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Surge

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Surge

The bus windows rattled with the engine starting as Olaf plunked down next to his sister. The leather smelled like an old man. All the big boys sat together in the back of the school bus where they were shouting now about how they were going to climb the surge tank all the way to the top, this time they wouldn't turn chicken and creep back down. They called at Olaf, laughing and tossing a roll of caps toward his head. He pretended he couldn't hear. Pulled at the collar of his shirt, the fabric scratching his neck, and then opened his book to stare at the lines of black on white. The bus was a cage full of noise. Greta stretched over his shoulder to look back at the boys, but Olaf knew they'd be talking too fast for her to read their lips. She slipped back into the seat. Each time the bus rounded a corner, her hip dug into his thigh.

He turned to face her, stretching his lips into huge ugly shapes. "What did you do at school today, Greta?" he asked, exaggerating each word. Before she could respond he began to sign. This time he wasn't making words. He was fluttering his fingers as fast as the wings of an insect. Greta stopped rocking her legs. Her mouth formed a small knot.

"It's a bee," he said, his voice warmer now, as if he'd been waiting all along to share this trick with his sister. "Just a bee. See Greta? The letter B." He pinched her under the arm until she squealed and pulled away. She giggled. Even her laugh sounded wrong.

The bus dropped off most of the children, who lived near town. Only Ralph was left. The bus creaked and huffed up a hill and around the next bend. When it braked, its metal joints complaining, Ralph walked to the front, nodded once goodbye, then was gone. The bus rocked over gullies and bumps, Olaf and Greta its only passengers. They sat with their hands in their laps, surrounded by rows of green seats. Olaf stared out the window. Instead of sky, he saw hemlock and spruce, cedar and fir, the glass cloudy with Greta's breath so the trees were smeared into an unbroken green wall. *Skirt-tree*, Olaf signed in his lap as they passed the giant red cedar that marked the halfway point to home, its base stretching out like the

sweep of a lady's skirt. His hands took the shape of what passed: the abandoned truck, the white pine burned black by lightning, the break in the woods that showed a slice of ocean, the pile of rocks where Greta scarred her knee. Each landmark he signed and Greta matched his sign.

Behind these trees, closer to the shore, were the houses the Japanese families had been forced to leave behind. Greta liked to ask him what was inside—beds and tables, like their own house? But Olaf didn't want to imagine the rooms, each one dim as a shadow. Beside the busy stink of the mill town, beside their own lives in the boisterous logging camp he knew so well, the woods were full of people who were gone. From here no one could see the empty buildings, but he still felt uneasy whenever he passed this part of the road, as if the houses themselves were what made the families disappear.

Before the children were taken away, Greta had given one of the boys a ball of red yarn, just like that, something she'd stolen from home. What would he need yarn for, Olaf had asked her—a boy? He had held it tenderly, away from his body, the way one would balance a bomb. Olaf remembered his cupped hands, the knucky fingers that were calloused from fishing like a man's would be, but sweaty and dirty from run-sheep-run.

Greta did those kinds of things. She did it without thinking about who was the enemy.

Now Olaf didn't sign their word for *house*. He looked up the road to find something else he could name.

The road narrowed and branches scratched at the windows, trying to speak. Greta leaned her head on his shoulder. They rode higher for three miles, the trees coming closer, the road darker. Then the bus stopped, and they climbed out. The driver told him to look after the little girl.

No buildings here, just the dirt road splitting the forest in two and the scrub where they hid their bikes. The logging camp was four miles farther, up the mountain on a road too steep and rough for the school bus, a single lane used for empty trucks heading up and loaded trucks heading down, the vehicles blasting warnings with their air horns at each bend in the road. The children pushed their bikes a bit, then got on to pedal, Olaf listening for oncoming trucks.

In the summertime, they stopped for huckleberries, squirting them between their teeth. They would sit at the crib dam and spit the sour

ones into the tumbling water. But today the air bit their knuckles. He needed to get Greta home. He tried to yank his sleeves down over his wrists. Greta followed him a few yards back, moaning at the wind. When they reached the hill, she climbed off her bike to walk.

“I’m not walking with you,” Olaf twisted around to say. “You’ve got to pedal.” He kept his grip tight. She propped the bike against her hip so she could sign that she was tired. “Keep going,” he said. “Get back on.”

He was not going to get off to push both their bikes, not this time. There was nothing wrong with her arms.

All the way to the crib dam she trailed behind him, walking her bike with one hand, the frame leaning so far to the right that Olaf thought it would tip. He pedaled as slowly as he could. His bike rocked side to side, and he had to keep dropping one foot to the ground to keep it steady.

