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THEY SAID IT WAS BAD FOR EVERYONE, BUT NOBODY ELSE the boy knew had to live in the woods. Even all these years later, with histories aligned—his own, the country’s—his dreams can still erupt in this welter of buggy heat, the leaf-rustling prowl of dark creatures a canvas thinness away, and stars, millions of stars so brilliant through the slant of the flap that with all the night sounds and sourceless shadows in wait the stars crackle around them as if the tent is an enormous boiling cauldron. And yet, they sleep, his father and sister on cots across the way. Everything they own is in this tent, most important the knives, cleavers, and saws. Without his slaughtering tools, his father says he has nothing.

Supposedly the bad times came from New York City when the stock market crashed. But it seemed to Thomas that everything really started a few years later on the wintry morning his mother left them at her sister’s house in town. Irene was awfully dressed up just to run a few errands, Aunt Lena sputtered that night to his father, Henry—as if she hadn’t known, when she’d been the one who’d called the taxicab to take her sister down to the bus depot.

So here it was summer and his mother still wasn’t back.

His father said she'd ridden the bus from Vermont down to Massachusetts to get a job in one of the big mills there. Why? Margaret kept asking. You work, why'd she get a job? Well, for extra, to help out the family, his father explained. Some ladies do that. Not any she knew, Margaret said. Not mothers anyhow.

She won't be gone long, was the most his father said in the beginning. Thomas heard his father tell his friend, Gladys Bibeau, that she was working temporary—just long enough to help get the farm back. That was a waste of time, Gladys's father couldn't wait to tell them the next day. Old Bibeau said he knew for a fact the bank was selling the mortgage to their neighbor, Fred Farley, who'd been after the land for years. Thomas understood his father might have to twist the truth and dress it up for others, but Henry Talcott wouldn't lie to his children. Never had, anyway. Soon, all talk of their mother ceased.

Once morning came living in the tent was swell again. They had set up camp in old Bibeau's woods out by Black Pond. Some days Thomas and Margaret rowed to the middle and just floated in the rippling stillness while he caught sunfish with his father's pole. His sister didn't care much about fishing. She'd end up either crying or inventing wild stories of how they should just hitch a ride down to Collerton, Massachusetts, and bring their mother back whether she had enough money saved or not—it didn't matter to Margaret. She didn't care if they stayed poor and had to live in a tent forever so long as they could be together again. It was important for Thomas not to get too caught up in her fantasies. More and more lately, it seemed he was the only reasonable one in the family. His father had always been a

quiet man, only now his intractable silences were fueled by sadness and anger.

Henry Talcott butchered livestock, some cows and lambs, usually pigs from farm to farm. The work (mostly now, the looking for work) took him all over the county. He'd rattle off in his old truck before the sun was up and wouldn't get back until nine or ten at night. Gladys Bibeau came by the tent most days to see how things were going. If Henry hadn't returned by suppertime she'd drag the boy and his sister back to eat with her and her father. Margaret didn't like old Bibeau with all his grunting, belching, and gassing, but every now and again she needed to be near Gladys. That's when Thomas missed his old life most, sitting at the table with pea soup simmering on the stove while the plain, gaunt woman whistled through the gap in her teeth and pressed bowls of buttery mashed potatoes and stewed tomatoes on them. His mother might have been a terrible cook, but she was the most beautiful lady he'd ever seen, with the softest hands and a voice so sweet when she talked it came like singing.

Everyone agreed Irene Jalley was the prettiest girl in town. Her attraction to taciturn Henry Talcott had caught a lot of people off guard, especially Gladys Bibeau. Gladys and Henry had been childhood friends; then when Henry was fifteen his mother died and his father just kept on walking out of the cemetery, never to be seen again. Old Bibeau took Henry in, not from any kindness of heart, he liked to say, but to keep the damn dogs from barking every night the boy snuck into his barn to sleep. Grateful as Henry was, he hadn't been raised to be anyone's burden. The War came and, soon as he could, he joined the Army.

