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Savages

“My house is in those trees, past the fence.” Cian points to the end of Paolo’s block, the Dead End sign as they walk, this wide street feeling like it’s his now. Everything is his, including the sky where the sun hits the clouds dark blue and these red bricks seem brown because it’s *dusk* and the streetlamps are his too, curled black like flowers with petals plucked off and even this black tar stuck on the cobblestone is his, he knows this like he knows his own name Cian Robert Corley, whispering Bast Bast Bast Bast to himself as he stares up at Paolo’s window, wondering what’s Paolo doing up there, right this second? Maybe playing those colored checkers still and ignoring someone else, some other friend who is knocking on his door. Sulking Paolo listening to his mother, Gia, and Franco, in their room, wrestling, wrestling because they are *lovers* which he feels could be the name for him and Nicy, especially as he watches her run where it’s private property into the cement yard in front of Paolo’s house. Lovers is a better name than husband and wife.

She kneels and balances herself on the white ledge of the fountain where water from the whale statue pours from the whale’s lips so fast Cian wonders how this C-shaped pool doesn’t overflow. She traces lines on the ledge with a knife-shaped pebble, writing the letters of her name onto the ledge, NICY while a fat man in the bottom window stares down, chewing on something green -- a stick of celery -- celery that the man keeps fixed in his lips, like a green cigarette.

Nicy drops the rock into the water. She sticks her hand in letting her finger make

ripples and circles in the water. As he peeks over her white shoulder he sees silver and copper coins at the blue bottom of the water. "I could reach that money," she says. "Money is the best thing in the world, right?" She looks at him like she's the boss and he better answer yes so he tells her yes, for sure, money's best, and she smiles and sticks her whole arm into the water, her fingers wiggling, wiggling like tiny white fish trying to reach the pennies and nickels shining from the bottom.

"Take your hands out of our well." Gia's there, hugging a bag of groceries. Paolo and Keef hold the front door opened. "Roberto, tell your friend to take her hand out of our wishing well, that's not a place for playing." Gia's dress is black with an orange flower in the center and before she can repeat herself, Nicy crawls off the water ledge and mumbles, "Sorry," like she doesn't mean it, which she shouldn't mean it, Cian thinks, because water's free, free for everyone and besides Nicy's allowed to do anything she wants. So too bad for rules. Nicy pushes up against Cian, holding his hand, pressing herself into him like she wants to tuck herself somewhere inside his stomach, hide, in his pouch, like a baby kangaroo.

"I saw you the whole walk up here coming out of Piccolos we were on the sidewalk right behind you two but when we shouted 'Hello!' you both chose to ignore us."

Keef is there as Gia repeats, "You both ignored us." Keef sneaks behind Paolo like the worst 'fraidy cat ever. Cian steps closer. "I see you hiding there, Keef."

"Robert, guess what?" Paolo asks. "I'm not moving to California. Not till summertime."

"This is true," Gia says. "My sister is ill. We found out in a telegram yesterday."

"Aren't you *happy*?" Paolo asks, "That I'm not moving? So we could still be

friends." Cian wants to ask how could we be friends when you're friends with someone as dumb as Keef? But he doesn't want to talk and fight and besides Nicy is here. As Paolo steps aside to let Gia go inside, Cian sees Keef there again, how weird Keef looks, with his sloppy dark hair and his torn shoes, standing here, so far from their own block, like a dope and a slave getting ready to go upstairs with Paolo and Gia, smiling as if they've been friends forever.

"Is Keef eating over your house?" Cian asks.

"I'm surprised you're even here, Roberto," Gia points with a scolding finger. "My Paolo said you ignored him, after the ceremony." Putting her hand on Paolo's head, Gia hugs her grocery bag harder. "Roberto, this is true, is it not? At church? After the ceremony? I saw with my own eyes you ignored my Paolo and ran off to your girlfriend there."

"He's a flat leaver," Paolo says. "Why did you ignore me?"

"Nicy's my cousin, not just my girlfriend, and none of you are my bosses," Cian says. "And besides, Paolo didn't even want to come out of his room the other day when I was sleeping over his *own* house. Why did he ignore *me*?"

"I was *sick*, that night," Paolo says. "From that stupid lot."

"He still is ill, Roberto, Paolo has the asthma."

"But he was playing checkers in his room when I was over. So why did he ignore *me*?"

"He was in bed with his asthma, Roberto."

Cian knows that's a lie because he remembers the sound of the checkers and he stares at Paolo as Paolo whispers something to Keef. Whispering lies, Cian thinks.

"What's in that *bag*?" Keef asks. Paolo and Gia push Keef to go inside the building and Keef follows but turns around, tiptoeing, staring over at the bag that Nicy

holds. She holds the bag of paints even higher so Keef can see them easy and she smiles, sticking out her tongue at him.

Once they're gone, Nicy laughs, bending forward, hugging the bag, tight, her laughing echoing off the bricks of Paolo's building and mixing with the sound of the pouring water from the fountain. The wishing well is what it's called, where Nicy climbs, on the ledge again, resting the bag from Piccolos as she reaches in the water giggling with her tongue half out. She holds up her wet hand. In her palm are three pennies she says he could keep. Cian takes them from her as they walk on, the cold and wet coins a shining brown color he never saw before and he shoves them into his pocket. He asks her how wild would it have been if she did that, right in front of them, in front of Gia and Paolo and Keef, so wild, where they would have had to watch and yell, "Get your hands out of the well," but they wouldn't have been able to do anything to stop her.