“It’s getting dark!” he shouted, turning back to her, not sure if she could see his lips in the dusk. Soon they wouldn’t be able to talk at all.

He crossed the crib dam—the wide concrete buttress smooth under his tires, the water clamoring far below—then stopped to let her catch up. He ducked into the bush. She trudged along. When she passed him, she didn’t look up, just kept her gaze on the slow spin of her bicycle’s wheel.

She turned the bend. Then he was pedaling back down the logging road, away from her, his legs spinning as furious as the sound of the water. He would be at the bottom of the hill by the time she turned around to look. The bike picked up momentum as the wheels skidded over pebbles that flew into the brush. He was not going to be able to stop. He was going too fast for the brakes to work and he’d spin into whatever truck was coming his way. He soared past the last clump of trees, then with a quick shove he let the bike go free from under his body, the metal clanging and the handlebars twisting as he dove and landed on his chest.

His lungs clenched. Nothing. He gasped. A rush of breath. He rested his lips and forehead on the cold damp earth and felt his wind return.

He rolled over, and sat with his knees up, brushing the rocks and dirt from his trousers. He shook his feet. Not even a twisted ankle. Trembling he got up to check the bike, tapped his boot against the

tire, then straddled the frame to twist the handlebars into place. He got on, moving slowly to test it, then faster, down the main road that led back to town. He wondered if Greta had got home already.

When he reached the dirt bank, he found a tangle of bikes where the boys had tossed them aside. The twilight made the chrome glisten, a clump of metal bones. He dragged his bike up the bank and dropped it on top of the pile.

The surge tank was another mile down the trail. Only one boy had ever climbed it. Now that boy was fighting in the war.

Olaf ran into the trail that led to the beach. He could see the tank, the metal tower rising three-hundred feet. Under the darkening clouds it was whiter than usual. He hurried, angry at the brambles and branches, stopping to catch his breath when he finally pushed through the end of the trail where it opened onto the beach. Even in the dusk he knew to tell apart the brown and blue and green shapes of this coast, the tides pulling the waves away, the waves grasping at scattered driftwood as though this flotsam could hold the water to the shore. A log boom roofed the left side of the bay. There were more logs scattered on the beach: along the rocky sand the logs formed a jagged alphabet, jammed end to end or crisscrossed, chewed almost hollow by torrito bugs. Boulders and stumps bordered the miles and miles of trees, the stink of kelp vying with the sharp pine oil.

Down by the boom the boys were tossing rocks into the ocean, not skipping them—just lobbing handfuls of rocks into the air and letting them drop. The boys made bombing sounds.

“Hey,” Olaf called out.

The five opened up their circle to let him stand with them. He picked up a rock and tossed it into the water. Waves reached up and closed around it.

“Let’s go,” said Joel. The boys scrambled up the beach single file, each kicking rocks ahead, trying to hit the nearest boy in front. Ralph stopped when he found a good flat stone, and they all waited for him to skip it. They counted as it bounced off the smooth water.

“Nine,” Karl said, and whistled. They started walking again, crunch of mussel shells under their soles, none of them willing to try to beat Ralph. Olaf slipped his boots into the others’ footprints, his face hot against the cold air. He could see the surge tank clearly now. The white paint glowed like phosphorescence.

“Climbed it before?” Ralph whispered. Olaf hated him for asking in front of the other boys.

The wind was rising from the ocean and twisting past the surge tank’s slick surface, making the metal ring out. As long as Olaf could remember, the tower had been here, cleaving the landscape. He knew what it was for: when the men needed to repair a turbine at the powerhouse, they had to turn off the river, funneling all the dammed water down the mountain through the penstake and into the tank to let gravity absorb the surge. Now the tank was empty. A great blank dividing the sky. There was the dirty white of clam shells, the flashing tips of waves. And then there was this surge tank. Even in the rain it looked clean. Olaf and Greta had walked up to its base and touched it to see if the metal was warm or cold, but they never tried the ladder. It ran from the height of the tank and then stopped eight feet from the ground.

“To the very top?” Olaf asked Ralph.

“You climb the tank first, you get to drop out of school,” Ralph said.

“You can’t look down,” Igmarr yelled. “That’s what kills you.”

The boys all jumped onto a line of rain-wet logs and walked along them, silent again, hands in their pockets to prove they didn’t need arms to balance. The rotting wood had softened and it crumbled under their steps. They reached the tank. They crouched together to pull a small log under the ladder, then dragged another to perch on top. The second log seesawed up and down. Knut held it still while the others climbed on top. One by one they balanced on the log—leaning back and forth—gripped the ladder and pulled themselves up, scurrying fast so the next boy could join them.

