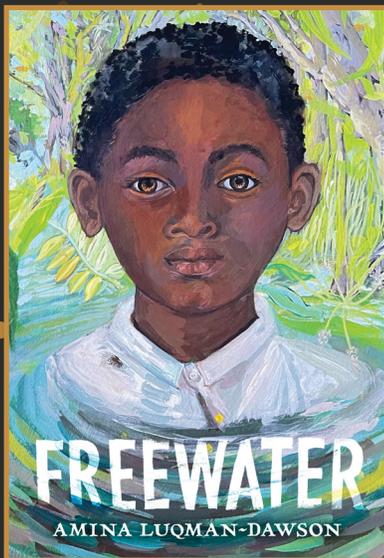


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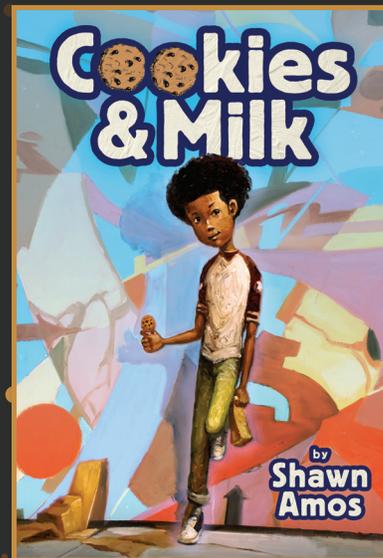
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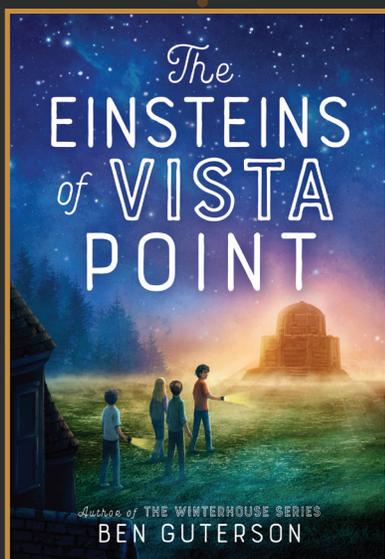
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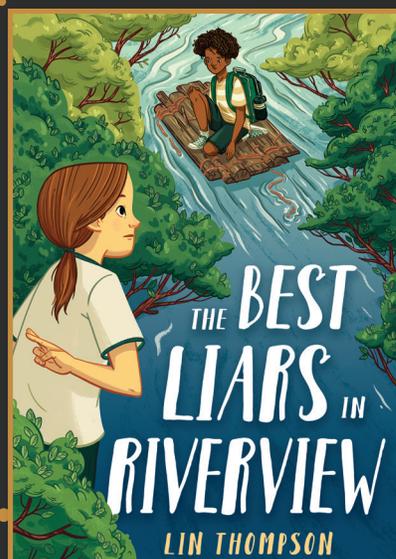
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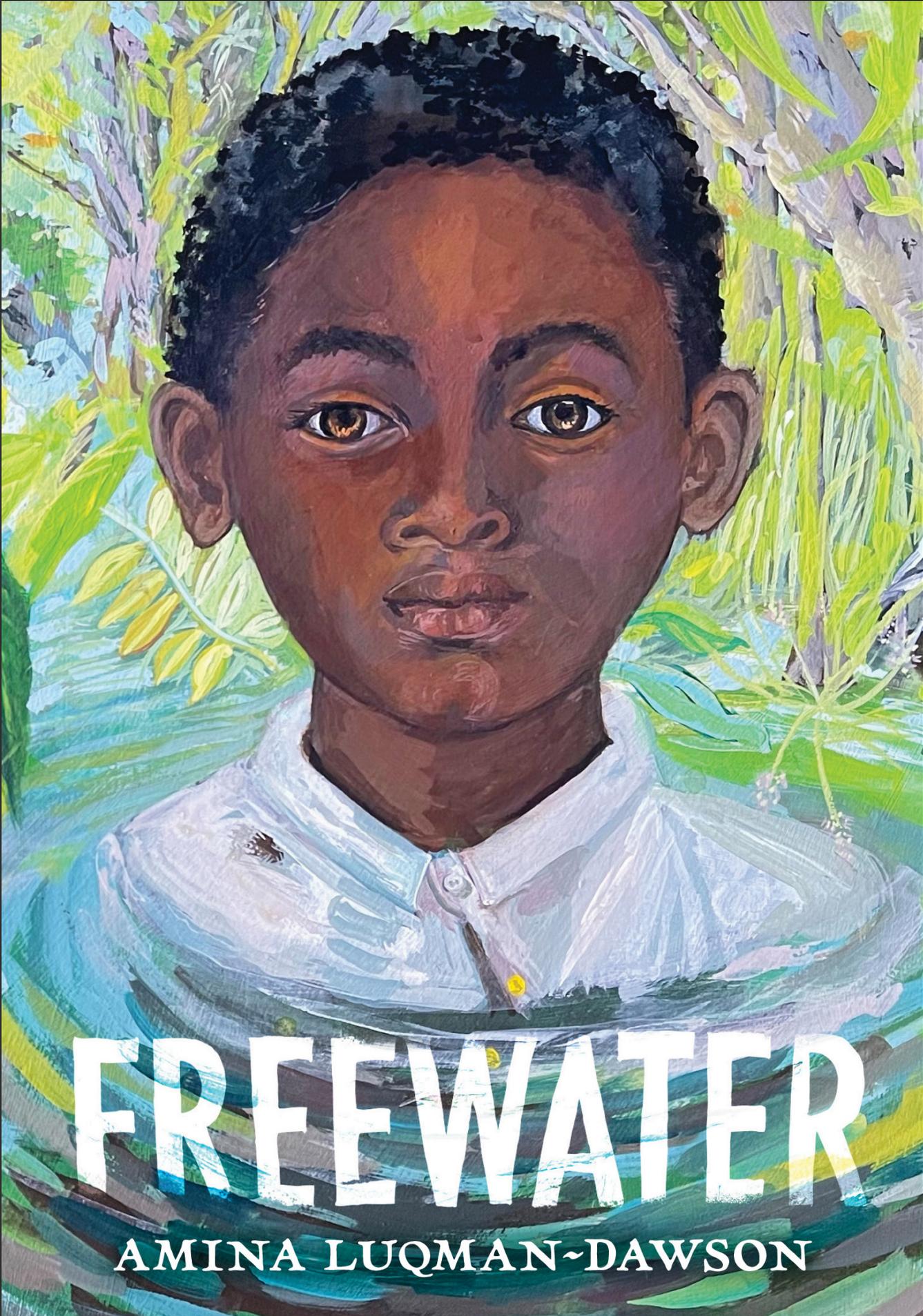


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LBYR REVIEW MATERIAL



FREEWATER

AMINA LUQMAN-DAWSON

LBYR REVIEW MATERIAL

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Prologue

SANZI HAD BROKEN YET ANOTHER RULE, BUT she didn't care. It was night, and she was alone and on the forbidden edge. To make matters worse, despite her mother's numerous warnings, Sanzi crossed right over, leaving behind the safety of her swamp island home. *Just a peek*, she thought. That's all she wanted, then she'd go back. Down the muddy hillside she slid to a single tall tree. She climbed it, hopping from one craggy branch to the next, higher and higher.

On the highest branch, moonlight hit Sanzi and made her nutmeg skin shine silver. From her perch she looked out. A sea of swamp mud, muck, and tangle lay before her. To her disappointment, fog rolled in from the east, covering her view like a white feather blanket.

She strained to see beyond the muck and fog to the plantation lands. She was a free child of the swamp and those lands were a mystery to her. It was a miracle her parents and the others had run from there and found this piece of elevated swamp land, small and dry. Their own secret island in an ocean of mud.

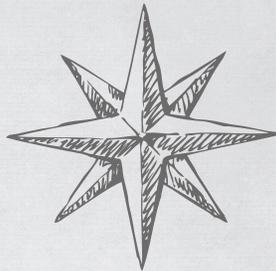
Tales had spread among the swamp island children like herself about what lay in plantation lands: two-headed

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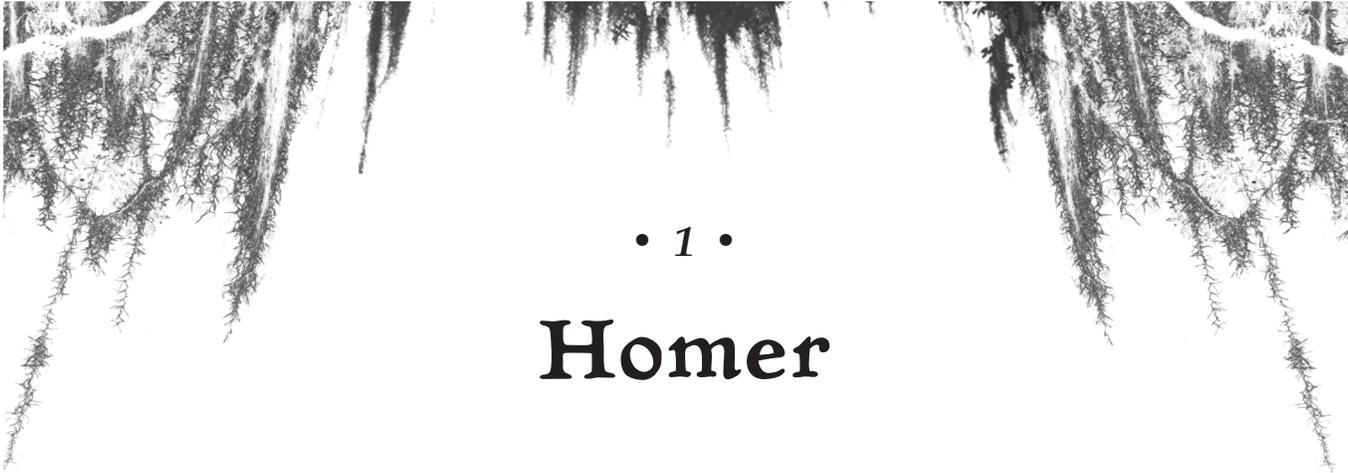
men, turtles without shells, and skeletons that rose from the dead. Although she was twelve and almost grown, at least in her mind, Sanzi still wasn't sure how much of it was true, but she did believe that dangers lay out there.