Henry and Gladys got engaged after he returned from

France, nothing but gray skin and lanky bones, his lungs seared by mustard gas. He tried to get right back to slaughtering work, but couldn't walk more than a few feet before he'd be so winded he'd have to sit down. Most days were spent on Bibeau's porch in worn army pants, whittling as he stared out at the dirt mountain road. It was old Bibeau who took the wheezing ex-soldier aside and pressed Gladys's mother's yellowing pearl engagement ring into his hand. After months of Gladys's care, Henry was strong enough to start back to work. It took a couple years but soon Henry had his own truck and tools and a house he was building on land he bought from old Bibeau with a bank loan. Those were twenty choice acres because they cut between Farley's dairy pastures and the main road up to Burlington. Someday that land would be worth a hell of a lot of money, old Bibeau predicted. As soon as the house was finished, Henry and Gladys were going to have a church wedding and a honeymoon to Niagara Falls.

Then one spring day Henry Talcott butchered Irene Jolley's father's three lambs. In spite of his gory mission Irene must have known instantly that this plain, rugged man would never fail her the way her own father had constantly failed her bitter mother with all his whoring and gambling, driving her to an early grave. Irene had had just one more course to go for the business college correspondence certificate that would deliver her from under her father's thumb. But her father refused to give her the seven dollars he owed her; then when she announced she was moving out he piled her books and clothes in the front yard and burned them for everyone to see.

Aunt Lena said the reason her baby sister Irene set her sail for Henry Talcott was that she wasn't used to being so completely ignored. Especially by a man.

"He climbed down from his truck and walked right by me on into the barn without a word or even a tip of his hat, like I wasn't even there," she would tell her children later, always with a note of surprise, of wonder almost, as if she too were still trying to figure out how it had all come to pass. He was a good man, respectful and hardworking, she would continue, as if testifying to them and herself what everyone already knew. If he had any faults they were just the result of who he was, a man's man who often ended a job with a drink after a long day, made longer still by his appreciation of the farmhands' bawdy tales and corny jokes. It was the life he knew best, having worked from the time he was twelve.

Irene was lonely on the little farm in rural Belton miles from Atkinson, the bigger, busier town, where she longed to live. She wanted to walk down sidewalks, on paved streets where she could talk to people on their front porches. She wanted to go to her sister Lena's beauty parlor and have her hair done and shop whenever she felt like it, instead of waiting until Henry could bring her into town, which was usually on Sunday when everything was closed. And that was another thing, she wanted to learn how to drive like Lena and work in an office where she could put her business skills to profitable use.

But she had fallen in love with Henry, who loved her back so much he couldn't think straight sometimes, much less understand her skittish ways. A few months after they

married, Thomas was born. Margaret came almost four years later. Then, Jamie. He was the last, the difficult pregnancy Dr. Creel refused to help her end. It was ten thirty at night. Crying all day, the baby grew sicker as night came on. Nothing would bring his fever down. He vomited and convulsed. She couldn't get help. The nearest phone was Farley's, three miles away. And Henry had stopped in at the Dellicote farm on his way home from Bennington to see if they had any work, which they did. Then came supper and a few beers with his old friend Bob. Before he knew it, midnight was long gone and Jamie was already cold in Irene's arms.

She never got over it, Aunt Lena said. She never forgave him. After that she didn't want any more babies to bring into this world and then lose. Henry understood. His own pain was all the more unbearable because he had loved that blue-eyed boy more than life itself. And he had only himself to blame. From then on Henry slept in the little sewing room/nursery off the kitchen and watched his wife turn into someone else.

. . .

Margaret's kitten was the start of all the trouble that summer after his mother left. It was the day Thomas and Margaret had been playing Indians, tracking the men who were putting up poles that would bring new electric lines farther up the mountain. The crew had no idea the children stalked them through the woods. Suddenly one man ran behind a thicket of birch. The minute he undid his pants, Thomas leaped on top of his sister and pushed her face into the ground. Margaret hollered and the man yelped, and then, soon as he was able, began to look for them. His search, if

even there was one, proved useless. By that point in the long summer the children ran those woods, every gully, rill, and copse as if it were their own backyard, which of course it had become. Panting, they galloped down the last hill and darted past the tail-switching cows in the hot, hummocky pasture behind Farley's rambling red barn. Fred Farley was the biggest dairy farmer around. He had five hired hands, a truck with his name on the door, and a shiny black sedan his wife usually drove. Round little woman that she was, she'd back the car right up over the curb in front of the movie theater, then haul their sickly son's big wheelchair out of the trunk to get Jesse-boy inside. Afterward she'd push him down to the drugstore for lemon phosphates from Leamings soda fountain.

