

A misty forest scene with a person's silhouette in the foreground and light filtering through the trees. The person is standing with their back to the camera, looking into the distance. The trees are tall and thin, with bare branches. The light is soft and golden, creating a dreamy atmosphere.

light beneath ferns

anne
spollen

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not the first chapter

This story does not teach a lesson. It does not explain gravity or the pack rituals of wolves or how the sun will explode one day and leave us all inside a gray welt of ice and famine. It will not make you popular or get you invitations to parties, if you are after that sort of thing. If death and the dead make you afraid, you better just stop reading and go take a nap. If bones scare you, you cannot read this book. At all. Because really, things started happening just a little after I found that bone.

You should also know that this story doesn't begin at the beginning. Really, nothing does. And don't believe people who tell you that's how the world works. My story goes sideways, like all stories. I pick the parts that I want to be the beginning, the middle, and the end because nothing ever happens in order; we just pretend it does. Everything happens more like a rainstorm with wind and lightning and confusion all happening at once, and none of it is divided into sections.

I am not going to tell you a lot about me in the beginning like other girl narrators because I am nothing like other girl narrators. If you were smart enough to find this book, and find me, you can figure out how I am without being told. But I will tell you what I am not.

I don't live on a prairie or in the American West or before, during, or after any war that you would find in a history book. I don't like flowers, or save small animals; I don't have whimsical adventures that end neatly with a moral. I don't locate lost children. In fact, I'm not even fond of small children. I don't solve mysteries or fix what's broken. I don't scare easily, but I am not noble in the least.

Usually, when stuff scares me, I avoid it. I also don't believe in courage. I think it is a radically misunderstood, applauded form of suicide. And I don't wish I lived anywhere else, even though we live on the edge of a graveyard.

The graveyard, Wenspaugh Rural Cemetery, is in my mother's hometown in upstate New York (or at least, in the town she moved to when she was about nine years old). When we moved back, she got a job as the cemetery caretaker. Some people live on the edge of a lake or a town or a meadow. We live on the edge of a cemetery.

You're thinking, "Oh, she lives on the edge of a cemetery and that's how and why she found the bone." And I already warned you that stories do not go in order like that. The graveyard, in the end, had nothing to do with me finding the bone.

Not a thing.

september

The high school is being painted so we have to go to the elementary school for ninth grade registration. The hallways have that ghosted, vacant feel of late summer with boxes towered high and a yellowish, drifting scent of wax. The classrooms are painted in colors so bright and glossy that the walls seem to chirp. And, unlike my old school, almost every classroom has a birdcage hanging from one corner. There are no birds in the cages today; there are no kids either. I try not to think how the kids are like the birds, only instead of cages, the kids are locked into classrooms.

The next day, the high school has the same smell as the elementary school, only the classrooms are not painted as brightly and there are no birdcages. Each day, the smell grows fainter. I follow my schedule during those first two weeks, while the smell of newness fades, managing to speak only a few words. Then in science, in the middle of the third week, Ms. Poulle calls on me.

“Elizah.” She says this in a bright, expectant voice, and I wonder what, exactly, will happen to me if I don’t answer. But she doesn’t pause to wait for me. “Elizah, please turn around and face me.” I continue looking out the window toward the mountains that hem Wenspaugh. I notice dark patches with jagged edges on the mountain face, and I realize the patches are clouds overhead, blocking the sun.

“Elizah,” she says again. “Since we are discussing community and habitat, it would be interesting if you could offer some comment on how you see us as a community here in Wenspaugh. It’s not often we get to feast on new blood here.”

I like that she used the word *blood*, but I still don’t want to answer her.

“You see, Elizah, the quiet students always intrigue me,” Ms. Poulle says as she walks right over to me, eclipsing my view of the outside. “I always wonder what’s going on with them. There has to be *something* going on inside all that quietness. Nature abhors a vacuum, Elizah, and so do I. So, what so far has stricken you about Wenspaugh, about us, our schools? Because sometimes it’s so difficult to see how we appear to others, isn’t that right?”

She waits.

“So what do you think of us, Elizah?”

I have no choice but to answer, with her standing over me, and I remember the birds trapped in cages. So I tell Ms. Poulle about the birdcages down at the elementary school and my theory of how students are chained inside school rooms like those birds, and how looking at the mountains right now reminds me of those cages because they are surrounding us.

“Well, Elizah, that’s an interesting take. I do think all of us live inside a cage of some kind or another. Maybe the trick is not minding your cage so much. Or maybe even liking it.”

I look back outside after she walks away, waiting for the bell to ring for lunch. Normally at lunch, I sit in a corner of the cafeteria and do homework so I can have time to myself after school. Only that day, a group of girls from the class comes up to me at lunch and begins telling me what a good question they thought I gave Ms. Poulle, and acting like I want to discuss something with them. I remind them that it was a statement, not a question; then I endure their laughter.

“She is like the weirdest teacher in the school, Ms. Poulle,” Brittany, clearly the alpha girl of the pack, says. She touches my shoulder as she says this, the white tips of her manufactured nail tips grazing me. “You know, she keeps pig babies in jars in that room. Can you imagine? Pig babies. Clearly the weirdest teacher.”