As Sanzi contemplated that danger, she took a walnut-shaped stone from her sack, placed it in the well of her sling, and spun it overhead. The whir of the leather sling whispered in the air like children sipping hot soup. *Sssip, sssssip, ssssip*. She aimed toward the plantation lands. With a dream of adventure and a flick of her wrist, she released the sling and watched the stone soar high in the air, catch the moonlight, and disappear into the cauldron of fog below.

THE JOURNEY



LBYP REVIEW MATERIAL



• 1 •

Homer

DOGS BARKING IN THE FOREST IS EXTRA SCARY.

All their growling and yapping hits the trees and makes it sound like they're coming from every direction. Stokes had sent out the whole pack. He knew we'd tried to escape, and his knowing had me to blame.

But Ada didn't say that. Eyes wide open with fear, Ada's skinny arms held tight to a tree trunk. She was huffing and puffing to catch air.

"Homer!" She howled it in that way that said, *You're my big brother—now what?*

I didn't have the breath nor heart to answer her. My mind was still on where we'd come from. Where were Mama and Anna? How could we keep going without them? Mama had gone back because of me, and now they were both gone.

"Homer, they're coming!" said Ada.

Paws crushed dead tree branches. It was enough to bring me back.

"Run!" I said. But it was too late. In the moonlight I spotted dog ears that pointed straight up. Funny thing was, I knew this dog. Even in the dark, I could see its face, big and

FREEWATER

round like one of Mama's iron pots in the Big House kitchen. Stokes had me feed that big head when he was away watching the fields. I had to do it with my morning work, after collecting milk and eggs, but before watering and brushing down the horses. The dogs ate just about the same food rations they gave us—lucky dogs. Yet they always stood there, yapping mean and angry—ungrateful dogs. Now here, this same dog came running at me like it didn't even matter he'd had the food from my hand. We were strangers. I was the slave and he was the dog sent to catch me.

He sank his teeth into my ankle. Ada screamed. She didn't need to. I was so scared I didn't feel anything but the hot wet of his tongue. With my other foot, I kicked him in his head. He let go, whimpering, then backed away, maybe waiting for his friends before coming at me again.

I grabbed Ada and we ran.

There was water nearby—Mama had told us about it. *If you don't see me come back, get to the river, she'd said.*

I didn't take much heed of her instructions at the time. We were going North, and Mama and Anna were coming along with us.

Mama said there was a river, but she hadn't told us it wasn't a thing like the sleepy one we knew by Southerland. We heard the water before we saw it. It was night, but this river was awake. We stood on the bank with barking behind us and roaring water in front.

“It sounds like a hungry monster!” Ada likened everything to monsters and angels. But she was right. The water spilled downhill and grumbled like a belly waiting for food, its tongue licking this way and that as it turned and twisted toward the foggy swamp. Lord only knows what happened when it got there. But there was no time for worrying about that. If those dogs met us again, they weren’t going to be any nicer.

“Ada, you know that dream you have about flying?” I asked. Even with dogs on our heels, her face was kind of happy that I’d remembered her dream. She nodded.

“Well, now you get the chance to fly, like you did in that dream. We’re gonna fly right off this riverbank.”

Ada considered. “Into the water?” she asked.

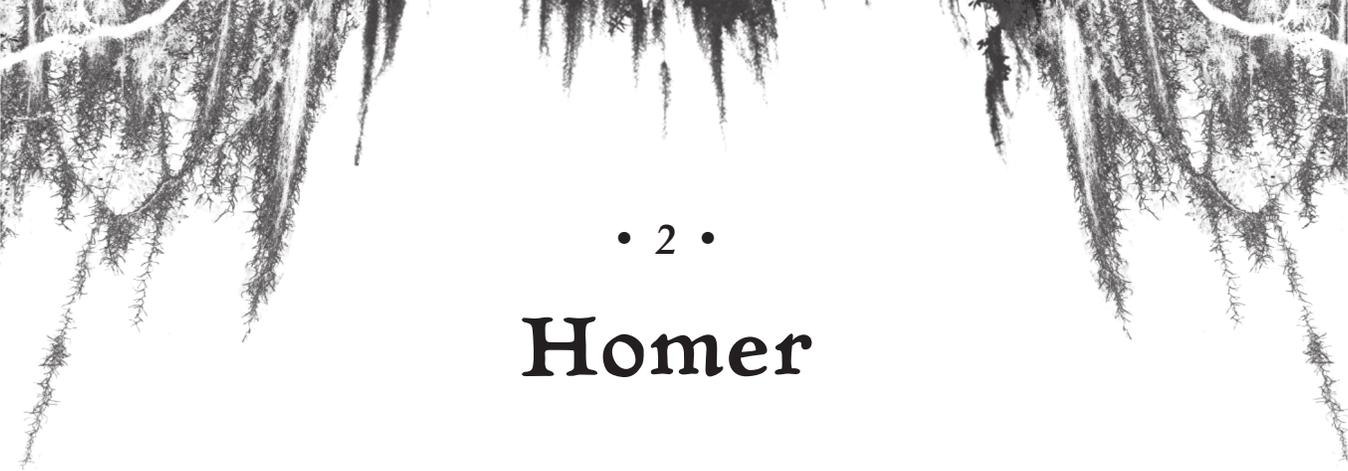
I nodded. The sound of dog paws hitting soft ground came closer.

“But Homer, I can’t swim.” She said it more with sadness than anything.

“That’s all right, you can do it,” I said.

“But Homer, *you* can’t swim,” she said.

Before I had a chance to think about that fact, I grabbed Ada’s hand and ran toward the riverbank and jumped.



• 2 •

Homer

WHEN MINGO DIED LAST SUMMER, THEY SENT over a coffin to our quarters. It was a simple wood box, narrow and short. I didn't know him well. But you don't forget a man you help put in a coffin. He was tall. When we folded his long legs to fit in that short wood box and nailed on the lid in the middle of the summer heat, I remember being scared that he wouldn't be able to breathe in that thing.

In the river, a flash of Mingo came to me. That's how being underwater felt, like lying in a coffin. I couldn't breathe, see, or move. I'd swear that water felt like pudding—heavy, wet, and smooth.

I stopped, pudding still until Ada's dress swiped my foot and woke me up. I took hold of it and started kicking and chopping at the water like I was fighting that big-face dog all over again.

Everything went swirling and finally I hit air. Water filled my ears and slapped my face. In my arms Ada was swinging at the night, reaching for things that weren't there.

"Homer!" she coughed.

The water pushed us downriver into a churning fall. Over we went, and down under again. My head hit rocks on the river floor and clanged like a cowbell. Everything went black. I awoke floating in the water, and Ada's arms were gone.

Then I heard it. A scream. Ada had made that same scream the last time she'd been around Mistress. That scream had set Mama's mind on taking us North.

I fell back into the ugly water. This time, I used it to help me get farther downriver, to Ada.

Ada's got a color on her, oak brown with lots of spots. I only ever seen spots like that on Master Crumb. It's those spots that led to troubles and the scream with Mistress. In the moonlight, her spots caught my eye. Ada was pressed to the riverbank, water smacking her this way and that. I kicked and fought my way to her. She grabbed on to me.

We reached for roots poking out from the bank and clawed our way out of that river. When we hit land, I lay there with my head heavy and pounding. Ada coughed and spat.

"I don't think we flew that time," she sputtered.

"No, I reckon we didn't," I said.

"I think we mighta needed to be running faster when we started, not just go jumping like that," explained Ada, like she was the one who was twelve, not me.

Even at seven, Ada holds tight to her dreams. I'm the

FREEWATER

opposite. If it didn't work the first time, there was no way I'd be trying it again.

"What you reckon is gonna happen now?" she asked.

I looked around, hoping for an answer. Thin, tall, starving-men trees stood at attention. Huge, fat ones with knotty trunks rested on their sides. All were covered in a tangle of vines, brush, dreamy fog, and darkness.