Last week Thomas had seen them through the drugstore window after he and Margaret had walked all the way into Atkinson. Margaret's feet hurt. She wanted to go in and sit at the next table. She thought if they looked thirsty enough Mrs. Farley might buy them a soda. Margaret was like that then, not minding a bit if someone wanted to give her something for free. She kept trying to pull open the door, but he held it shut. All he had to do was say Aunt Lena's name to get her to mind. Neither of them wanted to end up in that messy house with beery Aunt Lena and her creepy husband, Max.

Anyway, in their flight from the lineman, Thomas and Margaret were hurrying alongside the barn when Mrs. Farley came down the ramp carrying a cardboard box. She called to Thomas. She knew him from the brief time Jesse-boy had gone to their one-room schoolhouse. At first the Talcott children thought she was angry they were on her

property, but she only wanted to know if they'd like a kitten. There were three in the litter and they could have first pick. Before he could say no, Margaret scooped up the gray and white one. It had black-tipped ears and a black M over its nose.

"M for Margaret," his sister said, nuzzling the kitten's neck.

"Thank you, but we can't take it." Thomas dug his elbow into Margaret's dusty brown arm.

"Yes we can," Margaret countered, moving away so as not to be nudged again. The kitten perched on her shoulder, its big eyes like hers, bluely defiant.

"You know we can't," he said, narrowing his hard stare. Backing Margaret into any kind of corner could be dangerous.

"Is it your father, Thomas? Doesn't he like cats?" Mrs. Farley asked.

"He likes them all right." He tried not to squirm. "We just can't right now."

"Oh," Mrs. Farley said as if she were beginning to understand. "Well, with the barn cats there's always a new litter, so when you can have one just let me know and I'll be sure and save you one." She reached for the kitten.

"No! She's mine now and I'm keeping her."

"Margaret!" Mrs. Farley seemed amused.

That was the way people often reacted to his sister. Small for her age she made up for it in spunk. Even old Bibeau, crank that he was, knew not to push her too hard. Instead he'd address his complaints to whoever else was present: "Gladys, tell the girl to stop thumping the table." Or to him,

“Tell your sister she’s had enough chicken. That wing’s mine.”

Mrs. Farley was telling Margaret in the cautious tone people used around kids stranded on broken ice that she should listen to her big brother: Thomas was just trying to do what his father would want. She should go home and ask permission. If her father said yes Mrs. Farley would bring the kitten by herself. She asked where they were living. And the minute she said it her face clouded. Stammering, she inquired if they were staying at their Aunt Lena’s. That was the thing about backing Margaret into corners—she sucked you right in with her.

“No. We’re out at Black Pond. In a tent,” Margaret added, sending flares of color into Mrs. Farley’s cheery, round cheeks.

“Oh, well then.” Mrs. Farley plucked the purring kitten away by its scruff and returned it to the box. “When you’re more settled then,” she sniffed, as if she couldn’t send one of her cats to go live in a leaky tent with dangling spiders and quick green snakes slithering along the damp dirt floor.

“We are settled.” Just as surely, Margaret plucked the kitten from the box. “That’s where we live.” Hugging the purring curl of fur, she headed toward the road with Thomas swept along once again in his little sister’s wake.

. . .

Because the kitten followed Margaret everywhere, they had to be careful not to go too far. Once, after hours fishing in the boat, they returned to the tent, but the kitten was gone.

“Kitty! Please come back. Please, kitty, kitty, kitty!” Margaret screamed, thrashing through bushes and trees.

They dragged back to find the curled-up kitten hidden in the blanket-tangled mess that was Margaret's cot.

Henry Talcott didn't mind the cat one way or another. If anything, he seemed glad Margaret had found something to take her mind off missing her mother so much. Neither Thomas nor his father talked about Irene, and whenever Margaret burst into tears demanding to know when she was coming back father and son retreated even further, each into his own cave of loneliness.