“She has one pig fetus,” I remind Brittany. “She’s a science teacher. She’s supposed to have it. It would only be weird if she had a pig fetus in formaldehyde and she was teaching French.”

“Oh, she’s just odd is all,” Brittany says, ignoring logic. The two girls next to her, slightly smaller Brittany replications, laugh. At that moment, a lunch monitor comes over to me with a pass to Mrs. Daytner’s office.

“Use the exit under the clock,” the woman says to me. “And no talking in the

hallways.”

“Right,” I say, since I have spoken maybe seventy-five words since the first day of school three weeks ago.

The guidance office is near a bank of windows, and I stand there watching clouds bang into the mountains until a custodian snarls something at me about making smudges on the glass. I enter, wondering why these places always have a hushed, muted feel, like entering a fish tank.

Mrs. Daytner is waiting for me at the threshold of her private office. “You must be Elizah Rayne.”

I look at her. She is tall and narrow with a small round head. She reminds me of an inverted exclamation point. Thinking this, I smile and say, “Yes. I’m Elizah Rayne.”

She ushers me in and we sit across from one another. No one says anything for a few seconds.

Mrs. Daytner’s hands are folded on her pale blue desk blotter. Two rows of plants obediently bloom behind her. Through the window behind her, I see kids playing soccer out on the field. Everything orderly, everything predictable. “Well, you know why you’re here, don’t you, Elizah?”

“This is a counseling office,” I say. “So I would assume it’s for counseling of some kind.”

“Yes. Wenspaugh is a difficult place in many ways,” Mrs. Daytner says. “Many of these students, most in fact, have been together since kindergarten. I would imagine it’s difficult for a quiet student to make friends here.” Her hair is cut so when she angles her head, it moves together in one jaw-length chunk. I think about how the kids in this school move together in one group, in one force, like a wave traveling around the ocean. When you think about it, waves never go anywhere. They just loop and loop around the globe, all connected and blunt in force, and they never leave the ocean except to go up into the atmosphere to do the same thing again. And again.

A meteorite travels alone.

So does a falling star.

And you remember them.

“What are you thinking about right now, Elizah?”

She waits. A ticking sound fills the air. Even the kids on the field stop moving.
“Elizah?”

“I’m thinking how I want to call you Mrs. Daytime instead of Mrs. Daytner. It suits you more.”

She smiles. “That’s fine, if that’s how you want to establish control. Tell me, Elizah, are you finding it difficult here, the adjustment?”

“Not really. But my mother thinks I am. She told me she was going to call you. Well, not you, specifically. She just said someone at the school. To help me with the transition and all.”

Daytime nods, and I notice small rills of darkness around each of her nostrils. I keep staring at the darkness staining the paleness of her skin. “Your mother is very worried about you.”

“Did she say what she’s worried about? Specifically?”

“Well, it’s the same as what your teachers have been telling me. You are very quiet in school, Elizah. Sort of detached socially. Molly, ah, your mother, mentioned that you said you don’t intend to make any friends here. Made a statement to that effect.”

We watch each other for a few more seconds. “Have you met my mother?”

“Not in person. We’ve emailed each other and spoken twice on the phone.”

I nod. The bell rings, and it occurs to me that talking to her might be a good way to miss the first half of English. “My mother is not exactly the belle of the ball, you know. She goes shopping at four o’clock in the morning at the all-night supermarket so she doesn’t have to see anyone. And she did all her Christmas shopping on the Internet.”

“Right. So she’s in a position to understand your social anxiety.”

“Is that what I have? Because I’m quiet?”

Daytime gives me this tiny twist of a smile, as if she is sucking on a lemon and has just come to a particularly tart spot. “I think, most likely, you have some form of social anxiety, yes.”

“So do extroverts have something wrong with them, too? You know, like a lack of boundaries?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean ... what I mean is the way they prattle on and on, mostly about

themselves, what has happened to them, what they think, all of that even when you don't want to listen. And even if you're clear about not wanting to listen. You can look away or up at the ceiling and they keep going. They lack a filter that tells them when their audience is exhausted by them. Maybe it's some form of social compulsion to just talk on and on like that. Maybe extroverts could use a little social anxiety."

Daytime sighs. "Elizah. I'm here to help."

"I'm being serious. And why don't I feel anxious if I have social anxiety? Why do I feel normal?"

"It becomes normal after a certain amount of time. Or you think it's normal. It's not easy to move to a new state, to begin school where you don't know anyone. So maybe being silent feels normal to you."

"So, can anything become normal after a certain amount of time? Anything at all?"

"Not anything. I meant certain behaviors. In a way, we all become accustomed to ourselves, to our routines, to our modes of being. One of the benefits of counseling is to make you more aware of your ... well ... " She laughs, a dry little breath closer to gasping than breathing. "Of your patterns. And we all have patterns."

"Like wolves."

"Excuse me?"

"Never mind."

Daytime looks down at her paperwork. "I'd like to meet with you once a week beginning next week, but first I have to ask you a few questions. Let me just find my list here."

I don't believe the whole thing she said about patterns and getting used to them. Not at all. During the three weeks before we moved, time traveled backwards and sideways and none of it felt normal. We floated inside an underwater place where nothing seemed real. That was probably because after my father left, we adopted the sleep/wake cycle of hamsters.