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Cian takes the bag and helps Nicy climb in, her dress pressing like a pillow in his face as she steps up into the hole in the wire fence, standing, wobbling, her white shoes tilting her forward till she hops down easy, in, like she's done this before so many times she could hop in backwards. Handing her the bag, he climbs up and in, his pant leg almost ripping on the fence wire.

She stares up as she walks ahead, slow, staring at the hanging branches, slowing down like she expects cowboys to jump out at her from behind a tree. A crumple snaps in the weeds near the bottom of a dark tree, the tree trunk like an elephant's foot. A squirrel squirming in the weeds rushes up the fat tree, so fast his gray hair blends with the bark. As she passes by the tree she hugs herself and says it's cold, "North Pole cold."

“Mister Gogol told me once you could tell a tree is older than Columbus if it’s so fat that you can’t hug it. Like this one. This tree might have been here even when Indians were here.”

“This place would be amazing to sleep over in,” Nicy says. “You better come out in the summer to sleep over in Queens. My friends sleep over all the time and my father might buy tents so we could camp outside. But camping here would be even better. Did you make this road? I wish we could camp in here. Where’s your house?”

“It’s further, stay on this path.” He catches up to her, leading her over to the circle of bricks, to check, see if there’s anything new. Gold bottle caps shine in the mud. Rubbing the mud off the sharp edges with his thumb, he puts the gold caps into his pocket. She lifts a soaking pad of blank pages, soggy and smelling of soda. There’s a pair of broken eyeglasses stuck in the mud and shoelaces that look like dead black worms. Near another wet pad is a brown pipe, straight, not curved like Mister Gogol’s, but even shinier wood and longer than Mister Gogol’s. Under the pipe is a blue box of dry matches. He fits the matches next to the bottle caps deep inside his pocket and takes the bag from her so she can feel the pipe.

“My father smokes cigars now,” she says, twirling the pipe around. “One cigar every night, on our porch.”

As he leads her along the rusty fence at the back of the lot, she hits the fence with a broken branch. “I got a watch for Communion but it’s getting fixed because the little hand gets stuck. My mother said that your father was the first one out of everyone in her family to come over on the ship. She said he did that because your father has *guts*.” Nicy’s voice reaches into the high branches overhead, scaring blackbirds who hop onto the lower ends of the branches and fly out so quick that they look like bats in the shadows.

He tells her to talk low. "Or you might wake up a wolf."

"There's no wolves in here," she says, tiptoeing, the twigs popping under her white shoes.

"Blue wolves," Cian says. "I saw one when I was chasing the two cowboys. Did I tell you I beat up two cowboys in here? One I knocked out with a rock and the other with a branch? They knew I was the last Indian and they said I'd kill their camp, which I would have."

Taking hold of his hand, she points down the hill of rocks to the hideout and asks is *that* his house?

He tells her that's it, right there. "I hammered the whole entire thing together. Paolo, he just held up the wood."

Letting go of his hand, she laughs and runs down the hill, her arms out as she cheers, swinging her arms at her sides, running in circles in front of the hideout.

He hugs the heavy bag and runs down, the heavy jars helping him down so fast he slams into the rusty fence. Bouncing backwards, he almost drops the bag.

Inside the fort, she's already sitting Indian style, knocking her fist on the side wall as if it's a door that leads somewhere else. "I'm just checking to see how much this house could take of my punching it." She says this house is better than even her new one because she has to *share* that house. "All my mother ever does with me is vacuum and go to the Grand Union. Whenever my friends come over, we have to wrap up the furniture and the couch in sheets so they don't get no stains. Everybody, all the kids in my grade, they go to bed at eight o'clock even though the sun is still out. Living in Queens is boring like summer camp but it's permanent summer camp."

He tells her he never went to summer camp.

She moves her legs close to herself, hugging her legs and letting her face rest on

her knees. "You're really my best friend, Cian. Who cares about your friend Paolo? His mother was like my teacher at school, who I hate. So this hideout is just yours?"

"It could be yours too."

"It can't. I live too far. I could never come here. I wish I could though because I hate every girl on my whole entire block."

"But you said you had a hundred friends. You said it's the best place in the world to live."

"That was a lie. Really, that's just me repeating what my mother and father say all the time whenever we go visit somewhere, like to your house at Christmas. All they ever say is our block is clean. But who cares about being clean? The girls don't let me play teatime unless I join their club, which you have to be born on the block to be in. And they only come over my house to sleep over because my mother buys so much desserts. If you sleep over another girl's house, you hardly get any desserts and they don't even let you listen to the radio because they say that's forbidden. And they all have cars. And my father doesn't have a car which makes it worse because they make fun of me. They call me a *beggar* just because my father takes the train."

"So maybe you'll move back to your old house here?"

"*Nope*. My mother said if you move out of the Bronx that except if you have brain damage you don't ever move back. She said the Bronx is a pig sty. And she says there's too many spicks moving in now."

"What's spicks?"

"I don't know. But I wish we could move back. Most nights when I'm in bed I cry so hard till I get so tired from crying that I fall asleep. In my bed, I pretend to talk to my friends Jean and Linda from my old block who I didn't even get to be with today because they make their Communion in another church. And theirs isn't till two

weeks.”

“But at least you got a lot of dollars in your cards, right?”

“So?” She smacks her hand on the floor, dust and dirt clouding near her hand. She likes the dust cloud so much that she smacks the floor again and coughs. Making a throat noise like a man, she spits, her spit falling just where the floor meets the rocks, dripping white, bubbly. “If my mother caught me doing that I’d get the paddle. Only old men are supposed to spit. But that was good. That was a big gob.”

