ray's jaw. He catches her and she looks down quickly, sure that Ray will laugh at her. He looks ready to laugh—his mouth open, his tongue waiting---but no sound comes out. Jeremy starts to talk about World of Warcraft, and Lannie is sure Ray will tell him to chill out already. Instead, Ray pokes her arm with his beer can.

I know you want some, girl, he says.

Lannie swallows hard. She does not want some. Besides, she knows that if she has any beer, when the car crashes, when they find her body, then they'll know she is to blame.

OK, she says, taking the can, just feeling Ray's fingers leave it. She brings it to her mouth, sips. Warm yeasty liquid expands in her throat. The pick-up bounces down the road.

How about you, Lil' Sly? Ray says to Jeremy. But Jeremy is staring bug-

eyed at Lannie. Jeremy says, No thank you. I don't like the taste of beer; actually I'm allergic to it. Lannie glares at Jeremy, embarrassed by him, or envious.

Ray takes a sip himself and nestles the can between his thighs. He drives slowly, carefully down the two-lane road with pine trees shooting up on either side of it. They do not crash or veer or swerve, even as Ray lights a cigarette.

At the store Ray helps them take their bikes down. We'll see you back at four-thirty sharp, Jeremy says, pushing his glasses back up the slope of his nose.

About that—Ray says, leaning against the truck bed. I've gotta get back to those girlies. You know how it is.

Jeremy shakes his head like no, he doesn't know. His hair is damp now. His face shines with new sweat. A few clear beads streak down his cheeks, which are darker tan with dust and dirt.

This is pretty much a pain in my ass, Ray says, driving you all over.

It's not 'all over,' Jeremy says. And you said you would drive us and pick us up. With that, Jeremy reaches into his backpack. Lannie thinks he will pull out proof, maybe copies of emails exchanged. Instead Jeremy just pulls out a bandana, runs it over his face.

Actually, Rays says, I could use some gas money, Swiftfoot.

Jeremy shakes his head like he cannot believe it. Then he reaches in his backpack and hands over a few ruffled bills, which Ray smooths out.

Christ, what's this, Ray says. I thought we were friends. He turns to

Lannie. C'mon girl, he says.

Lannie feels sick from the car-ride, the smell of gasoline. Warm beer slides around in her stomach. She pulls out the last of her birthday money, and places all but a few dollars in Ray's open palm. He counts it and lets out a big laugh, held over from earlier.

Hell, maybe I will come back, he says, sliding into the pick-up. Yeah, maybe those girlies'll get bored at the river and I can drop them off and come back for you guys.

Maybe, Ray calls again as the truck pulls back onto the narrow, gray road.

Clive's Country Store is crowded with racks of dream catchers, Indian princess statuettes, and 'Virginia is for Lovers' T-shirts. A huge jar of hard-boiled eggs, swimming in red liquid, sits on the counter. Not like the Quik-Mart, Lannie thinks. She refills their water bottles at the tap over the rust-stained sink and uses that last of her money to buy saltines.

When she walks back outside, Jeremy is standing straight over his bicycle. He has rolled up the already short sleeves of his t-shirt; his arms are too thin. He looks at Lannie. His glasses slip, but he doesn't right them.

What, she says.

He doesn't answer.

That drawing on the envelope↓that was me, wasn't it?

Jeremy doesn't look away. He says he draws everybody, all the time.

Lannie and Jeremy both point the noses of their bicycles westward. West, Lannie thinks, for real. We will bike a mile easy, swim through cool water, bike back and Ray will be waiting. He will have me home before my mom knows I was gone.

Okay. I'm ready. Let's go, she says.

Hills rise before them. Going west, the road narrows and winds through meadows. Black cows congregate under scarce shade trees, looking like shadows. Lannie waits at the top of the hill whenever Jeremy has to walk his bike up. The sound of their breathing mixes with the chirps of insects in the tall grass. Clouds gather and part, gather and part, as if they cannot make up their minds.

Out of nowhere Jeremy's odometer beeps, startling Lannie. A mile exactly, Jeremy chirps excitedly. The two of them slow and stop at the top of the hill. Lannie can only see more hills, more fences, more grass, in every direction. Jeremy takes off his glasses, cleans them on his shirt, puts them back on.

Where is it, he says. The rock? The water?

They bike up the next hill, which is higher, so they can get a better view. Lannie shields her eyes from the glare with her hand. She looks out at the countryside, a bowl around them.

This is weird, Jeremy says. I still don't see any of our landmarks.

I'm an idiot, Lannie whispers to herself. A total complete idiot.

You're not—

Lannie looks down. It's not here, okay, she says hoarsely.

Of course it's here, Jeremy says brightly. It's gotta be. This thing is probably just broken, Lannie. He pushes at the buttons at his handlebars as if everything is his fault somehow. This thing probably just needs to be recalibrated. I should of thought of that beforehand.

No, Lannie says. But Jeremy is still fidgeting with the odometer, trying to set it right. You don't understand. We have to go back now, okay?

We can't go back.

I'm going back.

Saying this, Lannie feels dizzy. She tries keep steady, but her voice wavers. She sounds like she is about to cry. She pulls out her cell phone, flips it open. No signal. Hot tears run down her checks.

Jeremy takes a small sip of water, mumbling softly that his bottle is nearly empty. He reaches out to touch her arm, but stops short.

I sure hope it doesn't rain, he says looking up into the sky. Seriously. His shirt is plastered with sweat to his skin. Lannie can feel him looking at her; he is smiling goofily, revealing his gap, trying like anything to make her smile.