At ten in the morning, my mother and I went to bed with the curtains drawn against the sun, and the phone on the battery charger so it couldn't ring. We got up at six o'clock in the evening with the curtains still drawn. We kept putting our

things in boxes and moving the boxes into the garage, except we were still living in the house, emptying it piece by piece until the garage grew impacted and lightless with towers of boxes. Our space, where we had once lived our lives, grew vacant as a canyon.

On one of those mornings, my mother looked at me and whispered, “The movers will come after we are in Wenspaugh.” We were sitting on the kitchen floor at dawn. We were having dinner. I remember thinking, I cannot say goodbye to anyone here, not my friends, not my teachers, no one. I have become a living ghost in the place where I was born, in the only place I have ever known.

All because of what my father had done.

“Elizah,” Daytime says, interrupting my memory, “it says here on the form that your father is not living with you. And your mother is not sure where he is. Is that right?” She opens her eyes very wide as she says this.

“If it’s on the form, it must be true.”

“I see. Perhaps we can begin here.” Daytime taps her pen on the form. “Tell me, how does that make you feel, that your father is not living with you?”

“I guess I feel all right.”

“I’m not sure what ‘all right’ means, Elizah.”

“It means shit happens.” I wait for Daytime’s expression to change after I say that, but she keeps sitting there, her eyes still open wide as if she is slowly, silently being electrocuted. I sort of like that thought so I smile.

“Yes, it certainly does happen.” She smiles back at me. “But what do you mean right now by saying that—that it happens?”

“I mean it doesn’t matter how I feel. How I feel won’t change what happens or what did happen.”

Daytime dims her eyes to show understanding, and I remember this animal documentary we saw in science last year about behaviors that are supposed to make the other animals not afraid of you. Daytime dims her eyes in a way that reminds me of a wolf exposing an underbelly.

“Maybe,” Daytime says with her eyes all soft, “you could tell me how you feel about not knowing where your dad is.”

“All I know is we don’t know if he’s dead or away. Mom says he is living inside darkness.”

“Living inside darkness. What do you feel when you think of that image? Does it worry you?”

“I think he’s probably all right. Worms live inside darkness all the time and they do just fine.”

“Worms. I see. Do you miss your father?”

I shrug my shoulders. “It’s like he was never around when I was little. Not that much or anything, and now that he’s missing, it’s like, doncha miss him, Elizah, well, doncha? Like it’s not all right not to miss him. Or I don’t miss him enough, or something.”

Daytime puts her pen down. “It is perfectly fine not to miss him, Elizah. Emotions do not have a right or a wrong.” She keeps looking at me. “Elizah, where do you think your father is? Just a guess now.”

“Probably on an Indian reservation.”

“Why would you say that?”

“Because gambling is legal there.”

❦

The next day at lunch, Brittany and her friends come over to me while I am reading.

“So what happened in the counseling office?” Brittany asks. Her eyelashes remind me of spider legs, mascara freezing each one into a curve that delicately arcs into the air, like a spider leg extending out from a web.

“She taught me how to say *Go Away* in seven different languages.”

This makes Brittany and her friends go all electric with laughter. I get up and go to the bathroom, where I spend the remainder of the period watching water drip through a liver-colored patch on the ceiling. For the rest of the day, whenever I see Brittany or any of her satellites, they smile and wink at me in a way that makes them look as if they’re recovering from exposure to nerve gas.

❦

That night, before dinner, while the kitchen fills with heavy, golden light, my mother asks me about Daytime. “She called and said you had your first session

yesterday. How was it?”

“Mostly we talked about worms.”

My mother looks out the window. “I wish you would let people help you.”

“I don’t want help.” Mom keeps looking out the window, looking up at the trees that line the entrance to the cemetery. They are tall and filled with amber leaves that have a strange kind of ripeness to them, as if in dying they’ve discovered an enhanced level of energy.

I watch my mother from the wideboard kitchen table. She still hasn’t turned to face me. “I don’t see why I need to sit there and talk to that plank.”

“She is not a plank. She is a perfectly bright and balanced woman with an interest in the paranormal. She told me this cemetery is haunted.”

“Oh, now that’s original. A haunted cemetery. Words from a plank.”

“Elizah, she’s there to help.”

“She doesn’t know me. How could she possibly want to help me?”

My mother turns from the window, blinks for a few minutes, then moves a box onto the floor. Most of our stuff is still in boxes from the move. We just circle around them, and every time we open them, we look inside at the jars and spoons and magazines, then close the flaps again. This is how we packed, my mother and I, over those three weeks—like peasants fleeing a scourge of plague. Shirts in with food, socks and slippers lining boxes of photographs, soap in with the sheets.

“Mrs. Daytner told me there’s a man named Jonas Martleby who walks around the cemetery.” Mom’s eyebrows go up as she says this; it’s the face she used to make when I was little and she thought something was scary.

I look at my mother, standing there moving boxes around without accomplishing anything. She has glasses on top of her head, and glasses hanging from a chain on her neck, and she still sees nothing.