Ralph stood back, picking up rocks. Olaf nodded toward the tank. Ralph tossed a rock at it, a high ping. The boys above them stopped, looked down, then started again. Olaf and Ralph eyed each other awkwardly, Olaf tearing at a fingernail with his teeth, Ralph sliding his tongue along the cracks in his bottom lip. Knut waited, keeping the log steady.

Olaf cupped his hands together to form a holster for Ralph’s foot. Ralph scattered the rest of his rocks across the sand, looked up again at the tank, then walked over to prop his foot in Olaf’s palm. With a grunt Ralph hoisted himself up onto the log and leaned over to grip the ladder. He started to climb.

Salt air pushed open Olaf's lungs. His fingers were raw. He wanted to cheer on his friend. Ralph climbed a few more rungs, then Olaf reached for the ladder. He scrambled until he had his feet on it, and then he peered down at Knut who would have to climb up with no one underneath to help.

He'd been up ladders before. The first forty feet were easy. He felt a burst of energy as his boots pattered from rung to rung with a hollow clang, the ground receding beneath him. Olaf knew his father could walk up this thing easier than walking into his own kitchen.

But halfway up, the surge tank flared like a goblet, the top wider than the bottom, the sides jutting out at a thirty-degree angle over the beach. Olaf had to climb not just up, but out. With his arms stretched above him, his back hung parallel to the dark sea that crashed on the shore a hundred feet below.

The weight of his body pulled at his hands. He glanced down at the water. The view swayed too fast, lurching forward then retreating as his stomach turned. He clenched his eyes shut. His left foot slipped from the ladder and flailed. This leg suddenly felt longer than the other, heavier, the muscle pulling as the foot dangled in the air. He swung forward to hook the wayward heel over the rung, found his footing, pressed his face against the ladder's cold metal edge. He breathed. He could hear Knut breathing below. The rung of the ladder felt good under his boots.

If Greta were with him, she'd want to go down.

Someone up above was laughing. At first Olaf thought one of the boys was laughing at him. Ralph had almost reached the section of the ladder where it became perpendicular again. But he was clinging to the ladder without moving. It was Ralph who was laughing, only it didn't sound like Ralph; the laugh was high-pitched and fast, and it echoed off the surge tank's metal walls.

There was something wrong with Ralph. The laugh got sharper and sharper. Ralph screeched like a crow. Olaf's arms started to shake as if he were the one laughing. A ripple of air moved through his chest.

He wouldn't laugh. He was not going to laugh.

Ralph's arms were going to loosen. Laughter would slacken his muscles.

"Keep going," Knut shouted from below.

"I can't. It's not me," Olaf said. "Ralph has stopped. It's not me."

When Olaf looked up he saw that Ralph had swung to the side of the ladder to let him pass. Ralph was still laughing, but more quietly now. His feet were jammed tight together and he was hanging on with one arm. His body swayed out like a cupboard door.

Olaf clawed his fingers around the ladder's rungs, one hand over the next until he was sharing a rung with Ralph. He could keep only one boot on the ladder, tucking the other as close to the rung as he could. His left hand began to spasm. He could see the bottom of Igmarr's, Joel's and Karl's boots moving higher then vanishing as the ladder straightened. A few more feet and Olaf and Ralph would reach the section where the ladder ran vertical. The ascent would be easier from there. Olaf opened his mouth to explain this, but something about Ralph's laugh made him stop. He wanted to climb away from it.

"Wait here," Olaf said. "Wait and we'll get you on the way down."

He climbed ahead. Looking down, he saw that Ralph was gripping the ladder again with both hands. Olaf felt lighter. The laugh coming out of Ralph faded. He knew he'd make it to the top.

Olaf was stepping into the sky. Beside him a seagull rolled on the air.

He curved around the tank where the ladder straightened again, his arms stretching ahead to find the rungs. When he got his grip, he had to let both feet hang out free before he could swing them back onto the ladder as he pulled himself up, his sweating palms squeaking on the metal. He climbed another eighty feet. The half-moon lit the edges of the surrounding clouds. A cobweb caught his cheek. In the last stretch of the climb, the ladder narrowed, the rungs not rounded but flat. Their edges dug into his palms. Bits of rust stuck to his hands, flaked into his eyes. He tried to keep climbing with his eyelids clamped shut, but the surge tank started to tip.

The ladder seemed too narrow for a man. Olaf wondered who climbed up here and why he did it. A seagull swooped and cawed. Olaf waved at the too-close flap of its wings.

Above him the other boys had reached the top. Knut was a few rungs behind. Olaf couldn't hear Ralph at all.

He grabbed the last rung, swung himself up and folded his body over the edge of the roof, his arms dipping into shallow stagnant water.

The other boys watched him, Joel's face as white as the tank.