He asks her how could it be different if she said Queens was so good before?
“Even at Christmas that’s what you bragged.”

“I told you, it was stupid lie.”

He wonders how could that have been a lie when she meant it so real when she said it, that Queens is better than here.

She says she doesn’t care about anything. She stretches her white leg and kicks the heel of her right shoe on the pebbles outside the fort, pulling up the end of her dress where the dress has circles sewn in, circles shaped like eyes. Her bloomers show. In the corner, the spider web is thicker than it was the other day. Tiny flies, mosquitoes, hang in the silver threads.

She says for sure she’ll get spanked for coming here. “But who cares?”
She asks what kind of Indians they can be. “Apaches? Or the ones who live in the clay houses?”

“This hideout isn’t really a teepee so I don’t know which one. We’ll be a different tribe from those.”

“Let’s smoke that pipe,” she says. “With leaves.” He tells her it’s a perfect idea because that’s what Indians do, for real. Mister Gogol said Indians taught corn and buffalo hunting and smoking pipes, they taught all that, to Columbus.

Nicy lifts the paint jars out of the bag. The green label of the red jar shows a man with a slanted black hat winking at you like he knows your name and everything you ever thought. The words read FOR ART'S SAKE Sunset Red.

The yellow jar shows the same man in the slanted black hat and the label spells out Yellow Noon.

She asks what Indian names should they give each other?

"Pick an animal name. Plus a color. The jar you picked in the store is this red one, so your first name in our Indian language is Red. And then what animal in the zoo is your favorite?"

"We don't even have a zoo in Queens."

"At the Bronx Zoo, what was your favorite animal?"

"What's the name of the tiger? That doesn't have stripes? Just spots?"

"Cheetah?"

"No. It starts with an *L*."

"Lion?" he asks. She shakes her head No, looking so mad that he knows he better get the name right, now. "*Leopard*," he says.

"Yes!" she squeals and she repeats *leopard*, like picking her ice cream. "I'm leopard."

"That's your *favorite*? It has to be your favorite or else your name is fake."

"It's my favorite, *leopard*."

"Then your first name is the color red so your name is Red Leopard."

"And what's yours?"

"My color's this yellow jar. My favorite is a cat."

"Like a regular normal cat? That's boring."

"No it isn't."

“So I’m Red Leopard and your Yellow Cat?”

“And plus you have to forget your name was ever Nicy Riordhan.”

“I forgot it already,” she says.

“Not really, you didn’t forget. The way you’ll permanently forget your old name is when I paint your face with this red. Then you automatically will forget your name is Nicy and you’ll only be able to think of Red Leopard and that’s who you’ll be forever. Even at school. It’s like being *hippatized*.”

“I can already forget Nicy Riordhan,” she says. She tries so hard to open the red jar that her face gets pink so he takes the jar and bangs it on the edge of the hideout floor, banging it just like Ma does with the jelly jars. The lid pops open, easy, like out of a dream and the red paint smells like glue, glue and gasoline. He dips his finger into the cold thick red and she leans over the open jar, her eyes closed, sniffing. He lets his finger soak in the jar, remembering how last year Sister Henrietta taught finger-painting. The oak tag paper had to be held in the corners by inkwells to keep it from rolling while you rubbed paint any directions you wanted, rubbing colors into the white paper, tracing mountains inside glasses of bottle shapes and planets with bird feet and sometimes by accident you invent clouds with new colors, especially when the green and red and black mixed, bad, but it didn’t matter, because Sister Henrietta said *“There are no lines, this isn’t a coloring book, you go wherever your fingers want and paint whatever shapes you discover by accident.”* Accident, like Columbus discovered America, by accident.

“What are you waiting for?” she asks, opening her eyes. “Paint my face.”

“Close your eyes again, “ he says , taking up the long paintbrush. The hairs of the brush smell like wood, like new wood. He dips the brush into the red as the red paint drips fast, puddling onto the floor and he presses the paintbrush on her cheek,

pressing the red paint into giant red freckles, the paint dripping onto her dress and he wishes he had a napkin so that there would be no drips, just these perfect red spots on her face. He remembers the leopard when he was at the zoo, a *snow* leopard, who just lay there because it was summer and too hot to move and cats move only when they want to. She asks him make sure he puts a red spot on her chin, so he dips the brush again, pressing it red onto her chin. She keeps her eyes closed tight, squinting-closed. Her eyelashes are reddish like Uncle Gerard's hair. The red paint drips from her chin onto her neck streaking like blood but as he wipes it with his clean finger she tells him to leave it. "I'll be like a leopard that got in a fight with a lion and got bit on my neck." Her dress has red paint drops in the folds now and there's even red smeared on her white knees, splattered spots on her white tights. When he points to the red she says who cares?

Her new face scares him like she's not Nicy, her skin darker and the red spots such perfect circles. He counts six red spots. Plus her red chin. Seven. Her neck is red too, streaking red like she's bleeding.

Opening the yellow jar, she tells him it's his turn. The smell of the paint reminds him of the smell of the gas station they pass when they order the *good* pizza. He tells Nicy use the second brush or else the color will come out orange and to make sure the yellow gets painted in stripes because some regular cats that are yellow have those stripes. Like the yellow cat Cyclops in the cellar with one eye, who hissed at Neal when Neal found the Spalding in the garbage shed.