“I cannot imagine anything more thrilling than seeing a ghost or a spirit. What an amazing idea.” She takes two bowls out of a box filled with sweaters, then closes the box again.

“So he’s a ghost, this Jonas? People have seen him?”

“Apparently. I, personally, have never seen him, mind you, but Ella says there have been all kinds of reports that people have seen him walking around the cemetery. I don’t think I would be scared if I saw a ghost or a spirit; I think I would

be really kind of excited.”

“At least most people would leave me alone if I were dead.”

Mom puts the two bowls inside the box again. “Now, Elizah, what kind of statement, exactly, is that? What am I supposed to think of that now? You tell me.”

“The trouble, Mom, is that I don’t want to hang out with any of the kids here. I like to be alone. And that seems to be a problem here in Wenspaugh. I just don’t have any interest in knowing the people in my school.” I get up and start clearing the table.

“You should have friends. Everyone needs friends.” My mother takes a second box down and leaves it next to the first.

“You have no friends, Mom. I hate to break it to you.”

“I’m going to get friends, though. Mrs. Daytner invited me to join a paranormal group she’s a member of, and I said yes. I even offered to host some of the events here. I want friends, now. Now that ... ” She rubs the chain holding her glasses as if it’s an amulet. What she doesn’t say is, now that Dad is gone, now that we have a chance at a normal life. Instead, she pats the top of the second box and goes into the living room where she turns the radio on so she doesn’t have to think about anything that’s already happened, or how we can’t fix it.

river, leaves

The next Saturday morning it's warm and my mother is sitting at her computer when I walk into the living room. She looks up at me. "Remember I told you I joined that paranormal group Ella Daytner belongs to?"

"Yeah. So they found ghosts inside your computer? Is that why you're telling me?"

"Stop. We're going to have a meeting of people interested in the paranormal. I'm hosting it."

I smile. "Do they know you have the social habits of octopi living in a cave?"

"Stop, Elizah. I'm trying to change all that. By the way, Mrs. Daytner is one of the people coming. Ella Daytner. She's a lovely person. Oh, when we spoke yesterday, she told me about your assignment."

I pull my favorite green shirt out of a box filled with canned tomatoes.

"Daytime cannot give me an assignment. She's not a teacher."

"All she asked is if you could just think of reasons you want to be alone and you guys could talk about them at your next session. Just think about it, Elizah. You say you like to be alone, and she wants to know if you can say why you prefer it. That shouldn't be hard."

I nod. "Fine." I put one of my mother's soy-flour pancakes onto a plate and sit on the couch near her desk.

"So you'll think about why you aren't making any friends or speaking to anyone in school?"

“Yup.”

But I already know the answer. I need to be quiet now because other people feel like clutter. I like silence, and long afternoons where I sit watching the river and listening to dogs bark in the distance. And while I’m quiet, I have this strange sense that I’m preparing for something I can’t name.

But I will never say this to Daytime. Instead, I’ll make something up. I like to lie to people who think they can find truths. Like truth is that easy to exhume.

My mother frowns at the computer screen, then whispers something toward the keyboard.

“It’s not enchanted, you know, that computer. It won’t listen.”

“I know that.” She clicks her mouse three times in a row. “Elizah, Mrs. Daytner says she also wants you to think of positive interests that you have. You know, things you like to participate in.”

“Being alone.”

“Aside from that.” My mother taps the *enter* key, then curses very softly.

I like bones. I wonder if I can tell Daytime that. I particularly like bird bones. When my father was still around, we hunted for fallen birds. He knew how to submerge the bodies in an acid solution so the feathers soaked off, but the bones, particularly the wing bones, my favorites, stayed intact. Wing bones are incredibly delicate, and incredibly intricate at the same time. When you hold them up to the sky, they look like they are in flight. Wing bones are prizes. So when we found a bird, my father would dunk it into a vat and save the bones for me.

After I painted the bones, my mother and I would brush clear varnish over the paint and make jewelry. The wing bones made the most beautiful pieces: thinly delicate as veins, they looked like pieces of fire falling from the sky. I have close to fifty brooches made from bird bones, but I don’t make them anymore even though there are a lot of dead birds around the edges of this graveyard. My mother thinks that’s because they can smell death in the soil.

“I’ll tell her how much I like bones, Mom. There’s an interest.”

My mother leans over from the desk and tries to poke me in the side with her finger. “No. You can’t tell her that, and you know it. Elizah, do you ever think about how I don’t need you to make all this more difficult than it already is for me?”

For her. Because for me, it's all so easy.

"Why can't I tell her about the bones?"

"Elizah." Mom clicks at the keyboard, then turns to look at me. "Bones are probably not the best subject for a girl who lives on cemetery property to discuss. People will think it's weird, that you're weird, that we're odd people. And that's precisely what we don't want. We had enough of that in Queensport."

"Oh, okay. So if I don't talk about bones, no one will think of me as weird. Is that all I have to do? Wow, life is much easier now that we've moved. Much, much easier."

"There you go, Elizah, making things more complicated than they have to be."

"Right. So I pretend I'm into ... like, scrapbooking or stuffed animals. I basically lie so people will like me. I got it now, Mom."

My mother shakes her head back and forth several times, but says nothing.