Three hundred feet. Olaf stood up.

The roof of the surge tank was as flat and white as the sides and the boys scattered like five peas on a plate. Rain had pooled on the surface. The boys all kicked at it—small explosions of water. They whacked their boots into the metal to hear it clang.

The wind answered. It sounded different than it did on the ladder, low and hollow, it didn't thud against the roof but whipped and whined across the surface as if trying to slide the boys right off. Olaf leaned into this wall that pushed at his chest. His jacket was fat with air.

There were dead birds. A seagull, dark grey and rotting, its wings splayed out in a puddle. The feathers shimmied slightly as wind raked the water. And smaller birds, a blackbird, and what he thought were chickadees, although it was hard to tell in the dark. Their bodies were clumps. They reminded him of the mousetraps in the cookhouse, the cook walking to the woods with a dustpan full of eyeless tufts of fur. Did the birds fly here to die? Or was there something on the roof that killed them?

Olaf looked across the water at the lumps of islands, darker black than the black of the sky, each island rimmed in purple. He was higher than any tree. His father had never been this high.

Up the coast he could see the electric glow of the Powell River Mill—the light as yellow as the stink of sulfur. It lit the smoke that poured into the sky in four iridescent columns. Men were scurrying inside that box, masks over their faces as they released the spray of chemicals to turn trees into pulp. The lines of company houses were dim squares.

He turned to the south. If it were daytime, he'd be able to see all the way to Desolation Sound. A mile down the coast the moon caught the powerhouse's grey stone roof. All he could see was this roof, but he knew the front of the building had been painted to match the shore and trees, camouflage against enemy attack. The sides and back had been left as they were, the powerhouse greeting the ocean with this false face.

The Japs could attack now and Olaf could watch the planes swoop down and the incendiary bombs fall. The vibrations would rattle the surge tank and shake Ralph off the ladder. When his body landed on the beach it would snap like the sticks they held to play war.

Olaf looked up the coast at the sharp blades of the tree tops. He could reach over and pluck them from the ground.

Tug boats flickered green and red and white. In daylight the boats always looked happy, bobbing in the water, nudging log booms so much larger than themselves. He could not see the boom now, but knew it was there by the way it interrupted the water's ribbon of moon.

The Japs wouldn't bomb the ocean; they'd bomb the mill. The camps. He turned around and Tin Hat Mountain stretched out behind him. The mountain was a black mass, something inked out. The logging camp where he lived was tucked behind the hill where the mountain dipped before it climbed again. He imagined his mother and sister in the wooden house. They were sitting by the stove and talking about where Olaf had gone. Across the table they passed his name back and forth. What I'm going to do to that boy, his mother said. She couldn't see him, way up here. Greta couldn't watch his hands. He stretched them up in the air.

"What's that ball for?" Joel asked him, pointing at a metal ball the size of a crouching man. It lay on top of the tank like a giant's toy.

"Lightning," Olaf said right away, and the boys nodded. His words lifted in the dark wind. "It captures lightning. It protects the surge tank." Olaf wasn't sure if this was really what it did, but the boys looked convinced. He could say anything up here and it would become true.

Olaf was the last to leave the roof. The others were kicking the birds off the tank, waiting to hear the splat and not hearing the splat so shoving at each other and asking who was scared, who was scared now, until one of them finally marched toward the ladder. Olaf watched each head disappear.

When he grabbed it, the ladder was shaking. The wind and all that space down to the ocean dragged him forward, the urge to fall. He backed away from the ladder. Sure that the others couldn't see him, he got on his hands and knees and crawled. He turned to nudge his foot down until he could feel the third rung. He held on.

The flat edges dug into his palm. The wind pulled at his clothes. If he let go now, he would float.

It was harder going down, his arms and legs awkward with each backward step. His hands were growing numb. He counted as he descended. The seagulls had gone. What time was it now? He kept his eyes on his hands, dizzy with the effort not to look below.

The rungs of the ladder thickened. He reached the bend where it began to run diagonal. He had to curl himself around the corner, boot searching for a rung. He hinged from the hips, kicking his feet forward so they could catch the ladder while he kept his right hand on the straight section above. With his left hand he grasped the lower part of the ladder. The rust made his grip slide. To continue down, he was going to have to let go of his upper hand. He released his fingers, each one still frozen around the shape of the rung. He reached below for the ladder. His hand opened and closed on air. He was falling backward. Then his fingers smacked the metal and he clasped the rung tight. His whole body began to tremble. Upside down in the sky.

Ralph was still there. As Olaf climbed slowly toward him, swaying his feet forward with each step so he could catch the next rung, he could see Ralph's arms rigid against the ladder. The laughing had stopped. Olaf had swallowed a flake of rust and it tickled his throat. He coughed. It sounded like a laugh.