The wall of silence grew higher. Because Margaret was afraid to leave her kitten again, she stopped going on adventures with her brother. Thomas was tired of playing by the tent or rowing alone on the pond. The little cat was far more attached to his sister than to him. As the summer days passed, he felt more alone. His father drove even longer distances to find the few farmers left who could afford to raise animals for slaughter. After the cows or hogs were gone, they usually weren't replaced. The price of feed and hay had gone too high.

One sunny morning after a rainy week of sodden confinement, Thomas told Margaret they were going into town. Gladys had paid him ten cents last night for helping clean out her back shed and he knew exactly what he would buy with it: the Palomino, the nickel-plated, double-blade jack-knife in the window of Whitby's Hardware. Margaret refused to leave her kitten alone that long. All the way into town he knew he should have made her come. If his father got home early and found her alone there'd be hell to pay. But what harm could possibly come to her? Margaret was sensible enough, and besides, who would bother with her? Especially if she stayed near the tent as he'd told her to.

Creaking toward him along the rutted road was a wagon pulled by a swaybacked, blinkered horse. Gypsies? He froze. Sometimes they crept through the woods looking for children to steal. Or, worse yet, to murder. For a while after his mother disappeared, gypsies were one of the possibilities he and Margaret had considered. At first no one would tell them anything. But now Thomas was realizing it wasn't any great mystery, just his father's deep secret—and theirs. The driver was an old woman in a red-checked dress. Thomas raised his hand to wave just as she leaned to one side. A long brown gob of tobacco juice hit the dusty road. There weren't any gypsies. Margaret would be fine.

. . .

The minute he came out of the store he sat on the curb and opened the jackknife. Both blades were rusted. He rubbed them on his shirttail, but nothing came off. It took all his courage to go back inside. A dour, hairless man, Mr. Whitby didn't like many people, especially children. Thomas showed him the pitted blades and Whitby made a great show of examining the jackknife at every possible angle under the thin light of the hanging bulb that made his bald pate glow.

"Moisture got at it." He closed the blades and held it out to Thomas. "You got to keep it dry."

"I just bought it!"

"I know you did." He stared down at him.

"Can I have one that's not rusted?"

"You just bought the last one."

"What about that one?" He pointed to the jackknife gleaming in the window.

"That's display. It ain't for sale." He peered over smudged, rimless glasses. "So when's your mother coming back?"

“Pretty soon.” As Thomas stared back a smile worked at the little man’s mouth. His mother used to do Whitby’s books every few months. In fact he’d been with her when he’d first seen the jackknife. She was always different when they came in here. It used to bother him the way she’d act like somebody else, something she wasn’t, not his mother but businesslike, as if there were important things for her to do here so he and Margaret had better sit quietly and wait for her to be done.

“Hear she’s a mill hand now,” Whitby said.

Stung by his own ignorance, Thomas closed the blades. He laid the jackknife on the counter. “This ain’t no good. I want my ten cents back, please.”

Whitby smiled. “I don’t take nothing back that’s damaged.”

“But I didn’t do it.”

“It’s still a good knife.” He smiled again. “And it’s better than nothing, now ain’t it?”

“Nothing’s better than nothing.” He had no idea what he meant, but felt strong saying it.

Whitby seemed confused. And mad. “Go on. Take your knife and get the hell outta here.”

“It’s not mine,” Thomas said, leaving the jackknife on the scratched glass countertop. Whitby’s eyes followed him to the door. “This one is!” he declared, snatching the jackknife from its silver display case in the window.

“Put that back, you!” Whitby yelled, but Thomas slammed the door and ran up the street. As soon as he got outside of town he picked up a stick from the road. He whittled as he walked. He wasn’t very good. He couldn’t make the hook-nosed, witchy faces his father used to do, sometimes with

wavy lines of hair even. The best he could do after a couple miles was a sharpened tip. He snapped the spear in two, a dagger now, slipping it into his waistband. At the bottom of the gully lay a pile of broken branches, probably from the crew clearing for the electric poles. He skidded down the steep side and found a choice stick, just dry and thick enough, when a car passed above him. A big gold star glittered on the door. The sheriff. He scrambled on all fours up the gravelly rise back onto the road. Last week the bank in Atkinson had been robbed. Old Bibeau said all the crook got was a bag of promissory notes. *Maybe they got yours*, Gladys said to his father. Old Bibeau laughed. *Farley's got it now*, he crowed.