"Bones," my mother says finally, "make most people upset."

"So it's not okay that I like bones?"

"I'm not saying that. Just, please, Elizah, think of something else."

I am not a girl who is squeamish about bones.

Please.

So maybe on that Saturday morning, right after sitting on the couch eating soy pancakes with honey and organic blueberries, telling my mother how I might tell Daytime how much I liked bones, maybe on that day, it all began.

Maybe.

Or maybe it began decades ago when the owner of the bone died.

I don't know. No one does.

Anyway, after I wash the breakfast dishes and my mother arranges for a medium to come to her paranormal meeting, our doorbell rings. When we lived in Queensport, my parents ignored the doorbell, and the phone. They would just keep putting towels into the linen closet or reading the newspaper while the people stood on the front stoop or the phone rang on and on.

"It's our house," they would say. "No one has the right to ring a bell and demand our time like that."

Neighbors would look at us unloading groceries from the car the way most people would look at aliens debarking from a pod. Even waving was out of the

question.

But here my mother has to answer the door; she would lose her job if she didn't, and we would lose our rent-free house. That morning, while I'm getting dressed, I overhear the conversation, and I can tell there are genealogists talking to my mother.

Genealogists are always coming to the graveyard to trace their families. They sit for hours in the tiny front office, not minding the stained, orange-cushioned furniture that the town historical society donated. They sit reading death certificates and drinking coffee. Part of my mother's job is to guide them in their search for graves.

I go outside, into the bright parch of the day, and walk the short distance to the riverbank, close to the oldest section of the graveyard. From here, I can look up into the Shawangunk Mountains where everything burns golden and red. The slow violin of river runs, water sighing over rocks. People in canoes and kayaks, some of them from my school, drift downriver, and when I see them approaching, I lurk behind a boulder so I don't have to talk. I'm doing exactly this, crouching behind the boulder, while two girls from my gym class paddle past me. Their hair, blond and long, is braided and for a minute I smile: Pocahontas gone Nordic.

In my squatting position, my knees start to ache a little so I plop down butt-first, digging my heels into the soil. I look over to see my mother pointing to the nearly abandoned graves in the northernmost corner of the graveyard while the genealogists listen. My heel hits something solid, and I reach down to move the stick and that is when I see it, half covered in the wet, reddish mud that flanks the river.

Except I do not know this is a bone: it looks like a piece of branch, and I immediately like its shape. It reminds me of a bird wing, so I take a scatter of leaves and rub them against the bone to clean off the mud. That's when I see that the stick is not a stick. It's lighter in color and shaped perfectly.

I carry the bone with me back to the house, where I stash it in a paper bag under the sink. The genealogists look up at me as I pass, and I think, once you finish your research, I will begin mine. I don't dare think yet that the bone might be human.

I don't dare.

My mother is sitting at the kitchen table when I come in. “What were you doing down by the river before? I saw you there, crouched like a cougar.”

“There were girls from my school canoeing down the river. I didn’t want to talk to them.” I wash my hands at the sink, careful to pull the left side of my jacket out of my mother’s line of vision so she doesn’t ask what is bulging inside my pocket. I like the lightly firm way the bone presses against my hip, delicate and solid at the same time.

“Do you suppose,” my mother asks as she rises from the table, “that the girls wanted to talk to you?”

“I don’t know. Probably.”

“So then. Think about what you did, your first response. You crouch behind the boulder like an animal, either one who hunts or is hunted ...”

“Wait,” I interrupt. “That’s kind of a huge distinction. Hunter or hunted ...”

“My point,” my mother says, walking over to the small kitchen island, “is that you were behaving by using your animal instincts instead of your human reason. I would think that a girl who is so good at biology, who likes science so much, would rely more on her powers of reason.”

“People can surprise you every day.”

She begins to make me a peanut butter sandwich. I want to tell her that I can do that myself now, but it’s kind of a ritual at this point, my mother making me a peanut butter sandwich while we sit and talk. I take my usual seat at the table and wait for her.

“My point, Elizah, is very simple. Most likely those girls would just wave to you and move on down the river. Do you think they would stop, pull the canoe onto land, and start a conversation with you? Or would they just wave?”

“It doesn’t matter. I just don’t want them to know my spot.”

“Your spot.” My mother squints at me and shakes her head slightly from side to side, as if this gesture will clarify what I have just said. I have seen her strike this exact posture when trying to speak to people who don’t understand English.

“My spot on the river. I don’t want them to expect to see me there. I don’t want to share anything with them.”

“Not even a wave?”

“Nope.”

“That’s how you feel right now. You may feel differently when you get used to the area.” Mom motions outside. “The leaves are changing.” She comes over to the table with my sandwich. “I forgot how much earlier they change now that we’re north.” She puts the plate down, and her eyes are still gazing outside when she says, “You know, there was something else when I was speaking to Mrs. Daytner. She has some real concerns about you.”

“Wait. How did you just go from the leaves to Daytime?”

My mother sighs. “I don’t know, Elizah. I guess the leaves reminded me of how the mountains looked when I lived up here as a kid, and then I thought of school and how you’ve been in school for a month now, and I thought of my conversation with Mrs. Daytner.”

I nod. “So what are her concerns?”