Ralph hooked one arm over the rung and one arm under it and leaned closer in.

"Ralph Forrest," Olaf said. The name ricocheted off the surge tank.

The wind tugged at Ralph's hair and flapped his jacket open. Olaf wondered if he had seen the birds the boys kicked off. Ralph squeezed to one side of the ladder so Olaf could pass.

Olaf climbed down until the two boys perched on the same rung, boots cramped in a line. Ralph pressed his cheek against the ladder.

"Go on," Olaf said. Below them there was the steady hollow clang of boots hitting metal. The other boys had climbed past Ralph. Were they going for help? The wind whistled through the ladder and whipped Ralph's hair across his eyes.

"Go on."

Ralph didn't move. The boys were nearing the bottom. Olaf dropped one foot to the next rung.

He waited. Ralph glanced down, snot running into his mouth. He wouldn't let go of the ladder long enough to wipe it away. His sleeve slipped to the elbow to reveal his arm taut with muscle and veins. Olaf could still reach out and rest his palm on the nape of Ralph's neck to coax him down, but he didn't want to touch Ralph.

"Say something. Ralph. Talk. It will make it better." Bits of his words were torn by the wind.

Olaf waited.

Even the jaunty under-the-breath comments Ralph always made, even those he'd take.

Come on.

Go on.

Ralph was not going to move.

Olaf took another step down. He felt Ralph watch him. Three more steps, four, and he looked up through the black shapes of Ralph's boots. If Ralph let go without leaping free of the tank, his body would crash straight down and tear Olaf from the ladder and they both would drop to the earth.

As he neared the bottom, he climbed more quickly, careful not to look down until he was close enough to jump. Three yards from the ground, he leapt free with a high-pitched yell. He cleared the logs, landed on the balls of his feet, then rolled into the familiar crunch of sand and shells. He lay there for a moment, feeling the moist sand flat between his shoulder blades. Above the clouds, the stars looked as if someone had thrown a handful of rocks across the sky.

Ralph was still on the surge tank, but smaller. He hadn't moved. If Olaf didn't know Ralph was there, he wouldn't realize the dark speck was a boy.

Olaf scurried to his feet, rubbed shells and pebbles off his knees.

"You coming?" Karl yelled as he ran toward the water. The other boys ran too, jumping up and down on beach logs. The salt air was sharp on Olaf's face. Down by the ocean, the boys began to shout.

"Dumplings and gravy! Right now a whole plateful of dumplings and gravy!"

"Roast beef!"

Olaf couldn't tell who was saying what. His stomach spasmed. It was long past dinner. Greta and his mother would be eating without him. Greta would ask if she could have his portion and his mother

would blow cigarette smoke across the table, say she always knew her son would do something like this, then slide his plate to Greta.

“No, flapjacks. A foot-high stack of flapjacks!”

“And bacon!”

“And bacon! Hey Ralph! We’re going to have bacon!”

“Pork and beans!” one of them bellowed over the noise of the waves.

That’s what Olaf wanted. They could stay out here all night and sit around a bonfire like the men do in the summer, heat a can over the flames. Ralph would climb down, shoulder Olaf for a space, grab a spoon. They wouldn’t say how long he’d been up there. They’d eat. Olaf would have liked his tin lunch box right now, its slim black handle. He’d unfold his mother’s wax paper and pass her bread pudding to the boys.

“Salmonberry pie!” Olaf heard his voice toss the words out into the wind. He was suddenly giddy. “Salmonberry pie!” He yelled up to Ralph as if he had a piece to offer. He could do this. He could just shout out what he wanted to eat.

Olaf turned to see where the boys were. They’d almost reached the trail that led to the road. If he didn’t go now, he’d lose them. “Salmonberry pie!” he shouted at the surge tank before breaking into a run.

When they reached the road, the other boys climbed onto the pile of bikes to rip out their own. Olaf was still running through the trail, but he could see the flicker of wheels through the trees. He caught up. They saluted Olaf and he saluted them back. He grabbed his bike. Ralph’s bike was lying by itself. The tire was close to the road and Olaf thought maybe they should push it toward the trail.

The other boys wheeled off. The wind died down. His bike felt cold and wet. Without Greta to slow him, he’d be home in no time.

He pedaled back up the logging road. He flew into the camp and lifted his hands off the handlebars. The bike pitched to the left and he swayed his weight to the right and kept pedaling without holding on. The cookhouse was dark; the bunkhouses were dark; the men weren’t sitting outside smoking or spitting tar. No one could see him now.