Or maybe gypsies had been spotted. Margaret! Thomas dropped the branch and ran. Suddenly every terror that could befall such a stupid little girl as his sister reared into mind. For a penny candy she'd climb right in beside them and be gone forever. People were always saying what a beautiful child she was, with her mother's delicate face. But then, she had her father's stubborn ways so maybe she wouldn't. Maybe she'd know better. No, she'd probably do what he'd just done with the jackknife, grab the candy and run. But what if she had gotten tired of being alone all afternoon and decided to go out in the boat with her kitten? The only time they'd taken the kitten out it had walked along the rim of the boat. He could just see it falling in and Margaret trying to rescue it from the bottomless water. One winter when his father was a boy, a wagon, horse, and driver broke through the ice never to be found again. Not a bone, thread, or sliver of wood was ever dredged up. She was always leaning over the side. She could dog-paddle

some, but what if the boat tipped when she was trying to get the kitten back in and it fell over, right on top of her, trapping her in a watery casket. “Stupid girl,” he muttered, running as fast as his cramp-toed shoes would allow, because she’d never think to swim out from under it. No, she’d be banging her head into the dark seat, bobbing up and down while she sobbed and screamed his name, over and over again, so scared and panicky he was sure he could hear her. *Thomas! Thomas! Thomas! Thomas!*

Coming in the opposite direction was the sheriff’s faded green car. It stopped dead in his path. The sheriff jumped out. “You Thomas Talcott?”

“Yessir!” He nodded and panted, needing to tell about Margaret.

“Get in the car.” So the sheriff already knew. Talk was useless. Speed was everything. He ran around to open the front door. “Backseat!” the sheriff barked. When he was in the sheriff locked the back door, then climbed behind the wheel. He started the powerful engine with a key attached to a rabbit’s foot. Good luck. Especially to have the sheriff find him.

“No! You’re going the wrong way,” Thomas shouted as the car rumbled up the dusty road.

“Oh yeah?” The sheriff glanced back. He seemed amused. “Which way’s the right way?” He kept on driving.

“Back there! Out to Black Pond. My sister, she’s eight, and I gotta go help her, she’s—”

“You got a Palomino, two-blade, nickel-plated jackknife on you, son?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Give it here then.” The sheriff’s wide hand went back over the seat.

“It’s new. I just got it.”

The big fingers wiggled.

Hesitantly, Thomas held it up and the sheriff snatched it away. “T. C. Whitby’s? You took it from the window, right?”

“Yes, sir. But it’s mine. I paid for it. I did,” he averred in a weakening voice.

“That’s not what I heard. I heard you grabbed it and took off running, that’s what T. C. Whitby says. And I don’t think a busy man like T. C.’s got any reason or time to make up a story like that.”

“Well he did. I paid him. Ten cents. Did he tell you that?”

“That’s not what I heard.”

“It’s the truth.”

“You Henry’s boy? Talcott, the slaughterman?”

“Yessir. But my sister’s alone. I’m afraid of her going out in the boat all by herself. She’s—”

“Well, we’ll get to the bottom of it.” He glanced back. “One way t’other.”

The sheriff didn’t understand about Margaret. Thomas stared down at his stained brown pants, the torn knees and frayed cuffs. Even if he had stolen the knife his father wouldn’t be as mad at him as he was going to be for leaving Margaret and her damn kitten alone all this time. And if anything happened to her . . . Oh God, he closed his eyes, unable to bear the thought. What would he do? His poor little sister . . .

“I know your Aunt Lena. Yep, she’s a friend of my sister. Your mother’s Irene, right?”

Thomas opened his eyes.

“I heard she’s gone, right? Someplace down t’ Massachusetts. Got herself a job or something there, right? Some friend of hers got it for her. A real good job. Least that’s what Lena says. Well, here we go, son.” He parked in front of the jail.