“She thinks you have social issues. Pretty obvious ones.”

“I know that. So did you tell her I’m being raised by someone who goes grocery shopping at four a.m. at the all-night market to avoid seeing people or knowing what they eat? Did you ever tell her how you hate looking at what’s in people’s carts because it makes you imagine their lives after they leave the supermarket, and you can’t stand that? Because that’s, like, outgoing, Mom.”

Mom smirks. “Elizah, the beauty of being out of school is that I no longer have to be nice to people or even be around them if I don’t want to be. And don’t you think Mrs. Daytner understands that a woman who chooses to be the caretaker of an old graveyard is not exactly going to be invited to the Garden Club lunch? She’s not an idiot.”

“You didn’t talk to her long enough.” I take a bite of my sandwich. Mom is still smiling, standing over me, hunched like a bear.

“Anyway, here’s another thing: she wants you to go to Mary Alice’s Halloween party in a couple of weeks.”

“I’m sure Daytime wants a lot of things for me,” I say after swallowing. “But I’d rather be dead than go to Mary Alice’s party. I heard Beth Mooney talking about it on the bus. It’s going to be a sleepover and ... ”

“I already called Mrs. Pensick.”

“Mary Alice’s mother? You called her?” In the history of knowing my mother, I

cannot recall a single time when she called anybody's mother; we were the kind of family who spent Christmas day alone. "You dialed the number and you spoke to her about me going to a sleepover party?"

"Yup."

"So I guess now I'm sort of normal. Gee," I say, smiling, "I've just turned into Barbie. This must be the Malibu Dream House. Wait—why do I see tombstones outside? Barbie doesn't have a single thing to do with tombstones. Not a thing."

"Elizah, it's not like I ask you to do a whole lot around here. But this party is not something I'm going to back down on. No negotiation on this one. This is as simple and irrefutable a request as brushing your teeth or taking a shower."

"But at least I feel better after doing those things," I say. Mom sits down across from me, holding her chin in her hand. "Do you think I will feel or act any differently after going to Mary Alice's Halloween party? Think about that, Mom. Kids in my grade are sneaking around with beer and condoms and she's having a Halloween party."

"So beer and condoms are better ideas?"

"No one is saying that. It's just, c'mon, Ma. A Halloween party?" My mother continues to gaze at me while holding her chin in her hand. I look right into her eyes. "I still can't believe you called Mary Alice's mother. I would be less surprised if you'd grown another head. Seriously. Just sprouted an entire new region of cranium with a brain and hair and articulated eyelids." I wait. My mother smiles weakly.

"I told you a lot of things would change once we moved to Wenspaugh. You have to go, Elizah. It's sort of a deal I made with Mrs. Daytner. She won't leave you alone otherwise."

"So you made a deal with Daytime for me to be social so that she will eventually leave me alone?"

"Not exactly. It's more to show Mrs. Daytner that we trust her intentions."

"We? You've never even met Daytime." I push the rest of the sandwich toward my mother. "Wait a minute. She—or you—can't make me go to a party. That's ridiculous. School can't dictate what I do on a Saturday. This is like being raised by the Taliban."

"Hmm ... " My mother smiles and stands. "A little, it is. But did you ever think I don't want you to grow up like me?" She turns and walks over to the sink. I

follow her.

“You’re actually serious. You actually are going to make me go to a party with a girl who acts out Ukrainian folk tales at the library and organizes picnics for retarded people. You’re actually doing this.”

My mother doesn’t turn around. “It will be good for you. Every once in a while, Elizah, it’s good to leave the company of the dead.”

190

One great thing about this house, aside from its closeness to the river and its view of the mountains, is the tiny bathroom next to my closet. I can avoid my mother longer if I don’t need to use the bathroom on the main floor. For now, while my mother is safely in the front office talking to the genealogists again, the sink is the perfect place to clean and examine my bone.

I slide the bone out of my pocket and begin washing it. A puddle of dirt flows from its crevices, clogging the sink with tiny rocks that I have to loosen from the bone with the edges of my comb. After I pluck out a rock the size of a pea, the bone breaks, clattering together with the delicately destructive sound of shells knocking into one another.

“Damn,” I whisper, “I broke it. The perfect bone.” My finger grazes a smoothly bumpy section. I stop moving. What I’m feeling is shaped like a molar. I turn the faucet up, run water furiously over the piece in my hand. It’s clear now: this is a jawbone. What I felt was not shaped like a molar, it *was* a molar. And the bone is not broken. The motion of dislodging the pebble opened the hinge. What I hold in my hand on this bright October afternoon, while girls ride canoes and the genealogists map their singular histories in the front room, is the jaw of someone who died in Wenspaugh.

And I’m the only person who knows it’s missing.

“Elizah,” my mother calls through the door. “I thought we should make cupcakes for Mary Alice’s party, and I have some ideas on what we should do. I told her mom that I would. Why don’t you come look at some of the design ideas I found for Halloween cupcakes?”

“Cupcakes. Don’t we have like a couple of weeks?” I wrap the bone in paper

towels and place it behind a clutter of shampoo bottles on a shelf.

“I’m not making them now, just asking you to help pick out a design.”

“I don’t care.”