He careened along the trail to his home. Without taking off his boots, he walked through the back door and across the linoleum, pleased with the mud tracks, the wet slap of his soles on the floor.

The kitchen was empty.

The air smelled of stale smoke. He checked the stove. The pots were full of food that hadn't been served.

Balls of wool sat on the chesterfield, pierced by knitting needles, and he wished now for their comforting click, clack, his mother's sighs as she worked.

He leaned against the airtight heater to feel its warmth. Someone must be home. It was dangerous to leave a roaring fire when no one was home.

He stopped to listen. Rustle of fire in the airtight. Click of the pane against the sill. The wind had started blowing again, but more gently. He could hear his own breath, his blood pounding in his ears, the flick of his fingernail tearing at the skin of his cuticles. His steps were too loud as he walked slowly toward the stairs, heel to toe, his arms stiff by his side as if he were trying to find his balance.

A house has a face—from outside, but even from inside he could tell that the two windows above the sink were blank as untelling eyes. When he was a small boy, he used to be afraid of the house—not the creak of the stairs or the wind in the attic or even his bedroom closet where someone, something, could hide—he was afraid of the windows themselves, the glass that held the glowing light from the lamp, and these wooden walls that were as thick as a man's shoulders are broad. He thought the house could watch him, when he did something wrong, that it knew things that even his mother did not.

But the stairs tonight were reassuring to climb, each step wide enough for his boots, his hand holding this familiar cedar banister that his father had sanded smooth and round as a candle. He wondered if Ralph was still gripping the ladder's slick rungs. When he reached the top of the stairs, he kept hold of the banister and clenched his eyes shut as if this would stop Ralph from letting go.

Now he wanted to make a noise, cough or call out, anything to fill the house. He thumped his hand on the doorframe as he marched into his parents' room—dark. Into Greta's room, rapping first on the open door although she wouldn't be able to hear. Moonlight caught a book splayed on the floor, a page lifting on its own. Beside the book was one of the Red Ryder comics Greta liked to sneak from Olaf.

He sat on the unmade bed. He would give Greta the comic book, to keep, when she came home. The promise tightened its grip on his thoughts the way tangled sheets bind sleep.

He could give one comic to Greta and one to Ralph. No—more than one. He would let them have as many as they wanted. Handing over his prized collection filled him with a sharp pleasing sense of loss.

The wind rattled the glass against the frame. Underneath him were Greta's heavy woolen blankets, he could lie down, fall asleep, feel the rush of relief he always felt on waking up from a bad dream.

Outside, in the distance, his mother was calling him.

He pressed his boots firmly into the floor to hold her voice in place.

She called again. He scurried downstairs and out the front entrance. The air was colder now that he'd been inside. He left the door open and light spilled a jagged yellow triangle over the steps. He ran through the trail. Up ahead, there was a thin white shimmer between the trees. His mother was standing alone outside in her nightgown, the bulk of her overcoat hanging awkwardly over it. When she saw Olaf, she ran toward him, almost tripping as she opened her arms.

"Greta!" she called out, "Greta!" He wanted to shrink into his sister's name.

His mother held him and he buried his face into the slick softness of the nightgown. "Greta—where is she? Is she back at the house? Olaf? Is she with you? Olaf? Where is your sister?" His eyelashes flickered against her warm chest. As long as he didn't answer her questions, he could keep his arms around her. "Greta?" she asked again. Her body stiffened.

"Mom, I didn't..."

"What did you do?"

"Mom, she..."

She pushed past him to run up the trail. He watched the back of her overcoat.

"She ran away," he yelled. His mother stopped. She turned to face him. Her coat swung open and again he could see the white flicker of her nightgown. "Greta raced down the road on her bike, before I knew where she was going, before I could catch her, she wouldn't do what I said, she wouldn't look, she wouldn't stop, she went

speeding on her bike down the logging road, I couldn't see where she went."

"Greta...Greta did?" She walked back, her feet careful over stones and broken branches.

"I've...I've been looking for her. I didn't come home. I've been looking for Greta for hours." The lie stretched out to his mother and pulled her toward him.

"Where did you look?" she asked. Her voice was softer now. "The men have split up. They're all searching. Did you see your father?"

"The beach," he blurted out. He felt as light as he did on top of the surge tank. He could say anything. "I looked for her at the beach." His mother nodded. She gazed out past his head. She pressed her hands together like she was praying, but she wasn't praying. Olaf took her arm, the bone under her nightgown under her coat, and led her back to the house.

Not until he shuffled her to the table—slipped off her coat, pulled out the cups for tea, put the kettle on the stove, slid her tobacco in front of her so she could roll a cigarette—did he realize that he knew where his sister had gone.