T. C. Whitby’d be by soon as the store closed. Bad enough he’d been stolen from, he wasn’t about to shut down and lose even more because of the thieving Talcott boy. Thomas perched on the narrow bench by the front window, big as life for every passerby to see.

“Not surprised a bit,” a deputy muttered to the sheriff when he came in carrying supper in a tin pail. “Them Talcotts always been a rugged bunch.”

“Henry’s okay,” the sheriff said. “Long as he ain’t mad about something.”

“Which is just about all the time lately,” the deputy snorted.

Paper crinkled. Thomas smelled beef gravy. His empty stomach growled. Hours ago breakfast had been a shared biscuit and the blueberries he and Margaret had picked, covered with some cream his father had brought when he got home late last night and left in the ice chest for them to find as a surprise after he’d left early this morning.

“Can you blame him?”

“I never woulda thought it. Not of Irene Jalley.”

“Lena for sure. But Irene, Jesus, no.”

“Takes all kinds.” The words, thick globules with the deputy’s chewing.

The front door opened. T. C. Whitby appeared in rolled-up shirtsleeves and shiny black tie. He smiled triumphantly

at the boy. Even though they started off hearing the boy out, the sheriff and deputy were soon kowtowing to the man. If Whitby got his knife back that would be the end of it. Thomas could go home.

“Sounds fair to me.” The sheriff handed Whitby the two-blade Palomino.

“Fair’s fair, so here’s the one you bought.” Whitby held out the rusted jackknife.

“No, sir.” Thomas wouldn’t take it. If fair was really fair he should have been able to buy the jackknife in the window.

“Don’t be foolish now,” the sheriff warned.

Once again, Thomas explained that that one was rusted.

The sheriff pulled out the blades. “He’s right,” he told Whitby.

“That’s why it’s only ten cents,” Whitby said. “Now that one,” he said pointing, “that one’s twenty, being in such pristine condition.”

The sheriff glanced at the deputy and Thomas felt better. Whitby was a crook and they both knew it. He hadn’t broken the law, but Whitby had, trying to pass off the inferior jackknife on him just because he was a kid. The sheriff said if Thomas wanted the jackknife from the window he’d have to pay a dime more. That wasn’t fair, Thomas objected. The deputy eyed his cooling dinner. Rapping his knuckles on the desktop, the sheriff told the boy to make up his mind. This was taking up way too much of everyone’s time. Thomas said he wanted his dime back.

“No sirree!” Whitby squealed. “Not for all this trouble, you’re not going scot-free plus being paid besides.”

“Give the boy his dime. That seems fair. Don’t you think?” the sheriff added, and though Thomas couldn’t have

put it into words then, he understood later, years later, that he had been not just disappointed by the tremor in the sheriff's voice, but ashamed.

"For what? Reward for his brazen thievery? No, sheriff, I'm keeping this dime." Whitby flipped it into the air, then caught it. "That way he'll think twice before stealing from me or anyone else again. The wages of sin," he said, slipping it into his pocket.

"I suppose," the sheriff considered with a look meant to be both appeasing and stern, "it's kinda like a fine then, you could say, son, a lesson learned. I guess that's fair enough." He patted Thomas's shoulder, but the boy would have no part of it.

"Then he better give me the rusted one then!" he cried, with more indignation and anger than he had ever felt for anyone. "Or else he's just stealing from me then, that's what he's doing, and you damn well know it too, don't you, sheriff?"

"Now you just watch your mouth!" The deputy shoved him down onto the bench, so hard his head banged back against the wall. For a moment it felt as if he were struggling to wake from a pressing sleep.

"Mother takes off, that's what happens," Whitby was saying.

Tears came. No way to stop them. Closed his eyes. Held his breath, but they burned down his cheeks with the awful girl-gasping sob that shuddered through him. His mother was gone, his house. His father passed through the days like a dead man. All he had was Margaret and she was probably gone too. And here he sat bawling in their shadows because

his whole life had changed and he couldn't do a thing to make it better. He didn't want the stupid jackknife or the dime even. Just for life to be fair, that's all he wanted.