“That’s not the question, Elizah. Actually, I’d like you to come out of your room now. That’s really what I want.”

“Cupcakes for a sleepover party,” I say while walking to unlock the door. “This is a far cry from a woman who reads books on how to channel the dead.”

“Yes, but just because I read about the paranormal doesn’t mean I can’t bake cupcakes and join the PTA.”

“Oh, I don’t know about that. I think it might. I think they ‘out’ you if you read anything other than those diet and recipe magazines that teach you how to wallpaper closets. The PTA and the paranormal don’t exactly coexist.” I slide the deadbolt open and follow Mom into the kitchen.

“I made lasagna for dinner.”

“Great,” I say, sliding into a seat. “Then we can discuss the cupcakes while we’re eating. Maybe we should put the Food Network on.”

“We don’t have television here,” Mom reminds me. “There’s a word,” she says while cutting the lasagna into squares. “Comorbidity. I remember it from college. Sort of sounds like what we were talking about with the PTA and the paranormal. When two states exist at the same time.”

“I thought you left college when you met Dad.”

“Not right away. I dropped out so he could get his MBA. And it’s not like the only thing I remember from college is your father. You want cheese grated on this?”

“No thanks.” I watch my mother carefully after mentioning my father. She slices bread with no emotion on her face.

“Elizah, do the girls at school ever say anything to you about where you live? I mean, that I’m the caretaker of the cemetery or anything?”

“I try not to talk to them.”

“I know. But do they ever ... ”

“No, Mom. Most people at school listen to their iPods or talk on their cell phones or text. It’s nothing like when you went.”

“I doubt that.” She sprinkles grated cheese on my lasagna after I’ve asked her not to, and passes me the plate. “So it’s not that I’m the caretaker that’s keeping you

from making friends?”

I shake my head.

“So do you miss your father?” She sits down on the floor, crosses her legs yoga style, and closes her eyes.

“I guess. But every time someone asks me, I feel like I’m not missing him enough or something.”

My mother murmurs beneath her breath, “He skipped out on his trial, you know.” She opens her eyes and lifts her palms. “So it’s not just you that he left.”

“Just me?” When I say this, my mother looks over at me with her palms in mid-air. “He sort of skipped out on you, too,” I say.

“Yes. But what I meant was, he skipped out on everything he was supposed to do. Pay back his boss, support his family, everything, not just you. Do you remember how he left so many times when you were small?”

“Yup. Only he’s not coming back anymore. Is this supposed to be an epiphany?”

“No.” Mom pulls her spine up like a cat. “Elizah ... why is talking to you so difficult?”

I push the grated cheese off the top of my lasagna. “Because you’re not really talking to me anymore. You’re mining my brain like Daytime, looking for what you think might explode next.”

Mom laughs. “Oh, c’mon, Elizah. You might be right. But I ask you those questions because I’m worried about you.” She arches her back. “I want you to go into the dining room and see what I did.”

I drop the plate off in the sink and walk into the dining room while Mom curves her spine. I can’t stand the dining room; it’s dark and closed as a cave and every time I walk into its darkness, I can’t breathe right. Mom has cleaned the windows; she even put little pumpkins on their sills and hung up tea towels embroidered with smiling scarecrows.

“Nice. I feel like we’re turning into a television family.”

“Don’t go that far, Elizah. I just want our lives to be different here. Nothing notorious. And come look at the cupcake designs on the kitchen table. Those magazine pages I ripped out. Tell me which ones you like.”

“Make bones. I like bones.”

“No, Elizah. Which one of the choices do you like?”

“God, I don’t care.” I go back into the kitchen and stand behind my mother, who is now stretching her legs in the air. “But listen, Mom. What would you do if you found a bone over where you saw me crouching?”

“Probably nothing. Did you find one?”

“Maybe. But I can’t tell if it’s human or not.”

My mother stretches one last time, then begins gathering dishes. “My guess is that it belongs to one of the wolves up in the mountains. Most likely it’s not human. That’s a little too strange, even for me. But if it is human, at least it’s near a graveyard.”

“You think Mary Alice’s mom would answer that way?”

My mother laughs. “I said I wanted us to change a little. Not reinvent ourselves. So where is this bone now, that you might have found?”

“It’s where it should be,” I answer, innocence in my voice. “Right near the graveyard.”

156

The bus on Monday morning is merciless: bright sun glinting from glass to chrome and into my retinas. I take a seat in the middle of the bus because no one sits in the middle, and it sends the message that I want to be left alone. Everything in school has a meaning; it’s like living with a tribe of animals who judge when and how you should be attacked by the position of your tail. Usually, the less social animals can be left alone in the middle of the bus. Unfortunately, Beth Mooney has not read up on instinctual pack behaviors. She gets on at the next stop and rockets directly toward me like a heat-seeking missile sensing the sun.

“Elizah, I can’t believe it! I heard you’re going to Mary Alice’s party. It’s unbelievably fun to plan.” I look to see if Beth’s tail is wagging as she stands in the aisle. “I’ll bet you’re excited.”

I turn back to the window.

“Elizah?” Beth Mooney bounces down into the seat, next to me. “You all right?”

I nod without turning to face her.