The wet paintbrush tickles across Cian's cheek, over his nose, onto his other cheek and even up to his ear, and then lower, again, the thin brush pressing cold along the same path and tickling, the gas station stink of the paint so full in his nose that he could be swimming inside yellow. Yellow splotches land on his lap like rain and he

doesn't care because they will holler when they get home and the hollering will fade away like barking. And even if he gets a whipping with a wet washcloth from Ma, that will fade away too, the stinging pains always do and you sleep even better, because you're tired. And then it's as if it never happened. Because really it didn't happen. Nothing stays. He thinks about how the mark he showed Nicy, on his shoulder, is probably almost gone away, because everything fades, faster sometimes than it ever happened.

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The paint dries across his nose until it feels like a cloth under his eyes and Nicy's cheeks are dark red, even darker than when he first painted the spots onto her face. Her green eyes seem brown. In the dark of the fort, her white dress makes light for them, glowing in the shade. The birds have stopped chirping so the birds must be fast asleep somewhere up there in the branches. Stacking round rocks in a pile, she asks him what's the name of our tribe? "*Apache?*"

"We need our own new name," he says. Remembering the name on the record, he tells her, "*Orfeo. Orfeo savages.*"

"Not savages, a *tribe*," she says, putting a flat black rock on top of the mound of gray and white rocks. "We learned at my new school what groups are called. For wolfs, it's a pack. For geese, it's flock. And for fish, it's school. And people who are Apaches who don't live in a normal house, they're tribes. So we are a tribe."

"*Savages* is better," he says. "If you have a tribe, then you have rules like what time you go to school and whether you're allowed out to play and all that idiotic stuff that I don't even care about anymore. I got a Orfeo record that when you listen it makes you see this place where there's a cliff where a lady sings and when she sings it rains. But the rain is warm and in colors. Pink rain especially. The record is the best. It's

imported. From Italy. The name on the record is Orfeo which is the ladies and the man who sing on the record. So that's why we should have that name. Anytime we come here to this lot that's who we are. Orfeo savages."

"I have a record too. It's imported too 'cause it came from my aunt in Ireland by a ship. It's songs my father memorized from when he was smaller than me. And it cost so much money that my mother said it's too expensive to play on her victrola 'cause it'll get ruined."

Stepping onto the middle of the hill of rocks, she shrugs, holding her arms out for balance. She says she doesn't know and she walks closer to him, gently kicking over her rock pile, the rocks tumbling slowly in the dark. He steps closer to the fort and asks her why don't they sit inside?

The floor of the fort is mostly red and yellow paint. The red is long swirls and the yellow paint forms lines, sharp crazy lines, like yellow grass growing in the red. As he runs his hand over the dried paint, he tells her to sit down, "Close." She hugs her knees and tells him how none of the girls in her grade ever kissed. "I told them *we* kissed at Christmas. Because we almost did."

"I know," he says. "So let's now do a kiss for real."

"It means we are boyfriend and girlfriend, if we kiss. And let's change my name back because I like the name Queens Queen better than Red Leopard. I want that one back, what you said when we were playing in your room?"

He says Queens Queen is better because it rhymes, perfect.

She asks, "What's *future* mean?" and the way she repeats the question feels like someone touching him right below his stomach. He says he doesn't know what *future* means. "I think it means what comes next."

She presses her face on her white knees like she's whispering something into her

legs. "That word my mother says every single time I want to do something. We were in a store where there's aprons that have rainbows and leprechauns on them, so I wanted her to get it for me and she said that's for the *future*. And then when my friend, who's not really my friend, just somebody who I call for because my mother makes me go out even though I know the girls on my block don't like me. This girl, she had a toy oven. And my mother said that word again. She said an oven is for the *future* but I don't even know what that is, *future*."

He presses his shoulder against hers and asks if that's okay, to touch shoulders. She says it's good, it's okay. Moving his hand slowly he touches her leg, feeling her tights, near where her face rests. As his hand gets closer she lifts her head off her knees so he can put his hand right on her knee, and he does, feeling a tickling burning in his palm as he holds his hand there on her knee. A magic spot. She asks does he like how that feels? He admit he likes it more than anything he ever touched. The red paint left dry red dust on her tights, red dust he can see near his hand, and this red dust from her tights is probably on his palm and his fingers now too but he doesn't care. His fingernails have red paint on them anyway. Pressing his hand even harder, he says, "I wish I could put my hand on here every single day. I wish we could come to this fort every single day and do this."

Moving his hand up the round of her knee, he lets his hand slide down almost to her shoes, feeling her ankles with his fingertips as she giggles but doesn't move away.

She tells him to touch her other leg, so he stands up and switches to the other side and as she sits down he puts his hand on her other knee. There's no red dust on this knee and he runs his hand again, slow, on the white, closing his eyes while he listens to her slow breathing. Her giggles are whispers and when he gets to her ankle she squeals and pulls her leg back and laughs so loudly her laughing sounds far

outside the fort, up into the ceiling of trees and maybe waking birds.

"Let's kiss flat on the lips," she says. "For real, this time." She closes her eyes, moving her face close closer.

He closes his eyes. He leans in to where her face must be, his stomach falling as his lips touch hers, dry at first, and now wet, cold-wet, soapy, and she quickly pulls back, laughing.

"Kiss *again*," she says. "But this time lets make sure we make a noise. Or else it's not a real kiss."

"What kind of sound?"

"A wet noise."

He leans forward again and presses his mouth onto her lips and her lips press back so wet that he tastes her tongue, a slipping so cold and quick that he pulls his back. "That made a noise," he says. "I tasted your *tongue*."

She asks what did it taste like?

"Like soap," he says. "Or maybe it was a paint taste because just under your nose there's some red paint."