"Give him something. That there, the rusted one," the sheriff said. "Here." The sheriff put the lesser jackknife into his hand. "Now go on. Go on home." He steered him through the doorway.

Thomas wanted to run. His heart and brain raced so much he was short of breath, but he made his feet walk down the street, slowly.

"And you better tell your father what you did, because if you don't, I will!" the sheriff shouted after him.

. . .

At that very moment, a few miles away, Mrs. Farley had just parked her car at the wooded edge of Bibeau's property. She slipped off her driving scarf, patted any mussed waves into place, then slid the wrapped plate of warm cookies from the backseat and followed the old logging trail toward the pond, whistling softly to warn off animals and snakes. This mission required a great deal of courage, for Mrs. Farley was not a born country girl. Her free hand waved in front of her face. Even the bugs scared her. Especially mosquitoes. After all the rain they buzzed in bloodthirsty clouds. Her heel teetered on the bumpy path, but she caught herself in time. Two bites rose on her arm, one swelled on her cheek. Had she known it was this far in she would have worn more sensible shoes. Imagine, she thought, with the sagging black tent in sight now, children having to live like that. Fred said he'd done all that he could under the circumstances: she could ask anyone, and they'd all tell her

the same thing. Henry Talcott was a stubborn man. After Fred took over Talcott's note, he'd sent word through the bank that he'd be glad to have Talcott stay on as a tenant. But he'd chosen pride over his family. And now look . . . "Hello? Hello? Hello there!" she called, then paused, certain she'd heard something. A child's voice. Crying! "It's just me! Mrs. Farley . . . Margaret?" She rushed toward the tent.

. . .

When Thomas finally got back, Margaret and the kitten were gone. Shouting to her he ran to the pond, relieved to find the boat docked, the rope knotted exactly as he had left it. Maybe she'd gone into the woods to see if the blackberries they'd found yesterday were ripe yet. The blackberry thicket was at least a mile off. He hollered her name as he went. The sun sagged low in the streaked sky. His stomach twisted with hunger. It was surely past supper-time. Maybe six-thirty by now, seven, he couldn't be sure. "Margaret! Margaret!" The warm thicket hummed with bees, most of the berries hard, still white and green, and there was no sign of her.

He had to find her before dark. Before his father came home. He ran back, not even bothering to stay on the trail. This time he saw the note in the fold of canvas flap.

*Dear Thomas and Mr. Talcott,
I brought some fresh baked cookies by and found Margaret alone and covered with bee stings. I have taken her to Dr. Creel's. I will bring her to my house after.*

*Sincerely,
Your neighbor
Mrs. Fred Farley*

It was almost dark by the time Thomas arrived at the Farleys'. Mrs. Farley stood just inside the door, whispering how Margaret had fallen asleep on the way home from the doctor's. Her arms and legs were stung the worst. She'd gone out with the kitten and had stepped into a yellow jackets' nest. Dr. Creel had tweezered out the stingers, then made a baking-soda paste to bring down the swelling. But it hadn't done much for the pain. Every now and again she cried out in her sleep.

She'd be all right; Margaret was a brave girl, Thomas said, which was a lie. What she was was a very good actress, though he knew better than say this to Mrs. Farley, who was obviously in the thrall of his sister's drama. He said he'd better take her home now. She asked if his father was there yet. No, but he would be any minute, Thomas said. Well, he'd see her note then and know to come here, she said. She invited him into the kitchen, where Jesse-boy sat on a blanket-covered chair, thin legs stretched out on a leather hassock, nibbling cookies from his lap tray while he listened to the radio. She asked Thomas if he'd had supper. He lied and said yes. She gave him a plate of cookies and a glass of cold creamy milk at the table, then skittered happily, eagerly, nervously up and down the stairs to check on Margaret—poor little thing's sound asleep, she'd whisper, bustling back into the kitchen. With more than a few sentences Jesse-boy's breathing grew labored, so Thomas found himself doing most of the talking, not because he had anything to say, and not even to fill the strange silence, but because, just as his father's did, Jesse-boy's wheezing scared him, made him panicky in that same way. As long as he kept talking, Jesse-boy wouldn't have to.