He walked outside and grabbed his bike, turned to see his mother standing in the light of the doorway. She looked afraid, the lamp-light shining through her gown and silhouetting her legs. "Olaf," she cried. He liked her saying his name. He started to pedal down the path and she called it once more.

He careened down the logging road, then onto the main road that led to the surge tank, keeping his eyes on the spin of his front wheel. The ladder was on the other side of the tank, facing the ocean, so he couldn't see Ralph even if he looked.

The men were combing the shore. Olaf strained to track their voices. The loggers called out for his sister, then for him. His father led each call then the other voices joined in. The shouts trailed off and all the men stood silent as they waited for a response. Their bodies were still, black as paper cut-outs against the ocean's tumble. The woods absorbed the echo. Then the men began calling again, sway of lanterns etching the trees. Olaf imagined running down to show them he was safe—he'd throw his arms wide and announce where Greta had gone, spill the news like light. His father's face would lift, smile, he'd nod as if Olaf had made her appear.

He jumped off and pushed his bike to where the woods thinned. The men were small, visible only between the dark columns of firs. In the mist rising from the ocean, their lanterns bobbed like small floating moons.

They were nearing the surge tank. Light swung up against its surface. Someone had begun to carry a lantern up the ladder. Olaf dropped his bike and pushed his way past the trees, arching his head back to see the tower swooping into the sky so that the swirl of dark clouds seemed to be underneath his body instead of high above it—the sky was the ocean, the surge tank rocking in the waves. He had to grip a branch to steady himself.

Ralph was still holding on.

Olaf grinned and wrapped his arms around his chest, rubbing his hands up and down to get the blood moving. He thought of Ralph's hair lifting in the wind.

With a shiver he realized that the climbing man was his own father, the familiar wide shoulders rising quickly up and up and it was strange now to see his father chart the same height that Olaf himself had climbed, his father's body so high and yet shrunken against the expanse of white—a man crouching down to join a boy's game. His father's steps were too heavy, his boots would shake the rungs and make the remaining birds fall from the top of the tank, wingless carcasses dropping the length of the tower like secrets, each one landing in a waterlogged splat.

The birds were dead already. Olaf was not responsible for the birds.

Ralph had managed to climb down to where the tank ran vertical again but now he had stopped. He was waiting for Olaf's father.

Olaf had seen his father climb this high many times before. His father could reach this high or higher each time he rigged a new spar tree, climbing it and then topping it and wrapping the guyline confidently around the tree's tip as tight as a noose. He could climb the spar while waving down at Olaf, then reach the top and smoke a cigarette and take off his hat and pass it through the air as if collecting rain and even as he sat on the flat top of the tree without his belt roping him to it, even as he perched with nothing to hold him to the trunk's quivering height running straight down to the ground that lay so solid under Olaf's feet, his father was tipping his hat to him and so his father was attached to him and would not fall.

Now his father was hatless, hand over hand to reach another man's son. He did not turn to wave.

When his father reached Ralph, he plucked the boy's fingers from their tight grip on the rungs and wrapped the boy's arms around his shoulders. From the ground Olaf could no longer see Ralph. His black shape had disappeared inside the man's so that they moved as a single body.

Olaf got back on his bike, pedaling fast through the trees that swayed toward his face until he feared he'd lose his balance. The sound of the wheels mimicked the crying sounds he imagined Ralph would make. The men would wrap him in one of their Mack jackets. The men would offer him a sip of moonshine from one of the flasks they kept in their canvas satchels and then Olaf's father would lean down to speak to the boy at his own level, gazing into his eyes the way he looked into Olaf's whenever he wanted the truth.

There's a look a child gets when he has something good to tell, when he knows something valuable that an adult wants. At first Ralph would say nothing, letting the moonshine dilate the blood vessels in his fingers and his feet. Olaf knew that warm sensation. Olaf had come in from the cold to feel his frozen fingers softening and opening as soon as his father's whiskey was in him, as if his hands and not his mouth had drunk the amber brew. To sit like that with his father beside the air-tight, warmth outside his skin and inside his skin—Olaf would have told him anything.

Now Olaf turned down another trail a mile north of the surge tank toward the cragged beach where the boats and houses sat unused. The woods swallowed him. Then the forest exploded with music, one high-pitched voice then something like a fiddle. His bike rattled over branches, in the dark he couldn't see the forest floor. With each bounce the music tried to shake him off. The trail opened onto the beach.

Every window of the Jap house was lit. The building was leaning slightly toward the ocean, close to the water like a beached boat, squares of light doubled by a rippled reflection.

The music was coming from inside, the volume cranked so high that the windowpanes were shaking, sound tinny and broken. The house's slanting walls seemed too fragile to hold it.