“Are you getting a costume?” She shoves her backpack under the seat with one long arc of her foot. “I think, but I’m not positively sure, not absolutely sure, that I’m going to be an angel. First, I thought I would get one of those half-angel, half-devil outfits, but really, even my mom says a devil is a far cry from my personality.”

“It depends,” I say, finally turning to face her, “on how you define evil.”

“What?” She looks at me with her round face and her eager brown eyes, and it occurs to me that she resembles, almost exactly, the face of a kindly rodent in a cartoon I once watched. “You know, Elizah, I just noticed your hair, and my aunt has a shop in town and you have ... well, it’s nice hair and all, but did you ever think of getting it layered, add a little body so it’s not so flat?”

“I like flat. It matches my chest.”

Beth Mooney laughs very hard at this. “You know, when I first met you in gym, I thought you were like an alien or something, the way you were so quiet and knew all the answers in science. I mean, who knows anything about rocks?”

“I like rocks. They’re like the Earth’s bones. And I like bones.”

Beth grins. “I guess, but I mean, who really wants to know stuff about rocks? But you do. You know all this stuff. How they’re made, the types. You actually said this in class, you actually spoke, and Poulle was like, oh my God, she is a-mazing. Remember?”

“Yeah. I read about rocks a lot when I was younger. That’s all.”

“And you were always so quiet, plus, I mean, living in a graveyard and all. I thought you were just way out there, ya’ know?” She smiles. I keep looking at her. “It’s not like a lot of people actually move to Wenspaugh, so after a while I realized it was probably me.” She laughs again. “But I hope you think more about going to my aunt’s shop. She has this whole line of new things for lifestyle makeovers. And since you just moved here, maybe you would like it.” Beth holds up a purse that looks like it’s made from turtle shells. “See this?” She strokes the turtle shells. “It’s a cross between leather and plastic, this cool stuff that looks like leather but doesn’t have to be cared for like leather. It’s called pleather.”

The bus lurches onto the main road near the school and I look above Beth Mooney’s head at the smooth hull of the bus. I imagine stalactites crusting over on the hull’s surface, their points fanging above me and Beth.

“Anyway, I’m just so glad you’re going and that you’re just a smart, quiet kind

of kid. I shouldn't tell you, but I'll burst if I don't: Mary Alice's mom is going to have a medium come to the party to do a séance. So spooky. I've always wanted to go to a séance. Always."

I watch the imaginary stalactite drop, piercing Beth Mooney's skull.

"Ooops, now there's a smile, Elizah. See, I knew the idea of a séance would make you smile. I could just tell."

❦

Daytime calls me down to her office right before gym even though it's a Monday and I'm supposed to see her only on Fridays.

"Really quick today, sweetheart, since I'm running behind, but I just made a quick call to your mom and we decided it would be a good idea if you participated in some sort of community service here at school."

"Community service? You mean like building roads, like stuff they did on chain gangs?"

"No, I mean if you don't want to join any of the clubs or participate in the activities, maybe you could assist in the gym or in a classroom. I have a list of teachers who have asked for student assistants. Usually, the students pick a subject or a teacher they like. Do you have anyone in mind?"

"I guess Poulle."

"Ms. Poulle." Daytime looks down at a clipboard. "Well, you're in luck." She says this triumphantly, as if I have come to her office on my own and asked to do this and I was hoping for the opportunity. "She's on the list for Wednesday and Friday afternoons. I guess those are her lab days, huh?"

I shrug.

"I'll write you a pass to go back to gym, and you can start this Wednesday. How does that sound?"

I take the pass. "Would it make any difference if I told you how it sounded?"

❦

On Wednesday, Ms. Poulle shows me what she wants done in the room, mostly washing out beakers and making sure all the lab equipment is put back. I'm done in

about ten minutes. I'm looking at the rock display when she comes over to me.

"All done?"

"Yeah."

"You get student service credit no matter how long it takes," she laughs. "There's more to do as it gets later in the semester." She looks at me for a few seconds. "I'm glad you're doing this, Elizah. I was wrong about you; I didn't take you for a student service volunteer."

"I didn't volunteer. My mother and Mrs. Daytner are making me do this."

She smiles. "Well, you put that rather directly. But that's good, Elizah. A science mind has to be direct."

I nod.

"Elizah, do you think one day I am going to figure out what you spend your time thinking about?"

"Probably not."

Ms. Poulle laughs. "You remind me of a sphinx, of a riddle I can't solve. But maybe that's why we have Mrs. Daytner; she'll figure you out."

"I doubt that," I say quietly.

1001

For the next two weeks I spend Wednesday and Friday afternoons in the science room, cleaning and organizing equipment while Ms. Poulle tells me stories about the history of Wenspaugh. Her grandmother was the town historian, so she knows all this stuff about the Indians and early settlers. I listen and look out the windows at the mountains while she talks.

"So were there a lot of wolves in the mountains?" I ask casually one afternoon. We're putting igneous rocks into the display case. "It seems like there might have been a lot."

"Wolves. I suppose there used to be quite a few more. Why? Do you like them?"

"I guess. I just think I might have seen a jawbone of a wolf by the river."

"Oh, that's right. You mentioned you like bones."

"I do."

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