I coughed and the whole swamp answered with a heap of grunts, growls, tweets, and squawks. The swamp heard me, and I felt anything but safe.

I had my rules back at Southerland; the most important was being invisible. Invisibility was how I survived. I'd learned that all attention, even the good kind, could be dangerous. I'd go a full day without anyone or anything even knowing I'd been there. Fetching milk, brushing horses, tending the flower garden, getting eggs, all of it done without so much as a *moo* from a cow or a *cluck* from a chicken, or anyone saying my name. I was nowhere, I was nothing. When I did it right, I felt safer. But the swamp didn't abide by my rules. This swamp saw me.

My head sank into the spongy wet ground. It smelled of old tea.

"Homer, you hear those monsters?" asked Ada.

She leaned over me. Her wild curly hair touched my nose. Ada liked to do things close. Sweat made her spots shine like tiny coins in the moonlight.

“It’s animals you’re hearing—ain’t no monsters, Ada.”

Her eyes got dark, almost as brown as mine. They were the only thing about us that looked alike. She exhaled. Her breath already smelled like the swamp. Ada had a way of soaking things up.

“That’s what the monsters want you to think,” she said, like it was me who was talking without good sense. “Mrs. Petunia told me they’ll eat you alive. They just step out from one of these trees and swallow you down whole,” she said.

“Mrs. Petunia was trying to scare you. There ain’t nobody living in these here trees,” I said.

“You think we could get up North from here?” Hope shone in Ada’s eyes as she said it.

“North?” The word didn’t seem right in this place.

“Mama said we were going,” Ada reminded me.

Hearing talk about Mama made me rub my hurting head and almost cry from shame and sadness. I was set on going back for Anna. Anna was my friend and she needed saving. I tried to go, but instead Mama went in my place. And when no one came but those dogs, we did like Mama said and ran for the river.

“Ain’t no heading North in this here swamp. Besides, we can’t go North without...” My ending hung in the air. *Mama.*

“I was only wondering. Mrs. Petunia would whisper about the North. She said there were people free like birds

FREEWATER

there. I'm thinking if there's ever a place where people can fly, it's in the North. Going there we might even learn to fly ourselves, then come back here and fly Mama away."

Sometimes Ada's dreams burned so bright I didn't have the strength to put them out.

"I don't know," I muttered.

Ada smiled at me. She found that a good answer.

Mama was a finder. An egg tucked under the hay of the chicken coop, a tick lodged behind my knee, wild mint left over from planting three years past, my favorite rock, she could find it. She was good at finding me and especially Ada. When Ada was small, she was always wandering into trouble. Ada's foot stuck in a ditch, her hair caught in nettles, or she was lost in the forest. From the kitchen, Mama would know to go find her just in time. Mama had told us to run for the river. Maybe she could find us. The thought made me sit up.

How would she know where on the riverbank? Head pounding, I got two sticks, went to the bank, stuck them into the ground, then leaned them onto each other to make a point.

"What are you doing?" asked Ada.

Mama could find that, I thought. Then, as if the swamp said no, the damp ground pulled at the sticks and they fell flat. A second try and they fell again.

"Nothing," I said, digging my toes into the spongy earth. "Nothing." Still, if Mama slid down the river like us,

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she'd probably stop in the same place we did, then she'd climb up the bank and there we'd be. It was possible. She could find us.

Tired by the thought of it all, I sat down and everything began to swim. Blood ran from a cut on my temple. The swamp, Ada, and the river were spinning around me.

"We need to stay here for a minute," I heard myself say, and I laid my head back and let sleep come over me.

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

ELISE BROACH



Duet

A bird. A boy. A musical mystery.

LBYR REVIEW MATERIAL

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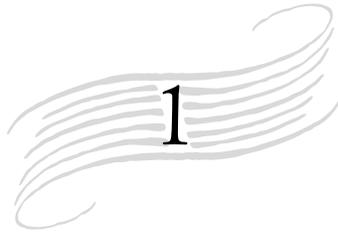
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Music Lesson

Call me Mirabelle. It's a nice name, don't you think? We all have pretty names, my mother says, because we're all beautiful. Every last one of us! There's no such thing as an ugly goldfinch. We're little and yellow, with gray, black, and white markings. But it's mostly the yellow you notice: like a beam of sunshine, or a marigold, or a lemon. Just seeing me—even for a split second, half hidden by leaves, a glimpse of that bright, flashing yellow—well, I promise you, it is guaranteed to make you smile.

Okay, I admit, my brothers are an even brighter color than I am. The boys always are. Why *is* that? So annoying. They brag about it, too. But Mother says we girls have *subtlety* in our yellow hues. I like the sound of that. A subtle yellow is more elegant, I'm pretty sure.

And I'm still yellow enough to brighten the grayest day. Early in the spring, when the old man, Mr. Starek, was sick, I sat on a branch outside his bedroom window to cheer him up. It had been a sad winter for him. His sister died, and even though she lived close by, they hadn't seen each other in years and years. Isn't that strange? I can't imagine not seeing my brothers for years, although they do make me mad sometimes.

We all knew Mr. Starek was very upset. In a way, that surprised me. If he hadn't seen his sister in such a long time, why would he miss her now that she was gone? But he *did* miss her. He has no other family, from what we can tell...maybe relatives far away, in Europe, but not here in America. There's a photograph of his sister in his bedroom, and after she died, he would look at it sorrowfully for long periods. And then there was some trouble with her house. I'm not sure what exactly—something involving money, and birds have no interest in money, so we didn't pay much attention. But the old man got sick in the middle of all this, and Mother told me to visit him. It seemed like the least I could do, since he always fills the bird feeder for us.

Sometimes I would sing for him. The high limb of a dogwood tree grazes his window, so I would hop to the end of it, close to the pane, and then let the song pour out of me—like water rippling, or wind blowing through tall grass, or something so free and fast and flowing that it can't be stopped. The old man would startle in his bed and turn toward the window, and then he'd listen intently. I

could see the concentration in his face. I don't think I'm flattering myself when I say he looked impressed, like hearing me sing was a real tweet. Haha, *treat*, I mean. Bird joke. For a singer, there is no greater compliment than someone who truly listens to you.

I'm a musical artist, you see. I prefer *artiste*, actually. It sounds more distinguished. All of us goldfinches can sing, of course, but I'm not like the rest of them, with their wild racket of chirping. I still have a lot of practicing to do, but I promise you this: when I sing, anyone within earshot knows it's a *song*.

Which is why I like the old man. Mr. Starek appreciates music. He's a music teacher, a pianist. And from what I can tell, he used to be *famous*. He played the piano all over the world! Can you imagine? Packed on the shelves of his music room are shiny trophies and serious-looking plaques with his name on them. And hanging on the walls are framed pictures of the world's great composers. How do I know they're the world's great composers? Well, he plays their music on his piano, and I have ears, don't I?

And something more important, which you can't really teach: taste. Musical taste. I grew up listening to the old man play—Beethoven and Mozart and Brahms and Bach—and hearing him talk about music, week after week, to the piano students who came through his front door. Now, since he got sick, he's pretty much stopped teaching. Parents come begging for lessons and he tells them he's retired. But I learned a lot while he was still giving piano lessons. He'd say things like:

“This is Beethoven’s Moonlight Sonata. Movement one starts gently, softly, like a lullaby.”

Or:

“You need speed and delicacy for Debussy. When you touch the keys, imagine they are covered in flecks of gold. Pick up the flecks as quickly as possible.”

See what I mean? For him, even talking about music is an art. It doesn’t hurt that he has an accent. Mother says he’s from Europe, a place called Poland, and he has a careful way of speaking that makes everything he says sound smart.

“I wish I had an accent,” I tell Mother.

“You do have an accent,” she says. “You just can’t hear it. If you flew all the way to Europe, you’d sound different to the birds over there.”

Isn’t that funny? We all have accents! We just don’t know it until we go someplace where people don’t talk the same way we do.

The children used to come to the old man’s house almost every afternoon. Most of them lived in Boston, which is a big, red-and-gray city about an hour from here, flying time. Remember, we birds don’t have to follow roads or stop for traffic lights, so we can get to places a lot faster than you humans can.

Anyway, their parents would bring them all the way out to Mr. Starek’s little town for their lessons. A sweet-smelling silk tree grows near the music room, and I would perch on the bottom limb and watch the lessons through the window. I could see

everything from there. I would sit perfectly still and listen, because listening is the best kind of learning for me. And birds have excellent hearing—did you know that? Of the five senses, it's our second-best, after sight. I can hear the piano perfectly even with the windows closed, and when I'm swept up in it, the music fills me almost the way it does when I'm singing. It swirls around me, sliding through my feathers like water, wave after wave washing into my *soul*.

Oh, you didn't think birds had souls? Of course we do.

With the music lessons, the children did get better over time, but they were never as good as the old man. I think we artists are the only ones who really know what it takes. And we recognize it in each other. Even now, when Mr. Starek goes into the music room and sits at the piano, his fingers dance over the keys, quickly, softly, and then with force: *ba-ta-ta-DUM!* I see his body sway and his arms tense and then loosen as his long fingers span the keys. I feel the music beat in me like a second heart. Oh my goodness, does it make me want to *sing*.