"I didn't hear a noise," she says. "But that kiss was a real kiss, for sure." Seeing her smile at him feels like looking into a mirror. "Now I could brag 'cause no girl on my block ever kissed a boy. We were running in the sprinkler once and the girls talked about who ever kissed and none of them ever did. I lied and told them I did, that I kissed you, at Christmas. But this time when I tell them, it's for real." As she stretches her legs out, her dress falls back down, covering up her knees. It's so dark in the fort that he can't see her shoes. He tells her keep it a secret.

"Keep what secret?"

"That we kissed."

“Why?”

“It’s better like that. Then no one except us knows and when we see each other, it’s good because we know something that no one else does.”

She tells him okay, “That’s a good idea.” She bosses him, telling him slide closer and he does, putting his hands behind his back, lifting himself up, shifting over, stretching his legs over her white dress and letting his legs rest across her lap. He asks her does that hurt? She shakes her head No. He asks her again, to make sure, and she shakes her head No, closing her eyes, like she doesn’t want him asking questions anymore. So he lets his legs relax on her and without opening her eyes she smiles wide. He closes his eyes too, so they match, and they do match, he knows it and feels as if he’s been here before, sometime, once, and thinking about going to bed later he remembers how she’ll be here, sleeping over, next to him, so that if he has a dream, she’ll be inside that same dream, with him, going on the boat coasting fast to someplace even crazier than here.

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Taking the pipe and the matches from the corner of the fort, Cian says if we’re Orfeo Savages we have to smoke the pipe .

“Get grass and leaves,” Nicy says. “But I won’t smoke it. My mother said ladies who smoke, they don’t ever get married.”

“Misses O’Connell smokes, who lives downstairs from me. She got married. Didn’t you see her? The lady at the window when they were playing cards? She smokes cigarettes.”

“My mother told me ladies who smoke don’t like boys so they never get

married. I won't smoke this pipe. But you will. I'll go get flowers and while I get flowers I'll rip some grass for you to put in the pipe."

The wood of the pipe feels smooth as metal and he knocks it against the wood wall. And this is all *his*. His hideout, his pipe. A house. And a mirror on this wall would be perfect, especially now, for seeing how scary the yellow stripes on his face are. He wonders if Keef is still at Paolo's house. And what day is today? Tomorrow is Easter. Eggs filled with sticky chocolate. Jelly beans and colors that come off in your hands when it's hot.

Nicy comes back in, huffing as she drops a handful of leaves, green leaves big as spoons, dirt too, and white and green flowers, the loose roots of the flowers scattering dirt clumps across the floor. She says for sure there's cowboys out there, down by where they found the matches before. "I saw them sitting and talking. They were smoking cigarettes."

He puts the pipe down and tells her let's go explore and they hurry out, laughing.

He shushes her as they run up the hill of rocks, along the rusty fence, tiptoeing through high weeds, crouching low. "Don't crunch your feet," he says, stepping so soft that he can't even hear himself. He waves for her to follow him, here, behind a thick tree where they can both fit, hiding themselves. Down near the circle of bricks a man is smoking, the man like a moving shadow there sitting across from a lady with hair short as a boy's. They talk about problems and they hand each other the cigarette, back and forth, sharing, taking long sucking puffs. The wet pads of paper they saw from before are there near the man's foot and Cian wonders if that was *their* eyeglasses in the mud? And maybe their pipe too? Their cigarette smoke smells like horses. Nicy asks who are they?

"What you said, *cowboys*," Cian says. "Cowboys who lost their hats. But this is our territory, not theirs, so it's wartime."

"If they catch us spying here, what will they do?"

"Take us to a prison for Indians."

"So what could we do?"

"We'll bomb them. With a rock. Go find one."

As she steps away from the tree, he listens to the talking, the smoke over their heads and the horse smell drifting in invisible lines near Cian's nose. The man's voice is soft and smart, like Mister Gogol's voice and he mumbles something about downtown. The lady isn't happy. She almost stands up. She says, "That's not the *point*, Enrico. If he's serious about acting then what's he care what a critic writes? His talk about '*I'm a born actor so I don't give a shit what anyone says about my work*' and then he's got to be scraped off the barroom floor because some asshole with a useless drama degree writes a hundred words no one reads in some piece of shit journal. Give me a break. He's all thin skin." The lady takes the cigarette from the man and he helps her light it again.

"Where'd you say you scored this stuff?"

The man coughs. "From a Negro, the guy Luke, a pool shark down by the Stadium. If you take his word, this shit's from Persia."

"Well, it's a cow-jumped-over-the-moon caliber stuff," the lady says.

"Tell me about it," the man says "Magic carpet ride."

Without moving his legs, Cian presses himself harder against the tree and turns, quietly, trying to see Nicy. The lot is dark. Birds cry from far back. She's there, glowing white, behind a bush, kicking so loudly while ahead here the man and the lady go on smoking and he prays they don't hear her back there kicking around for rocks.

The man asks did she ever notice Hank has a Frankenstein head? "His

roommate calls him Boris Karloff."

The lady laughs, stomping her feet as she coughs.

Nicy hurries back and hands him a triangle-shaped rock, giving it to him like it's a special gift just from her. And it is. She whispers, "Is that good, Yellow Cat?"

He laughs. He says it's heavy but he'll try to reach from here.

"Thanks, *Red Leopard*," he says. She shakes her head No and says "I'm Queens Queen," giggling so loud he puts his hand over her lips. When he lets go, she says, "Scare them out of here so bad Cian that they think we're ghosts. Oreo savages."