Jesse-boy was four years older but they had been in school together years back, before Jesse-boy left to be taught at home. Thomas was recalling his way through the grades. Jesse-boy's eyes gleamed with the comeuppance stories. Thomas tried to think of every bad thing that had ever happened to a bully. A few he even made up. This one though was true. It was about Billy Humboldt's terrible accident, falling on his head from his father's tractor. He'd never been right since. But then his fits got so bad last year they had to send him to some place up in Burlington. "Like a crazy house almost—"

"Shh!" Mrs. Farley said, and Thomas realized that Jesse-boy had fallen asleep. She hurried off again, then tiptoed into the room with Mr. Farley, who slipped his arms under his son's limp body and carried him up to bed.

At ten-thirty when Thomas's father still hadn't come, Mrs. Farley made up the daybed for Thomas. He said he wasn't tired. She insisted he at least rest on it. At three in the morning he was awakened by Margaret screaming. Bolting upstairs, he followed her cries to the bedroom, where Mrs. Farley had already arrived. Margaret's cheeks hung in jowly sacs past her chin. Her eyes were swollen to slits. Helpless, he watched Mrs. Farley dab on another coating of the white paste that cracked the minute it dried.

"There, there now," she whispered, holding his sister's puffy hand while she moaned.

She looked like a monster. Like one of the sideshow freaks at the fair. Mrs. Farley kept assuring Margaret that she was going to be all right. Her tongue was so swelled up she could barely speak. When she grunted like that, she sounded like Billy Humboldt. What if she ended up like him? In some

crazy-person place? It could happen. Anything could, he was beginning to find out.

At four thirty he sat up on the daybed. His father's rickety old truck had just pulled up to the house. Henry left the motor on and ran onto the porch. His truck had broken down in Montpelier and he'd been most of the night trying to get it fixed and going again. No matter how Mrs. Farley went on about Margaret's dangerous condition, he insisted on taking his children home. Shushing him all the way, Mrs. Farley led him upstairs to look in on the poor little thing. Thomas watched from the doorway. His father bent down and whispered in Margaret's ear. Then, just as Mr. Farley had done earlier to his son, his father lifted her from the bed. She screamed with pain. Easing her back down, he said she could stay if she wanted. Did she want to? he asked through her sobbing. She said yes, Mrs. Farley reported, gently touching the baking-soda poultice to the little girl's neck.

"And Thomas, you can stay too if you'd like. That way Margaret'll have a familiar face here when she wakes up," Mrs. Farley offered.

He didn't want to. He wanted to be with his father, who just stood there like a drained and broken man, grease-streaked arms hanging at his sides. But he also didn't want to have to explain how it had all come to be this way because of him. "Okay," he said with a quick step into the room.

"No! He comes with me. She can sleep here. Until I come back. In the morning at eight."

It was a long, silent ride back. Thomas was relieved. His father had had enough bad things happen for one day. He

didn't need to hear how his son had been picked up as a common thief and been hauled into jail by the sheriff, though he'd know soon enough. News traveled fast, especially bad news.

"Listen to me now," his father said, pulling up to the tent. He turned off the lights, but not the engine. "Fred Farley might have my house and land, but he's not taking my kids."

"No, I know!"

"Well it didn't sound like it back there. Seemed to me you were ready to move right in."

"No, I wasn't! I swear!"

His father was silent a moment. "I'm doing my best, Tom, but I don't know, maybe that's not good enough. Maybe one of these days I'll just run down dead like the truck today."

"No! You won't! It's just bad times. Like you said."

"Some people's bad times just seem to get worse and worse, no matter what. And that's what we gotta be ready, prepared for."

"For what?"

"For what to do. If that comes." Here came a longer silence, strained with the rasp of his hard breathing. "What to do with you and Margaret."

"We're doing fine. Just fine, Daddy."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah! I never had so much fun as this. This summer, living in the tent, going fishing every day, just going in the woods all the time. Margaret and me, we're probably the luckiest kids in the whole world!"

His father patted his knee. “You’re a good boy, Tom. A real good son.”

Thomas’s eyes burned with tears. He wasn’t a good boy, good son, good brother, good anything. If he had been his mother never would have left.