Sometimes the old man glances up and sees me. I think he can tell how excited I am. I miss the piano lessons he used to give. Honestly, I learned so much from them. The old man would often play a short piece for the child at the beginning of the lesson, and I loved listening to him.

Sometimes, even now, after he plays for a bit, he'll walk to the window to speak to me.



“Hello, little bird. Are you hungry?” he’ll say. “I filled the bird feeder for you.”

I pretend to be shy. If he comes too close, I hop backward on the branch and then fly away home to the shiny green holly tree.

It grows by the fence in his backyard, and it's where I live with my mother and brothers.

☛ I'm not shy, really. None of us birds are, but people like it when we pretend to be. Don't get me wrong...birds are careful of dangerous situations. We look out for ourselves. But that whole elaborate dance—hopping close to a person, then flying away, then returning and approaching even closer, then fluttering off again? I'll let you in on a secret. It's a performance. People like to feel chosen, like they've been singled out for a wild creature's attention and trust.

You don't believe me? One word for you: pigeons. Pigeons aren't shy at all. They flock to people, and how do people react? Everybody thinks pigeons are very ordinary. Worse yet, people are annoyed by them and call them pests. So believe me, the rest of us birds learned our lesson. Pretend to be shy.

That's what I do with the old man. When he comes to the window and talks to me, I quickly hop up the branch, cock my head at him, and then, with a whoosh, I flutter away.

Here's another thing I bet you're dying to know: what it's like to fly. Well, I won't lie to you. Flying is THE BEST. Next to singing, it is the most wonderful feeling you can imagine. Mother says we must never take it for granted, and I promise not to.

How can I describe it?

When I lift off from a branch, my wings are beat-beat-beating, super fast.

Currents of air rush underneath me, and it's like being lifted

by a cloud—something weightless but also thick, cushioning my body and streaming off my wings and pulling me, pushing me, raising me higher and higher and higher.

And then, when I'm high enough, I dive and float and soar, buoyed only by air.

The whole world spreads out beneath me. I can see the entire backyard of the Garcias, the family who lives next door to Mr. Starek: their swing set, their deck, their barbecue grill. I can see the clumpy tops of trees, the bright flowerpots, the lush green squares of lawn, sometimes a turquoise swimming pool. I can see the colorful metal flashes of cars driving by, the geometry of streets and driveways in the neighborhood. And often, more often than I'd like, I can see the old man's fluffy gray cat, Harmony, sitting on the back patio, watching me.

I'm not scared of that old cat. What's there to be scared of, when you can *fly*?

In fact, on this sunny summer day, I am just about to execute a couple of loop-the-loops over Harmony's head, to remind her that she will never catch me. But then I see a boy.

His mother gets out of a car in the driveway, and she has to do some coaxing even to get the boy to join her.

Is he a piano student? I've never seen him before. He looks to be about eleven or twelve, though I admit, I am not good at guessing human ages. His hair is smooth and shining black, the blue-black of a raven's wing.

I land in the top twigs of the old yew bush by the front door for a better view. The boy is frowning, his face angry and clenched.

“I don’t see why I can’t keep taking lessons from Emily,” he says.

“Michael,” his mother says, her voice low, her arm urging him toward the old man’s porch. “We’ve been through this. Emily is the one who thinks you need a new teacher. And years ago, Mr. Starek was *her* teacher. Think of that! You’ll be taking lessons from your teacher’s teacher.”

Well, I hate to disappoint these two, but the old man is retired. They’ve come to the wrong place.

“I want Emily,” the boy says. His hands ball into fists at his sides. He stops walking.

His mother sighs and bends down, her voice tight with exasperation. “I know you like Emily. She was an excellent teacher for you, all through elementary school. But she believes you have a real gift! She doesn’t want to hold you back.”

“She wasn’t holding me back,” the boy, Michael, says, still frowning.

I hop to a lower branch. This would be something new: a boy with real musical talent who doesn’t want to take lessons from the old man. The old man is a very popular piano teacher. Before he got sick and stopped teaching, there was a long list of students waiting to study with him. I know this because, even now, they sometimes come to the house with their parents, or if

they're teenagers, on their own, pleading with him to teach them piano. And he says no. Politely, of course—the old man is always polite. So why should this boy—this reluctant, grouchy boy—get the chance to study with him?

Is it because of his “gift”? If his mother and this Emily they're talking about are even right about that. Personally, I doubt it. The boy clearly doesn't want to be here, and the ones who have real talent can't wait to play.

Take me, for example. You couldn't keep me from singing if you tied my beak shut with string! That's the difference between an ordinary skill and a gift. A gift is an *obsession*. You can't stop yourself.

So why is the boy being so stubborn? His mother looks mad now, too. She reminds me of my mother when my brothers and I are splashing too long in the stone birdbath.

“Michael, please. Emily says Mr. Starek is the best of the best. And we're very lucky he's close by! At least let's go in and meet him.”

“I like Emily,” Michael says, his voice loud.

“Well, Emily likes Mr. Starek. And she thinks he'll be the perfect teacher for you. Let's give him a chance, okay?”

The mother presses the boy forward, herding him up the steps. She knocks on the door, then hesitantly clangs the large brass bell that hangs next to it.

“No one is better than Emily,” Michael grumbles.

“Shhhh,” the mother whispers, just as the old man opens the door.

He stands there smiling, in his pressed shirt and trousers, filling the doorway. The old man is so distinguished looking. It is another thing I like about him: even on the quiet days, when he has no visitors, he dresses neatly, buffs his shoes, combs his hair.

“Ah, you must be Michael. Come in, come in.” The old man swings the door wide. “Emily Goldberg told me all about you.”



“Mr. Starek? We’re so happy to meet you,” the boy’s mother says. Her voice sounds nervous. “I’m Vivian Jin, Michael’s mother. I so appreciate you making an exception for Michael. I know you’re not really teaching anymore.”

Mr. Starek smiles faintly. “Well, Emily is very persuasive. And for the right student—”

“I have a teacher,” the boy says to him, his face a stubborn scowl. “My teacher is Emily.”

This boy is so rude! I want Mr. Starek to slam the door in his face.

But the old man does the opposite, welcoming him into the house. “Yes, I know,” he says. “She was very enthusiastic about your playing. She says you have a real talent for Chopin.”

It’s a French name, Chopin. It’s pronounced *show-pan*. I know this because Mr. Starek is something of a Chopin expert.

The old man tilts his head, studying the boy. “I understand you have only ten weeks to prepare for the Chopin Festival in Hartford.”

Ooooh, a festival! I do love a festival.

“That’s right,” Mrs. Jin says. “And Emily says Chopin is your specialty. The festival is in mid-September. Do you think it’s enough time?”

“We will see,” Mr. Starek says. “We will see.”

Mrs. Jin hesitates in the doorway. “Shall I stay...or...?”

“No, no, that’s not necessary,” the old man tells her. “Michael

will be fine. Let's keep it to half an hour today, just an introduction. Michael, why don't you go into the music room? It's that door on the left."

The boy glances back at his mother, his face stormy, and skulks into the house.

Mrs. Jin shakes her head, her mouth a grim line. Now she seems more worried than mad. "I'm so sorry," she says. "He's not usually like this. He really does love to play."

Mr. Starek nods. "Emily tells me she's never had a student like him."

Michael's mother sighs. "It's been a hard year for him. His father took a job with an enormous amount of travel, and he won't be home this summer. I think Michael misses him, and he's nervous about starting middle school in the fall. It's...a lot of changes."

Mr. Starek studies her sympathetically. "I will be gentle with him."

"Thank you. I appreciate it."

Mrs. Jin turns to leave, and the door closes with a soft click.

I can tell the old man is going to have his work cut out for him with this one. But I can't help feeling curious. I want to hear the boy play.

cookies & milk



by
**Shawn
Amos**

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“Mannish Boy”

Words and Music by Melvin London, Ellas McDaniel,
and McKinley Morganfield

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LBYR REVIEW MATERIAL



The Final Countdown

Sometimes you gotta take a chance.

This is it. My last moment to go out on top. Summer is one minute away. All eyes are on me. I slowly rip a small piece of paper from the corner of my notebook. I slip it into my mouth and start chewing. Next, I pull out the plastic straw I saved from lunch.

“Do it, Ellis,” Alex whispers from his seat behind me.

Our math teacher, Mrs. Cook, is wiping the board, but she could turn around at any second. Her

twisted gray hair is pulled on top of her head like a bird's nest sitting on a storm cloud. I quickly put the straw in my mouth. Using my tongue, I push the paper wad into the end of the straw. Showtime. The skinny red second hand on the clock moves up.

“Ten, nine, eight...” The class starts the count-down.

“Seven, six, five...” I aim at the center of Mrs. Cook's bird's nest.

“Four, three, two...” I blow as hard as I can.

“*ONE!*”

The spit wad tumbles through the air. It's a perfect arc. Bull's-eye! It lands squarely on the back of Mrs. Cook's head—a lonely spit wad trapped in a tangled gray mess of hair. She doesn't suspect a thing. The bell rings and the class cheers.