"Orfeo." He says the name again, making a long *fff* sound as she giggles.

The man coughs and spits up and tells the lady he thinks he hears a snake. "Don't laugh, Julia, there are garden snakes in this lot." The horse stink of the smoke drifts over their heads and the man asks the lady, "You hear a hissing?" His foot is off the ground, as if lifting his foot helps the man hear better, keeping his foot up like Ma does at the beach when the sand gets too hot for her feet.

Cian tells her to stay safe here behind this tree. "Or they'll get up and come over here. And if they find us they'll tie us in chains and take us to an Indian prison."

"Indian prison is probably more fun than Queens."

"Not if you are stuck to a wall in chains."

"We're Indians," she says. "We'll win. Yellow Cat, go. Throw it right at them. Scare them off our property."

Cian steps around the tree and he kneels. His hands shake so fast he makes a fist around the rock and presses his knee onto his other hand and then he crawls, crawling so low that he feels he is a real cat, wild, here, moving on this muddy ground, pressing his hands and knees in the weeds, slow, because some could be poison ivy and he wonders as he crawls can he throw this rock from down here, from the ground?

The lady drops the end of the cigarette into a can that fizzes. The can says **Campbell's Tomato**.

"In the end, here's how it is," the lady says, "You say fuck tradition at some point. That's what I tell Hank. His drama teachers from college, they nag him, that's his problem. College was then, this is now. He obsesses after every audition. You got to step back and think about life's big picture. It all comes out in the wash. In the big picture, we don't matter. How many people did the A-bombs kill, in Japan? They lost count it was so many. Now you are going to tell me after all the mayhem in the world that it matters a whit what some drama teacher at some college thinks of his acting? Why should Hank be quote unquote respectful of tradition? Fuck tradition. Tradition sounds like my father talking about table manners. *Tradition*. So is it a tradition now we drop A-bombs on whoever we don't like? I mean, really, *tradition-shmition*." The lady reaches across. She cups the man's chin. "Enrico, you awake, are you still with me?" The man groans, sleepy, like he's at breakfast.

Cian crawls closer till he can see that the man's pants are baggy and black. The rocks on the ground hurt his shins so he stands behind a thin tree.

The man's hair is stringy, like Keef's. The lady's wearing pants too, not baggy, but pants just like a boy. The crate she sits on says **CALIFORNIA PEARS**.

Far behind him, Nicy giggles but he doesn't turn to see her. He wishes he was back there, safe, with her.

Standing up fully, he reaches back over his head with the rock, aiming at the man's leg in a long slow practice throw. Then he closes his eyes, reaching back as he swings his arm forward letting the rock go, harder than even he expected and someone screams in long howling shouts. "*Chhhhhristalmighty!* My ankle. What the fuck?" The man hops around on one leg as the lady stands up, circling around the man, her hands

on her face as she asks him did a snake bite? The lady hugs herself, staring right at Cian without seeing him. She tucks her dark hair behind her ears as if to see better but still she doesn't see as the man holds his foot and hops on one leg, angry, kicking over the wood crate.

"You know, I'm kind of scared shitless. Rex lived on this block when he was a kid," the lady says. "Rex told me this lot used to be a slave burial ground. Remember he told us that? There's spirits, Enrico."

"What does Rex know?" Enrico says. "Fuck Rex. That was no spirit that just threw this rock at my leg. *I* grew up on *this block* too, this lot wasn't a nigger burial ground. It was an old lumber store, a warehouse thing that got razed. And let me tell you, you see this rock that hit my leg? I'm telling you it was from over there." The man points away from Cian and the lady says no way it was a rock that hit him. "There's no one even *here*," she says holding her hands over her eyes again, staring right at Cian without seeing him. "I'm spooked, Enrico. Even if this lot was a warehouse it could have been a slave burial place before that. I'm positive Rex told me that. I want to go, anyway. I'm not lingering around here and meet whatever it was that hexed your foot." The lady heads toward the S-shaped path and the man follows, limping. "If I meet who threw that rock, oh boy. Christ, slow down, Julia, slow down I want to see where that bastard is who threw this rock. It's not even a *rock*, look?" The man holds the rock for the lady to see but she just shrugs, walking on. "Julia, this is a goddamned chunk of concrete. It hit me here, in the ankle and it came from *there*." The man points right at Cian and he feels as if the man's finger is poking right into his head. But he doesn't move because to move would be to be afraid and he's not. So what if he catches him? The lady is already off on the path and she shouts over her shoulder as she goes, their voices lower and lower as they move, shadows, really now and the man walking mostly

on one foot, looking back every few steps, their shapes shrinking, like they are sinking into the ground. And even as Cian thinks he hears them talking, it's only a squirrel, his claws scratching the tree bark, overhead, there, a jumpy black squirrel hurrying in the branch, the branch low enough that he can see the white flowers growing out of the knots in the bark.

Nicy comes over and giggles, her face even darker red, the paint spots on her cheek so blended into each other that her whole face is red paint and it almost scares him how different she looks. She's a savage for sure. "We did it," she says. "I told you we would. Let's go home to the hideout." She's already far ahead of him, her legs kicking weeds in sweeping sounds as she skips, jumping, as if over puddles, then skipping onto the patches of brown dirt, running along the rusty fence toward the hill of rocks, her arms swinging at her side like she knows this place now, like she's never lived any place else but here.