Let's stick together and go just a little farther, he says. I've got a feeling. He laughs a short snort and rubs his shiny forehead with his palm. Lannie tries to laugh too, but it comes out thin and watery sounding.

Twenty minutes later, Lannie sees it: a gray rock the size of a jungle gym coming out of a field of weedy white flowers. There is a pool of water tucked beside it. It looks both ordinary and out of place. They ditch their bikes by the road.

Running up to it, Lannie is surprised by all the litter: crushed cans, candy wrappers, and a girl's tank top, muddy and rotting. On the backside, the stone is flat as a chalkboard and scarred up with initials and claims of true love. Both Lannie and Jeremy circle the rock, in opposite directions, ending up in front of the water just as it starts to rain: a few cold, hard drops.

I wasn't sure if it was east or west, she says.

We're here now. Jeremy uses a bottle to push cigarette butts out of the water.

What if we freeze to death and drown, Lannie says.

If we freeze to death, we can't drown.

How would they find our bodies?

C'mon, Jeremy says.

With that, Jeremy starts to shed his t-shirt. His chest is paler than his arms. Beneath his oversized t-shirt, he is thin except for a slouching softness at his middle. Lannie starts to look away as he steps out of his shorts, but he has on a bathing suit bottoms underneath.

You're not planning on wearing all those clothes now are you? he says, looking at Lannie. Clothes are dangerous in the water; they only weigh you

down.

Lannie decides, even so, she will keep her clothes on. She will not, under any circumstances, undress in front of Jeremy Ryder, who is weird, and goofy, and not even her friend. Or at least didn't used to be. She squints at the view of the gray road leading west, leading back.

Lannie starts to undress slowly, in denial. With her back to Jeremy, she takes off socks, shoes, shorts, and finally her t-shirt. She hunches her shoulders to shield herself as she turns to face him in her flowered underwear, and the stretchy cotton bra she didn't even own a month before, her house key sticking at her throat.

Jeremy trains his eyes on her face as if aiming for a target. Color flares up in his face: deep blood red. He fidgets with his backpack, pulling out supplies. He places two flashlights and some clothing into a Ziploc and then a trash-bag. They leave other things—her cell phone, his glasses, their socks and shoes—in his backpack under a shelf of rock.

The rain is coming in earnest now. Raindrops go plunk, bouncing off of the pool of water, which is the size of their arms linked together along with Ray and Sara and the dark-haired girl. Lannie thinks of school starting in just a few days now. She thinks of her mother saying, Don't you know all that can happen to a girl out there on her own.

Lannie has no idea what might happen. She dips her foot into the water. Goose bumps break out all over her skin.

The pool is deep; the bottom drops quickly. They tread water, drifting under the shelf of rock with just a few feet of space above their heads. In front of them, the mouth of the cave slopes into the icy water.

I can't hardly see anything down there, Jeremy says, shivering; his teeth knocking violently, making new, unnatural syllables in his words.

Lannie's blood inside her feels electric. She is treading, frantic circular movements. The water is so cold it burns. It's here, Lannie says, her voice echoing. She grabs for Jeremy's hand. They gulp hot air and force themselves underneath.

Lannie is kicking fiercely underwater. Her body shudders as she swims. She searches with her free hand, every few strokes, for the top of the channel. Reaching up for the third time, she grazes her knuckle. The water-softened skin scrapes clean away.

How much farther? How much farther, How much? Lannie thinks.

She keeps swimming. More air escapes her mouth and nose. She swims like she is some prehistoric creature making for the first shore, except she needs to breathe in. Behind her, Jeremy is pulling back, digging his nails into her palm.

We're going to die, Lannie thinks. For real. It's too far now, either way.

Air! Lannie thinks. The idea of air pushes every other thought from her head. She swims. She wants to breathe in. Then her hand plunges unexpectedly

into openness.

She bursts out of the water first with Jeremy just behind her. They paddle forward, their heads at the surface like turtles, until they can stand. They stand, half out of the water, their inhales vibrating thick, cold darkness.

After a moment, Lannie can hear Jeremy struggling with the garbage bag, the flashlights. A fragile beam of light extends into dark.

They scurry onto a sandy area that rises out of the water and slip on dry t-shirts and shorts that Jeremy has brought; even so Lannie can feel the wetness of her underclothes leaking through at her chest and crotch. Underground the season has shifted; it would be better to have sweaters, long pants, socks and shoes.

Jeremy hands Lannie the second flashlight. Two weak beams bounce around in the dark. Lannie shudders, shocked that this space exists hidden beneath the rock, the field. It is an enormous room with slick mud walls, a maze of tunnels leading a million mysterious ways.

Man oh man, Jeremy says.

They venture forward, each on their own, careful to stay within a few feet of one another. Jeremy's breathing is loud, ragged, so Lannie tries to compensate by quieting her own heart. I'm alive, she thinks, feeling her bare feet mark the cave's muddy floor. Her hand trails along a stretch of wall. She turns her light on the slick surface, half expecting to discover hieroglyphics there.

Instead she sees a cluster of bats on an overhang, small as insects, clinging

by their feet. Hey, look at this! she says.

Lannie hears Jeremy coming up close behind her, his raspy breathing. The dry sleeve of his t-shirt brushes against her wet arm. With two fingers, he touches a bare place just below her neck where her key hangs, where the bone juts out. Lannie keeps the dim circle of light on the plain cave wall even as Jeremy Ryder presses his cold wet lips against her cheek. She can tell that he is smiling because she feels the imprint of his teeth and the space between. Something at her throat quickens; something in her stomach and lower wakes and uncoils. No one has ever been here before, she thinks.

She turns towards Jeremy and waits.

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