“El-lis! El-lis! El-lis!” they chant.

My work here is done. That's it. Fifth grade is over. Years from now, students will still be talking about this moment. They might even rename the classroom after me: “The Ellis Bailey Johnson 1976 Memorial Spit Wad Classroom.”

Everyone runs for the door, high-fiving me on the way out. Some of my friends whisper so Mrs. Cook doesn't hear.

“That was awesome, Ellis. Best one yet,” Alex congratulates me. We immediately give each other our secret handshake—one palm slap, two fist bumps, then hook pinky fingers.



FPO

As I lift one foot over the classroom doorway for the last time, I feel a familiar tug on my backpack. Alex gives me a cringe look before slipping out of class. I turn around to see Mrs. Cook's stink eye looking down on me.

“Young man, I want to remind you that Hollywood

Middle School will be receiving a long list of your...”
She clears her throat. “...*extracurricular activities.*”

“Yes, Mrs. Cook.” I’m careful to avoid her glare and not inhale too deeply. Mrs. Cook’s breath stinks almost as much as her eye.

“They will not be as tolerant as we have been here at Curtis Elementary School.”

“Yes, Mrs. Cook.” Her breath is choking me. I’m trying so hard to keep a straight face.

“It’s a shame that such a smart boy wants to waste his time being a class clown.” Mrs. Cook is always calling me a class clown. Can I help it if I think of funny stuff to do? “Enjoy your summer, young man.” She releases my backpack. I watch Mrs. Cook return to the board with my spit wad in her hair. Then I get out of that classroom fast. Free at last.



Outside in the carpool line, summer vacation talk goes into overdrive as Alex hops in his dad’s car.

“See you tonight at dinner, Ellis,” Alex says

as he closes the car door. They drive away, leaving me alone with Amanda Freeman. I am so glad Amanda is going to a different middle school next year. She's the worst. Always showing off. Amanda starts bragging about her trip to Hawaii before I can escape.

“So, my parents are letting me have my own hotel room. Now that I'm in middle school, they say I deserve to be treated like an adult.” Amanda twists her hair as she brags a mile a minute. “Did you know Hawaii is called ‘the Aloha State’ and that the word *aloha* means ‘love,’ ‘hello,’ and ‘good-bye’? I wrote my geography report on Hawaii. I got an A. What grade did you get?”

“I dunno, Amanda.” I failed that report. I hate geography.

“Where are you going this summer, Ellis?”

Amanda actually asked me a question instead of talking more about herself? I'm so shocked that I start blabbing nonstop. “Nowhere. My parents just got divorced so my mom's gone for the summer. She's staying with her best friend in upstate

New York. She says she needs to put herself first for a change. Well, first she said something I couldn't follow about being in a plane and putting on her oxygen mask first. Anyway, she's gone and it sucks. She's never left for more than a weekend. So I'm staying with my dad. That sucks even more."

Amanda looks at me and twists her hair. A piece of today's cafeteria lunch is wedged under her braces. Her eyes turn sad. Why did I say all that? I've only told Alex so far, and everyone knows that Amanda can't keep a secret.

"Oh, Ellis, I'm so sorry. Don't worry. I'm sure it'll be fine," Amanda says. She seems like she actually cares. For a split second, I think maybe it's okay that I told her. Then she keeps talking. "You know, I think it's really cute how you always make everyone laugh and how you play your harmonica all the time. And your hair is so funny and lumpy! All scrunchy-like. You remind me of my little brother. He's short like you."

Did I say how glad I am that Amanda is going to a different middle school next year?

“My dad’s here. Look at his new car. Isn’t it cool? Gotta go, Ellis. Aloha!” Amanda gives me a pat on my head then runs off.

Your hair is so funny and scrunchy. And a pat on my head? What is wrong with her? Please, *please* do not let me be the only Black kid in middle school next year. And please let me grow.



As the last of us wait for our rides, I pull my harmonica from my pocket and blow a few farewell notes. The harmonica is the best company you can keep. Blow into one of its ten holes and you get a note. Suck in the same hole and you get a totally different note. You can suck in and blow in all sorts of combinations. Suck or blow a bunch of holes at

the same time and it sounds like a huge wall of notes. The harmonica is like an orchestra in your pocket.

Amanda drives away in her dad's new silver sports car, revealing my dad's brown Rambler next in the carpool line. My dad's Rambler is the total opposite of a sports car. It's old. *Really* old. Dad says it's got a "vibe." I'd rather have the vibe of a school bus taking me home. It'd be less embarrassing.

Dad leans over and opens the car door from the inside. The outside handle doesn't work anymore. "What's up, Little Man?" he says.

"Don't call me that," I say for the millionth time.

Dad's Rambler is beat-up, but it sure smells good—like brown sugar and cocoa. I toss my backpack on the floor, stuff my harmonica in my pocket, then slide across the big bench seat. The front dashboard is covered in pins, buttons, and a few decals. The KEEP ON TRUCKIN' button used to be on my backpack. My DYN-O-MITE! button is also there. It's from my favorite TV show, *Good Times*. A guy named J.J. always says, "Dyn-o-mite!" when he's

excited. All of the other buttons are Dad's. There's a big yellow one with a happy face. It stares at me while we're driving. Some of the other buttons have phrases like SUPPORT YOUR LOCAL FEMINIST. The strangest one has a picture of a smiling peanut with the words CARTER FOR PRESIDENT. A peanut for president?

Dad slides that familiar wrinkled paper bag across the bench seat toward me. The sugary smell has fully invaded my nose. It's hard to believe a smell can make you forget your troubles, but sometimes it's true. Right now, the smell in that bag is quickly making me forget about my summer.

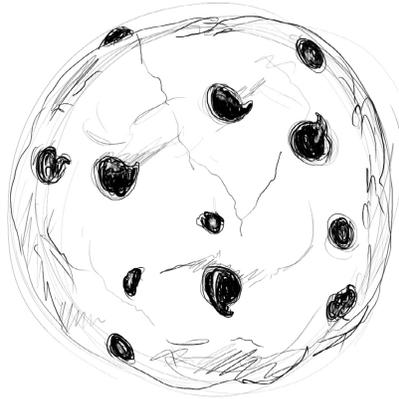


My Dad the Cookie Man

I made a fresh batch,” Dad says as he hands me the bag. It’s warm in my hands. I open it and pull out one of Dad’s chocolate chip cookies. He’s been making them for as long as I can remember. He says it relaxes him and helps him think.

And his cookies taste good. I mean really, REALLY good. They’re like bite-sized crunchy golden cookie nuggets. Each one is packed with gooey chocolate chips and sweet pecans.

I could eat his cookies and nothing else. Before the divorce, we baked cookies all the time.



I'm trying to remember the last time we made them, but I can't. Since the divorce, everything is screwed up.

"Well?" Dad asks. He always wants my opinion. It's kinda pitiful.

"Pretty good," I say.

"What's that?" he says as he pokes me in the rib. "You're mumbling, Little Man. I can't hear you."

"They taste pretty good." I make sure to pronounce every word clearly. Both of my parents tell me that I mumble. All I know is that sometimes it's hard for me to speak when I get nervous or mad.

Dad steals a cookie from my bag. He pops it in his mouth. "Not *bad*?!" he says while crunching the cookie. "Man, these are *fantastic*."

"Don't talk with cookies in your mouth. It's

rude,” I scold him. After all, that’s what he and Mom are always telling me.

“Some things, Ellis, cannot wait to be said.” He pulls out another one of MY cookies. Dad stretches his right arm up and out in front of him toward the front windshield. It’s like his arm is a telescope and at the end is a small, crunchy chocolate chip asteroid suspended against the clear blue California sky.

“Look at you,” Dad says admiringly to the cookie. Dad doesn’t just eat cookies. He *talks* to them like they’re pets or friends. My dad is like that Willy Wonka chocolate factory guy. I don’t remember everything about the book, but I do know that if Willy Wonka was tall, skinny, Black, and had a salt-and-pepper beard, he would be my dad. I really think Dad believes that chocolate chip cookies have some kind of magical power.

Dad continues talking to the cookie in his hand. “You are perfect. Just the right amount of chips. And look at that lightly toasted pecan poking through. YOU are a good cookie!” Then he retracts his telescope arm and pops the cookie in his mouth.

“Isn’t it kind of weird to eat something you love so much?” I ask.

“No, no,” Dad says. “Chocolate chip cookies are *meant* to be eaten. It’s their life’s purpose to bring joy.”

“That doesn’t make any sense. What if I was born just to be eaten?”

“Then you’d be a chocolate chip cookie.”



Dad steers his Rambler through the traffic on Sunset Boulevard. Some people call it “the Sunset Strip.” It’s full of famous nightclubs and shops. I don’t come down here all that often. Sunset Boulevard is full of strange characters. Mom always says, “Sunset Strip is no place for little boys.”