*

She rips the leaves, tearing them into shreds to fit inside the pipe. Her hands have freckles, even on her pinkies. Yellow and red splotches of paint. But the wet gasoline smell of the paints is gone. Even the lids of the paint jars are dried. "Indians and geniuses smoke pipes," he tells her. "Mister Gogol my next door neighbor, he's a genius and he smokes a pipe. He's home everyday and reads books because his groin got ripped so he can't work no more. Work is stupid. You put on a costume every single day and go to work until you die. What do you want to be, for work, when you aren't in school anymore?"

"A *teller*," she says. "In a bank. That's what my mother said I would be good at. You work in the bank and play with money and if you don't like a customer you tell them they're not getting any money. Especially if they're dumb. Or I could be a lady cop. A meter maid." She stuffs the pipe full of the ripped leaves, pressing her thumb onto the green bits. She hands him the pipe and tells him be careful or those leaves will spill and pushing him aside, she grabs the matches. He holds the pipe close to his lips and wonders how many Indians smoked from this pipe? In this lot? Their horses might be buried here. Or maybe a slave smoked it? The lady said a *slave* burial ground. He asks Nicy what's a burial ground? With her tongue out, she plays with the leaves in the pipe. She says she knows how to light matches because her father showed her, at the stove, with his cigar. "He smokes cigars from Cuba after supper. We have a porch on the house. He showed me how to use matches to light his cigar. You got to puff *hard*." She hits a match stick against the brown sandpapery edge of the box. The flame is giant, yellow, hot. The flame is right over the leaves but it doesn't catch and she tells him puff harder. He sucks harder at the hollow wood but still the leaves don't catch. "We need *paper* in there instead," she says. "Leaves don't catch fire."

She goes outside to look for paper and he wonders how long they have been out here? It feels like three days. More, even. Loud birds cry, far off, somewhere behind the hideout, behind the rusty gate. *Crows*. Crows sound like animals not birds. Ma said crows were once white doves that fell from heaven with the angel Lucifer, down into hell and they cry loudly like that because they want to get back into heaven but can't.

Stepping outside, he doesn't see Nicy in the dark. Walking over sharp rocks near the rusty fence, he empties the green leaves from the pipe, letting them fall into the grass behind the fence. Down there, past the trees and buildings, a long white boat with a green light floats along, a flag at the tail end of the ship and the ship so big that there

could be another boat inside *that* boat. He wonders where it's coasting to.

Nicy comes running down the hill of rocks, excited, with both of her hands full of crumpled newspapers.

Back inside, they rip the dirty white paper, small and smaller, and Cian notices one crumpled paper has a picture of a baseball player reaching high over a fence. Another shows a picture of an ice cream scoop.

Shoving the paper bits down into the pipe till the pipe is filled up, she lights a match quick and tells him bring the pipe close, puff on the yellow flame. "Puff like crazy this time."

The fire in the pipe flames up and the smell of the newspaper bits burning is so strong inside his nostrils that he feels as if he's already smoking the pipe. As he sucks again on the hollow wood, the flame glows and the taste in his stomach burns hot, filling his chest with the burning, a tightness that hugs him as he breathes. He coughs, spitting out and taking in cool air. "It feels like suffocating," he says. "It feels like when you fall asleep on your stomach." He sucks on the pipe again and she watches the flame. "Do two more puffs so at least it's three and that means you smoked. It's enough if you do three." He puffs a third time as the fire in the pipe glows orange and then blue and gray and black bits of burnt paper float out, vanishing before they land outside the fort, like falling snow vanishes when it's too warm, the snow melting even before it lands.

Stepping outside, he goes over to the rusty fence and taps the pipe empty. The burnt bits of black paper fade in the long grass and he waits to make sure there's no smoke. Nicy's breathing behind him, touching his back to see. He tells her the fire's out, *out good*.

The clear air in his chest feels better here. You can smell the green. Stars show through the branches. Mister Gogol said a lot of stars are dead but since the light takes so long to get here to earth, half of forever, when you look up you still see the light but it's only the light still traveling to here but the star that made the light is already dead. But how could a star die? And if the sun is a star than those stars up there are suns too. He tells Nicy this but she hardly listens. He wonders can you tell time by the moon? And where is the moon tonight?

He holds her hand as they walk further along the rusty fence, where the weeds are taller and smellier, where dried up brown vines are woven into the wires of the fence. Stepping where he sees a gap in the tree, there, between two forked branches, he sees the moon just under a thin cloud, the cloud yellow and white in the moonlight. He points and tells her how everywhere up there is surrounded by planets, planets where you could come back after you die as one of the creatures on *those* planets, instead of coming back as someone on earth, all over again.

She seems like she's in a rush to go back to the fort but when he asks her she tells him no. "We could stay right here because this is a new spot." She squeezes his hand and presses her arm into his side, pressing so hard he almost falls into the high weeds. "I can build a much bigger house than that hideout," he says. "Then what we could do is you sneak out of your school and I sneak out of mine and then we just run away to here and live permanent in a house around here."

She says that would be fun. "Because I hate my mother," she says. "Could we really do that?"

"All we need is *weapons*. Rocks. Plus tomahawks which you could make so easy from the fat sticks in the lot. Then you can get food from growing stuff."

Nicy says the growing part is easy. "My father said we could grow tomatoes in

our yard if he could get the right seeds.”

“So we could do that here. You don’t need a supermarket and money then. Grapes are the best. Corn. Anything we want to grow.

“What about to sleep?”

“We make beds out of feathers from birds that die. Or we could use grass. I don’t even need to sleep, really, I just go to bed because they make me.”

“What else could we do?”