A lull in the music. He heard Greta, her low rocking voice. Her singing slid left and right of the tune. She flitted by the glass. The

flames of oil lanterns followed her wake. He dropped his bike and crept to the house to watch her as she swooped back and forth across his view, a flash of blue that appeared, disappeared, dancing from one end of the kitchen to the other, her hair a swirl of light around her head as she leapt from a stool into the air.

He pressed his face to the glass and felt the vibrations of the music the way she would, the pulse vibrating his jaw.

She landed in a heap of blue satin. Lanterns flickering all around her, on the table, the counter, the floor. The robe covered her body like a tarp, spilled over her feet, shiny blue with red piping and red pictures stitched down the sides, small houses and smaller people and enormous curving fish. Greta grasped the satin, then she was up again, swooping around the kitchen in this robe that skimmed over the jerky quickness of her limbs. As she brushed past the table, a sleeve caught at a rice bowl and dragged it to the table's edge.

The bowl didn't fall. Greta swayed her head back and forth to the vibrations of the record, her mouth slack. No words in her singing. It bothered Olaf, the sounds that meant nothing, her low voice flooding this house where she didn't belong. The family that had lived here had been lined up with the others, bussed out, without a chance to pack their things.

Greta reached her arms up and spun in place. The robe twisted at her feet. Its long red tie whipped a lamp. The robe was going to catch on fire. He banged at the window. The latch was jammed shut. She kept dancing. He ran around to the other side of the house to reach the door.

The night air rushed in as he entered the room. Greta stood still. She didn't jump or call out. She stood with her back to Olaf. He couldn't see her expression, couldn't tell if she knew it was him. The record kept turning, the robe corkscrewed around Greta's legs.

He walked toward her. He thumbed the lantern to the middle of the table, the bowl away from the edge. There was another bowl lying mouth-down on the counter, the shards of a plate on the floor. The cupboard doors were open. Across the table she had shaped the letter *B* from grains of rice.

"Greta, it's me." He tugged at the robe. She signed something to him, but the sleeves covered her hands. He felt her fingers flicker against the satin.

She spun from his grasp, climbed onto the counter and tore open a box of crackers, waving it in front of his face like some toy she had stolen and wouldn't give back.

You left me, her lips shaped the words as she stuffed crackers into her mouth. She swayed her head side to side.

I was there, Olaf signed.

Gone, she signed back.

I was there. It was you. You didn't see me. But his hands were small and tight: even his fingers didn't believe him. The music stopped—vinyl crackle and static. The kitchen was white with silence. Then the roar of water as the ocean hit the shore.

She said something, but she kept eating and the crackers muffled the shape of her words. His stomach clenched at the sight of food, but he wouldn't take a thing left behind by the family. Through the bedroom door, he could see another lantern, records strewn across the bed. He slipped a bowl from the counter and put it back on the table, slid the other bowl to meet it, the clink of china ringing out as the two rims touched.

Gone gone gone, she signed, shimmied down from the cupboard and traipsed around the kitchen with her hands forming the words wider and wider. But she wasn't upset. She was grinning now. Olaf would like her to be upset. He would like her to sit down.

We could stay gone all night. We could sleep here.

"We have to go home." His voice cracked. "Mom is waiting for us."

Gone gone gone. She spun around as she signed.

She swooped by Olaf again and he grabbed her by the waist, expecting her to squirm against his grip. Like a dead weight she collapsed into his chest. He held this feeling, her leaning against him, him bracing her, him keeping her from falling, if he stepped away she'd slump to the floor. "I'm here," he whispered. He mouthed the words against her cheek. She was breathing fast from the dancing, but she let him hold her, the way one of the camp whiskey jacks will step forward to peck at a palm full of seeds offered by an owner who has been gone too long. Through the slick satin Olaf was relieved to feel the rough nubs of her sweater underneath.

When he released Greta, the warmth of her body fell away from his. She stepped free of the robe, letting it drop to the floor. He bent down to pick it up, walking into the other room to place it on the

bed, folded on top of the records. Two of the records were chipped, another had been cracked. He hoped it wasn't Greta who did it. He couldn't tell which broken parts were new.

She watched him shut each cupboard door in the kitchen, the flat warm sound of wood on wood. One by one he blew out the lanterns. The rooms shrunk. Greta took his hand and swung it as they walked out the door. This bothered him too, the music in her arms, and when they reached his bike, he turned to check the house. The windows were dark. He let Greta sit on his seat and he stood up to pedal. When they had almost reached the logging road he began to get tired and he remembered that she must have ridden her own bike to the Jap house but it was too late now to go back. Her hands gripped his waist and the bike rocked with the effort of his legs as he followed the narrow track his wheels had left.