I see our street corner approaching. Usually, Dad would turn left off Sunset and drop me off at Mom’s house. Not today. Dad drives farther east into Sunset Boulevard. I’ve never been this far down Sunset. We approach Ralphs supermarket. People in the neighborhood call it “Rock and Roll

Ralphs” because lots of famous singers and bands go there late at night. Rock and Roll Ralphs is huge. It’s a whole other world inside. The grocery store takes up the entire block, and it never closes. Out front there’s always a weird mix of little kids on kiddie rides, teenage kids smoking, and old men feeding pigeons.

A few blocks from the Rock and Roll Ralphs, Dad stops the car at the corner of Sunset and Formosa. We’re parked in front of a small empty building. It’s funny looking, shaped like a triangle and with a door at the bottom, a window in each corner, and a chimney sticking out of the pointy top. It’s seriously run-down. The stucco white paint is peeling above the front glass doors. A family of pigeons have pooped all over the roof.

This is not the glamorous part of Sunset. This block is on the edge of Hollywood. It feels a world away from our house a few miles behind us. This block looks creepy. And sad. Most of the stores are abandoned. Trash is blowing down the sidewalk. This empty store looks like an abandoned house in the middle of a bad fairy tale. Weeds surround it.

A paper sign saying RENTED is taped over another paper sign that says FOR RENT.

I roll down the car window. It gets stuck half-way like it always does. I sit up on my knees so I can speak over the glass. “Dad, what is this?”

“You’re mumbling, Little Man,” Dad says with his back to me. He’s looking at the top of the pointy roof.

“Stop calling me Little Man! I’m eleven years old,” I yell in my head.

Dad whips around. “What did you say to me?”

Oops. I yelled that out loud.

“You don’t listen. Just like Mom says.” I definitely said *that* out loud.

“Get out of the car, Ellis,” my dad orders.

I open the car door and get out. Dad and I face each other like in one of those cowboy movies. He leans over me. He runs his hand across his beard then speaks in his most serious voice. “Now, *you* listen to *me*, Little Man. I am still your father, divorce or no divorce. You want to know what this is? This A-frame is our home for the summer.”

“Home?” I squeeze my eyes shut to keep my tears in. There’s no way I want Dad to see me cry.

“Yep. Our new home for our new *cookies*. Six weeks from now we’re gonna open the world’s first chocolate chip cookie store.” Dad looks up at the building. He’s grinning ear to ear. My eyes go dry. Now I’m just confused.

“The world’s *what?*” A store that only sells *cookies*? *Chocolate chip* cookies? How is that even a thing? How can anyone make money just selling chocolate chip cookies? No one has EVER opened a store selling just chocolate chip cookies. That’s totally crazy.

Dad looks up at the front of the building. He’s starry-eyed like he’s sitting in the first row of a movie theater. “A cookie store,” he repeats. “And you and I are gonna build it together.”

“Great,” I say sarcastically while I roll my eyes. “Happy birthday to me.”

Dad opens the front door. “What’s that about your birthday? It’s only June. Now get inside. We’ve got work to do.”

I'm stuck in place. This cannot be my summer.

"Did you hear me?" Dad thumps the back of my head.

"Uh-huh," I mumble as I walk inside.

"Ellis, you dropped something getting out of the car." Dad hands me my harmonica. "You don't wanna lose this. We're going to need some music."

I'm gonna need more than music to get through this nightmare. I wish Mom would come home. What the heck are Dad and I going to talk about for six weeks? Alone. In an abandoned store on Sunset Boulevard. This was supposed to be my epic twelfth-birthday summer. I can't believe this is my life.

The
EINSTEINS
of VISTA
POINT

Author of THE WINTERHOUSE SERIES
BEN GUTERSON

LBYR REVIEW MATERIAL

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LBYR REVIEW MATERIAL

— One —

THE GIRL FROM THE WOODS

Zack Einstein was reading his favorite novel, *Falcons and Bandits*, when he looked out the open window of his room and saw a girl walking toward the abandoned Tower. He shot up from his bed, fumbling the book to the floor with a smack that echoed through the house.

“You okay?” Zack’s father yelled from the kitchen below.

“Just dropped my book, Dad,” Zack called, keeping his eyes fixed on the girl heading for the stone building in the distance. It seemed she had emerged from the thick cover of hemlocks west of the Tower, something that was very odd, given that the building was strictly off-limits to everyone and was just on the other side of the property the Einstein family now owned. But what astonished

Zack most of all was that the ponytailed girl looked—from far away, at least—like Susan, his sister who was gone forever.

Zack stared. The girl's hair was red, her jeans were light blue, and her white shirt hung loosely from her tiny shoulders—all in uncanny imitation of Zack's little sister.



Why is she going to the Tower? he thought.

And then, although he'd tried to stave it off, came the question he'd asked himself countless times over the past ten months: *Why didn't I watch out for Susan?*

For half an hour he'd been able to lose himself in a book he loved, and now thoughts of his sister had returned to him like rain resuming.

"As long as the book's okay," his father yelled. When Zack said nothing in return, his father added: "That's a joke, son."

"Okay, Dad," Zack called just as the girl stepped behind the stone building and disappeared from view. He stared, waited.

The Tower, a hundred yards to the north and taller than the third-story window through which Zack was watching, stood in all its solitary majesty near the edge of the bluff. On the far side of the Tower, an immense hill sloped to the river below. It was an impressive building, nine-sided and rimmed with graceful, sturdy columns; though after Ruth—the closest in age to Zack, two years older than his eleven—had said it looked like a gigantic cake with gray frosting, the image had been hard for him to get out of his mind. There was no official name for the building, as far as any of the kids knew. Miriam, herself two years older than Ruth, had suggested they call it "the big thimble" when their parents brought them to Vista Point three months before for their first visit. ("We'll be living here come summer," their mother had explained.) Once Ethan, the oldest of the siblings at sixteen, had dubbed it "the Tower," the name had stuck.

When the girl did not reappear after a long minute, Zack imagined she was standing before the front doors of the Tower and taking in the impressive view on the opposite side: the quarter-mile-wide

Grand River, the range of mountains to the northeast, the thick forest on both sides and across the water, the clear sky above. From that spot, everything was deep blue or lush emerald, endless and broad. The girl was most likely admiring all of it, just as Zack and his brother and sisters had done every day since they'd moved to Vista Point five days before. Their new house was only an hour away from Roseburg, the only place they'd ever called home, but it might as well have been in another country. Vista Point was a speck on the map, more a community of scattered houses and large plots of land, while Roseburg was the biggest city in the state.

“A fresh start will do us all good,” Zack’s mother and father had said so many times over the past several weeks that Zack had begun to wonder if they believed it or if they mainly wanted him and his siblings to believe it.

During the previous winter, his parents had found a fixer-upper put up for sale by an elderly couple who could no longer maintain the home or the property, and now the future was starkly laid out: The Einsteins would be turning the bottom floor of their new house into a bed-and-breakfast, something Zack had come to understand was sort of like a small hotel set up in a regular home. Why his father had quit his architect’s job at the Valencia & Hartnett Firm to serve people scrambled eggs and change their bedsheets—and why Zack’s mother seemed just as eager to join in, abandoning her teacher-training coursework at Roseburg Community College—was something that didn’t seem to add up. He

couldn't understand their enthusiasm for the move or why they'd become intent on relocating to the middle of nowhere.

"I think Mom and Dad feel we won't be so sad about Susan if we move," Miriam had once told him, but Zack couldn't get the words to make sense.

Zack continued to stare out his window, yet the girl did not reappear. He wondered if maybe she had descended the slope and then circled back into the forest, which would be the surest way of departing—or approaching—the Tower if a person didn't want to be seen from the house. Zack glanced at his clock: 3:17. His mother and his siblings had gone to the nearby small town of Thornton Falls for the afternoon and weren't due to return for another hour. They'd all pressed Zack to join them—his father, too, had encouraged him to get out—but, as had been his habit ever since the awful night the previous August, he was more comfortable staying in his room and reading. He had no desire to be around people, around crowds.

"First day of summer's a good time to explore, Z," Ethan—only three merit badges from becoming an Eagle Scout—had told him at lunch by way of encouraging him to join them on their afternoon outing. "You should come with us. There's a map store we could check out."

"I'm taking the basketball, Zack," Miriam, the athlete of the bunch, had said when Zack had indicated he was going to stay home. "We could play H-O-R-S-E. I'll even show you my new crossover move."

“Or we could all compose poems under the gazebo in the town square,” Ruth had said, giving her sister a well-practiced and exaggeratedly eager look, because she knew writing was the last thing Miriam would want to do—and Miriam had goggled her eyes right back, all in good fun.

Zack understood and even appreciated that his siblings went out of their way to try to include him—and make him laugh. He just wasn’t in the mood to be cheered up. Ever.

Now all he could think about was that he had another hour to himself, and the girl who looked like Susan was out there somewhere near the Tower. He waited a minute, and then another minute, watching all the while. The thought came to him that maybe the girl was lost—or maybe she had tried to go inside or had even hurt herself somehow. That she had gone to the Tower and was still out of sight was worrying him. Zack glanced at his clock once more, looked back at the Tower, and then slipped on his shoes and departed his room, hopping quickly down the stairs.

“Gonna go outside for a few, Dad,” he called as he dashed for the front door.

“Don’t be gone long,” his father said. But Zack was already out the door and heading for the Tower, thinking as he began to jog: *Maybe that girl needs help.*

— *Two* —

THE FORBIDDEN TOWER

The Tower was absolutely forbidden to the four Einstein kids. They were allowed to admire it from the outside—the clean lines of gray sandstone bricks that made up its walls, the precise planes of its nine sides, the gentle arches of the now mostly boarded-up windows—and even sit on the stone stairs in front of its enormous metal doors; but, as their parents had made clear to them, the Tower wasn't part of what they owned, and they were to make no attempt to go inside. Not that doing so would be possible—the doors were locked tight (though none of the four kids had dared test this), and several No Trespassing signs were posted on the building. The place certainly looked abandoned—its windows were covered, and the masonry of its outer walls was chipped and flaking in spots and mildewed in broad patches—though all the Einstein kids had agreed it didn't appear quite as

run-down as their parents had led them to believe before they'd seen it for themselves.

“This must have been the coolest rest stop ever,” Ruth had said when the four of them visited the Tower on the day of their arrival. “So scenic, so romantic. The kind of place I could write about.” She looked around wistfully and then said, “*When Bridgette Carlisle gazed out at the river from the Vista Point Tower, she knew she would love Thomas Cooper forever.*”

“No one would read that story,” Ethan had said, shaking his head and turning to point—his arm fixed straight and steady—upriver. “Interesting. From here, Mount Knox is almost exactly at a forty-five-degree angle.” He took his compass out of his pocket and began to fiddle with it.

Miriam pantomimed a jump shot in the air. “Forty-five degrees when the ball leaves my hands,” she said, and Ruth sighed heavily. Miriam called out, “And that’s a three-pointer for the win!” as she stared at an imaginary hoop, and then she stopped and peered downward to the river far below and the strip of highway that ran just beside it.

“I wish they hadn’t built the highway down there,” she said. “Dad says if they hadn’t, the old road up here would still be the only one through, and people would still be traveling by and stopping here. The Tower never would have gotten so run-down.”

Zack, however, wasn’t thinking back to that visit from a few days before just now—he had slowed his run and was striding

closer to the stone building, keeping his eyes out for any sign of movement. He was keenly aware that his father might be watching him from the kitchen window, far behind him on the other side of the big field that separated their house from the Tower. He veered off to the west, close to the forest that bordered the field, and drew near the bluff; and then he trotted down the slope a short way, deliberately overshooting the Tower and glancing at its front stairs as he did. No one was in sight. Zack came to a stop and turned around. The slope now blocked his view of the house—and ensured that his father could not see him—as Zack studied the building. All was silent beneath the high, hot sun, and Zack felt not only all alone but very distant suddenly, as though his new house were miles away.

The memory came to him once again from late August of the year before.

All seven of the Einsteins had gone to the Western State Fair, south of Roseburg, near the town of Hugard. Zack and Susan, his younger sister by two years, had stayed with their mother while the others had scattered to enjoy the rides and sights and booths; Ethan and their father had stayed together, and the two older girls had gone off on their own. By eight o'clock, with twilight deepening and the strains of a country music band wafting from the arena at the center of the fairgrounds, Zack and Susan were sharing cotton candy while their mother led them to the gate and out to the street that lined the way. The three of them stopped and waited

beside the chain-link fence, noise and lights and people and cars moving in a swirl of motion before them. A huge WELCOME TO THE 2001 WESTERN STATE FAIR! banner was strung between two high poles just before them.

“Where are they?” Zack’s mother said after a short while, scanning for the others. “They should be here.”

Susan plucked at a wisp of cotton candy clumped on the stiff paper stick Zack held, and the two of them giggled and smacked away happily. Zack felt his mouth and cheeks becoming sticky from the pink sugar. His mother appeared worried as she glanced about.

“Wait right here, you two,” she said, giving Zack a severe look. She pointed to the gate just off to their right. “Maybe they thought we were meeting inside.” And with another hard stare at Zack, she said, “Don’t move from this fence, okay? I’ll be right back.”

Susan was focused on the cotton candy; but then she stopped plucking at the sugary wisps, gave Zack a sly look, and said, “Susan sees a man wearing purple flip-flops.” She lifted her chin to look skyward, her typical way of confounding Zack whenever they played this game.

“Right there!” Zack said almost immediately, pointing to a man who’d just passed them and who was, indeed, wearing purple flip-flops. They both loved this game, all the more so because it always seemed to exasperate their siblings.

“And now Zack sees a woman holding two caramel apples and a hot dog,” he said.

“I see her!” Susan said. “Gosh, remember last year when you ate two hot dogs before we rode the roller coaster?”

Zack clutched his stomach theatrically. “Don’t remind me!”

As Susan reached to snatch another shred off the stick Zack held, a kitten appeared from behind a plywood program stand beside them.

“Look!” Susan said, pointing to the tiny gray cat. She knelt to reach out to it as Zack watched; and then she jerked her hand too quickly, and the small thing darted off.

“Oh no!” Susan called as the kitten skipped through the mass of people passing on the sidewalk—and before Zack could stop her, Susan was racing away.

“Hey!” he yelled, but she was gone, following the tiny cat; the last image he had was of his sister—in her blue shorts and her favorite white sweater—frantically chasing a kitten. After that, his memories were only of a weirdly dark sky, the squealing of car tires, an awful thud, and then what sounded like a thousand people shouting all around him.

The moments from that point on were pure chaos, and he never could recall how his mother—and then his father and his siblings—had found him or how he understood Susan was missing, and everyone seemed to be crying or in shock or feeling some other emotion he couldn’t understand. In fact, as hard as he tried to remember the details of what had happened after Susan rushed away, his mind couldn’t make any sense of it. How he’d ended up

back at his house and what happened later that night—none of it remained with him. There were days of strange sadness, and then a funeral, and then weeks of nothing more than sitting in his room or lying on his bed; he still couldn't remember what had happened or what he'd done during that time, though eventually he returned to school and the days continued marching forward. He only knew that Susan would never be coming back—and he felt absolutely that the reason for this was that he'd let her follow the kitten. There had been something he had failed to do or some part of him that had caused things to unfold as they had.

“I never should have left the two of you alone,” Zack's mother would often say whenever she took him up in a tearful embrace. “Never.” But he always felt she was only trying to make him feel less sad by claiming it was her fault. He knew better. He'd not watched his little sister as carefully as he should have. His mother or his father or Ethan or the girls could say whatever they liked—he knew the truth of things.

Zack gazed at the Grand River below. A bridge, the only one within twenty miles up or down the broad river, spanned the water to the east, though it was so far away and so far beneath him, the cars on it moved soundlessly, like small toys on a distant track. For that matter, the water itself appeared to move slowly enough from up here that the river looked like a long, motionless strip of blue that stretched to each horizon. Unbroken forest covered the hills on the opposite shore, so distant that the trees merged into a single

cover of thick green. Zack studied the Tower once again. *The girl must have gone back into the woods*, he thought.

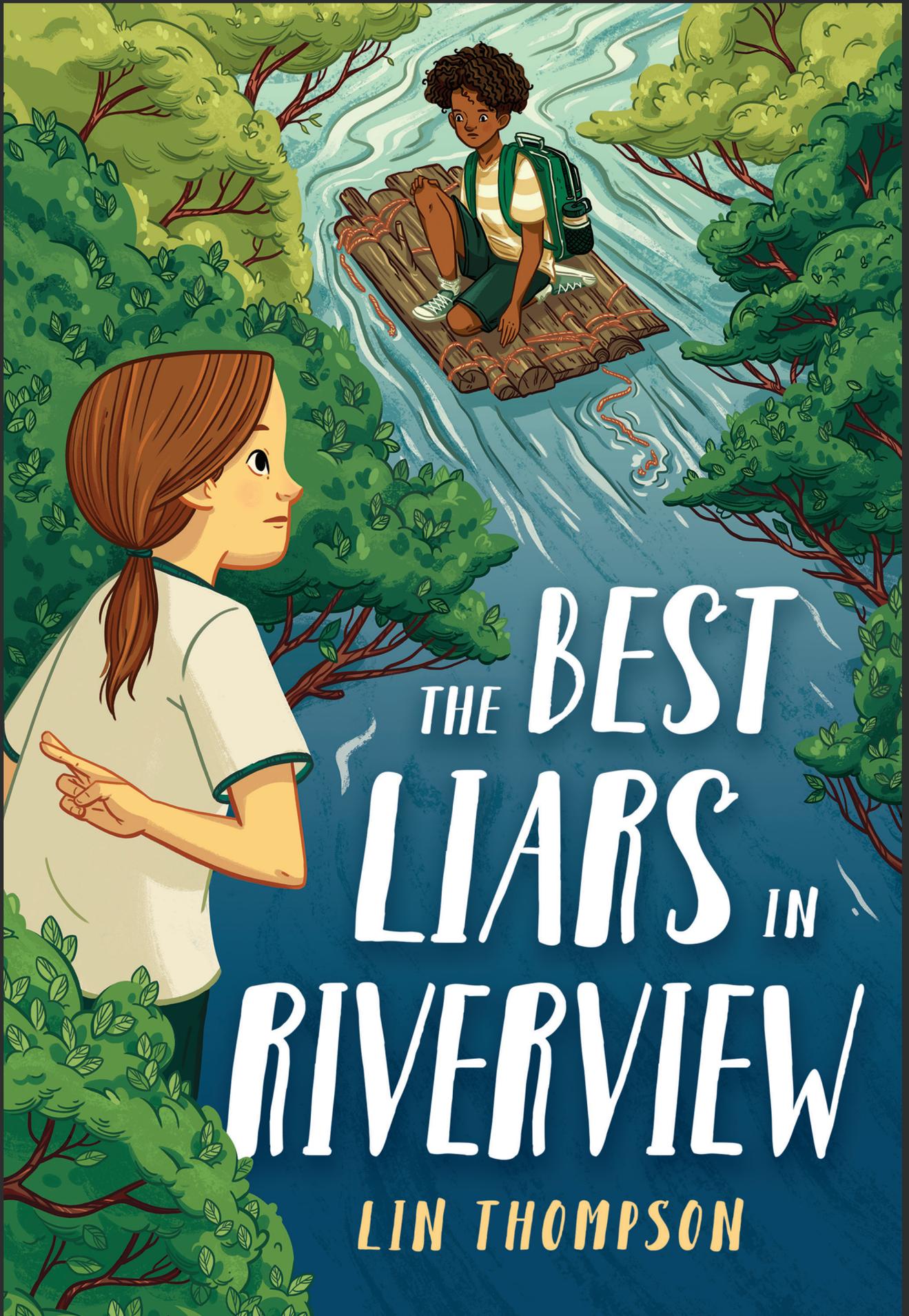
The gray building looked imposing in the sunlight, both graceful and sturdy, and Zack considered how perfect it must have been before the tall windows were boarded up and the tiles on its roof cap had become frayed or torn loose. It was hard to believe, now that he'd visited the Tower a few times, that it had been allowed to fall into disrepair like this. He squinted and tried to picture the building as it had once been.



Something moved inside.

At a window—just barely visible through the wooden boards covering it—on the upper level of the Tower, a silhouette appeared momentarily, a shadow that passed so quickly, Zack couldn't be sure his eyes hadn't played a trick on him. He waited and watched, but nothing more appeared; he took several steps toward the Tower, scanning the upper windows all the while. And as he drew closer to the stairs, he saw something he could hardly believe: The doors to the stone building were slightly ajar.

Zack walked softly up the few steps. In the space created where the doors had been left open, he saw a thin portion of the inside of the Tower, shadowy and dim, with only a bit of light from the few windows high above. He put his hand on one of the doors and turned his head to listen within. No sound came. Zack leaned closer to the crack in the doorway and saw muted light gleaming off a marble floor. He glanced at the river one more time, and then he gave a slow pull on one of the doors and entered the Tower.



LBYR REVIEW MATERIAL

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LBYR REVIEW MATERIAL



PART ONE

LBYP REVIEW MATERIAL



A CONFESSIO

SOMETIME IN THE LAST DAY OR SO, EVER SINCE JOEL GALLAGHER disappeared, I became a liar. I didn't mean to turn that way. I didn't even realize I was lying as I did it—not at first, anyway. Mine were mostly lies of omission. I lied by *not* saying things. These lies feel like a different category, if you ask me. They feel like something you just let happen instead of something you actively do.

But Father Jacob says lies of omission are still lies. They count with God just the same. Which is too bad, I guess, because the more I think about it, the more sure I am that even before Joel disappeared—even

before *any* of this—I’ve been lying by omission all over the place.

It’s Sunday morning now. Joel disappeared from the woods behind my house sometime late Friday night, or maybe early Saturday morning. *Disappeared* isn’t the right word, but no one in town can come up with a better one. *Disappeared* sounds like a magic trick. It sounds like Joel just up and vanished, *poof*, from a patch of woods in the middle of Kentucky. There one minute, gone the next—like a miracle, but not the good kind.

“He can’t have just disappeared,” everyone in town keeps saying. But no one can figure out what actually happened to him, either.

Except me, I guess. I’m starting to have an idea.

Confession is a word that can mean a couple of different things. You can confess to the police about a crime you committed, for one: You can show up at the police station downtown and sign some papers admitting you’re guilty, that you did whatever the police say you did. Joel and I used to put that kind of confession in our Secret Agents game. I’d play the bad guy who tried to assassinate the president

or stole top secret information on a thumb drive or something, and Joel would play the agent who interrogated me and got me to crack. I'm surprisingly good at playing the bad guy. Joel is not surprisingly good at playing the hero.

It's against the law to lie to the police, and if the justice department in the state of Kentucky counts lies of omission the same way God counts them, I definitely lied to the police. I could make that kind of police station confession now if I wanted to. I could find the phone number on the business card Officer McCarthy gave me yesterday and call him up this morning.

But I'm not going to confess that way.

If you're Catholic, like Joel and me and pretty much everybody I know, you can confess in church, too. That's Confession-with-a-capital-C, one of the seven holy sacraments. You sit in a special room in the church and list off your sins to Father Jacob, and if you're really, sincerely sorry and really, sincerely plan to change your ways, Father Jacob will tell you God forgives you.

But I'm not going to confess that way, either. I feel plenty sorry about the lies I've been telling, but I

can't go back and change them. I'm not about to tell everyone in Riverview the whole truth.

Maybe this is a different kind of confession. A confession that's not apologizing and that's not admitting guilt. Both of those confessions are the kind you make *to* someone: the first to a police officer, and the second to a priest. But I don't want to confess *to* anyone. That's the whole problem. None of them deserve to know the parts of the story I'm leaving out. Father Jacob, or Officer McCarthy, or Joel's parents, or my parents, or Rudy Thomas, or the kids at school—they don't deserve to know any of it.

The story I told about where Joel's gone, and about Joel and me and everything that led up to him disappearing, has been like a bunch of puzzle pieces whose edges won't quite line up. You can try to force them together, but the picture they make is jumbled and crammed. It's missing too many pieces in the middle.

This isn't a confession *to* anyone. It's a confession in the telling. I have to tell the missing pieces.

And I'm sure I'll have plenty more pieces to confess before this is all over and done.



ONE VERSION OF THE STORY

THE OFFICIAL STORY I TOLD TO THE POLICE AND JOEL'S PARENTS AND everyone in town about the night he disappeared goes like this:

On Friday night, Joel and I went out camping. We always go camping on the last day of school, the first night of summer. It's been our tradition since kindergarten. Joel and I have lots of traditions like that. Things we've done over and over for as long as we've been friends, which means basically forever. In past years, sometimes my mom or dad has joined us, or Joel's mom or dad, or my older sister, Teagan, or

one year a dog the Gallaghers were dog-sitting. But no one else goes every single year. Just Joel and me.

This year, my parents were tired out from work. Teagan had decided she didn't like camping anymore unless it was inside a cabin with air-conditioning. Mari Clark-Espinoza, our new friend from school this year, had wanted to come along but had to drive to Louisville the next morning for something with her moms that Mari wouldn't explain any further. My dad said that Joel and I were finally old enough to stay out by ourselves, so he helped us carry our supplies to the same clearing in the woods we've been camping in since kindergarten, helped us pitch two tents, and then hiked home.

So it was just Joel and me.

But late that night Joel and I both got spooked. We know every inch of the woods during the daytime. We've crisscrossed them hundreds of times, over and over, pretending that we're pirates or spies or warriors or elves. We know how to make trail markers for each other out of broken sticks or rocks. We know how to tell apart the different kinds of birds. We know all the names of the trees.

But the woods at nighttime are different. There are noises, ones that in daytime I could probably recognize as just the wind through the trees or someone's dog barking. In the dark, they sound like bears or wolves or ghosts.

So we got spooked, and Joel and I decided that camping out with just the two of us wasn't such a good idea. We put out the fire and packed up the tents. I walked back to my house. I figured he was walking back to his.

Joel never arrived home.

That's the end of that version of the story.



A TRUER VERSION OF THE STORY

HERE ARE SOME PARTS OF THE STORY I LEFT OUT:

1. The homemade raft Joel and I built together, hooked to the bur oak tree beside Mystic Creek, during the last two weeks of sixth grade.
2. Our many, many plans to run away.
3. The unrepeatable names Rudy Thomas and the other kids in our class had called Joel at school.
4. What Joel said about those names that night when we were camping.

5. The fight Joel and I had by the campfire that night, before he disappeared.
6. The look in Joel's eyes after the fight stopped.

Joel and I have been friends so long that I know every facial expression he can make. I keep a list of them in my head so I can name them as they happen—I like having categories for things. I like organization. There's his wide-eyed Begging Puppy Dog look when he wants something. There's the sideways smile of his I'm Up to Something look. There's the too-bright Cover-Up Smile when he's trying to act like he's not upset but really he is.

But his wild, reckless look after we stopped fighting that night—that one was new. I didn't have a name for that one.



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