“You can climb trees here. I climbed that *one*.” He shows her the tree, waving for her to lean forward, across to the tree branch just over the hill of rocks. “You lie flat on that branch with your arms out and you’re a bird. We can play manhunt in here. My friend Paolo could come back here, if we even let him. He hates school, too, Paolo. He sings a song in Italian that makes me feel like I’m asleep when I’m wide awake. Plus he tells good stories too. If he cries too much, we could just kick him out. Or make him into our slave.”

“Let’s go and *ask*,” she says. “If we could sleep here tonight.”

“We don’t have to ask anyone, we could just do it.”

“We would get punished super bad.”

“So? Then in the morning we get in a lot of trouble but so what? They’ll spank you and they’ll spank me too. But then that’s over and at least we got to camp here. Right?”

“I hope we move back to our old block. But I don’t think we will because my mother hates it here because she said it’s a pig sty.”

“A block doesn’t matter,” he tells her. “*This* would be a yard that we live in.” She says how she’ll probably live in Queens all the way past high school. “But you’re going to sleep over,” she says. “And when you sleep over, we’ll do this again with the

paints on our faces, all over again. An the names too. Yellow Cat and Queens Queen. We could scare the girls on my block." He tells her he can bring candies too. "Nickels I could take, from that wishing well. And rope to tie up the girls on your block. I know how to get rope, my mother has rope in the closet." He pulls at her hand, leading her back toward the fort, telling her to take big steps in these weeds or else she might get scratched by thorns. "Or you might step on a snake. That man before said there's garden snakes in this lot."

He wonders again why can't you tell time by the moon if you can tell time by the sun? Maybe you can, if you know how. Because there's a lot in books that you could never know, unless you have forever to read, like Mister Gogol does. That's what Ma says. *The man has forever*. He could ask Mister Gogol about telling time with the moon, next week, on a walk to school. And ask also did the Indians have moondials like they had sundials? And he could tell Mister Gogol, brag, really, about how he built the fort and nailed the walls and the ceiling in so tight not even a hurricane will knock it down. And how he smoked a real pipe, finally, a real pipe and a real savage.

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At the top of the hill of rocks a light shines so bright that Nicy screams, turning to run from the light but he holds on to her hand and tells her stay. Somebody up there shouts, somebody whose shadow falls far down the hill, the head of the shadow a black shape on the floor of the fort and seeing this shadow his stomach melts down into his legs, his hands shaking crazy as Nicy cries and he wonders who could that be holding a light so bright that it hurts even when you squint?

And there's mumbles, talking, more than one person up there.

"Roberto?"

"Cian Robert, are you down there?"

"Nicy?"

"Stay up the hill, ladies, stay put," a man's voice says. "It'll be easier to accomplish it this way."

In the light, Cian sees a policeman stepping down the hill, white rocks tumbling to the edge of the fort as the policeman comes, slow, using the sides of his feet, shining black shoes loosening more rocks as he walks down. He aims the flashlight inside the fort, the light so bright he sees it even with his eyes closed tight.

Aunt Ann's voice cries out at the top of the hill and Nicy lets go of his hand and runs ahead, screaming and running past the policeman, up the hill, slipping but still running.

Aunt Ann lifts Nicy into her arms, hugging her as her crying gets so sharp and loud that Cian wants to cry. He crawls out of the fort and at the top of the hill Ma and Franco and Gia and Aunt Ann are there but none of them talk as Nicy cries long and loud and Aunt Ann tries to shush her. He covers his ears with his hands and the policeman holds on to his elbow to lead him up the hill, as if the policeman knows this lot better than him, which he doesn't, because he almost trips, aiming the flashlight back down into the fort. The policeman goes back down there, kneeling, his black belly fat in the light as his head disappears into the fort.

Ma hugs him. "I thought you perished my God Cian we have been out for an hour looking searching knocking on doors Good Lord." Ma's hands shake so hard that he wants to cry. Her eyes are wet from crying as she hugs him again and then she pushes him away to see his face, "How on earth did you mess your face so?"

"They did it *this way*," the policeman says, coming up the hill, holding the two paint jars, the paintbrushes. "And that's not all," the man says. "Them Injuns smoke

'em peace pipe." The policeman shows Ma the pipe and sniffs the pipe, again, his flashlight tucked under his arm, the light shining on Aunt Ann's blue shoes as she shushes Nicy, who cries quieter now into her shoulder. Gia says something to Franco and the two don't even look at Cian. As they turn to go, Ma shouts toward them. "That's it, go ahead, run off. You're half liable, Misses Arancia. But go ahead, you scurry off then." Gia turns around as Franco grabs her arm to get her to go, even as she shouts at Ma in Italian and the policeman tells Gia to go on. "It's all done, Misses Arancia. Thank you for showing us the path here, thank you. Both of you, thank you."

Ma asks the policeman how could he possibly thank the likes of those two? "They're the ones let my son come with their son into this filthy place to begin with."

Whipping a black bag out of his pocket, the policeman seems calm. His face is fat but his chin is small and his black hat shows a silver medal, the medal of a lady with perfect posture standing next to a giant flag. The policeman bags up the paint jars and the pipe and the brushes as Ma stares at the bag and shakes her head.

Nicy's face is buried in Aunt Ann's hair like Aunt Ann is her pillow, her crying small and sharp, like baby Anna's crying. Ma takes his hand, hard. As they walk, Cian stares at the ground, kicking the weeds and the green spiky balls along the path.

Ma pinches his shoulder. She tells him stop it, now. "I don't want even so much as the slightest stirring from this point on. Two hours of horrible panic, absolute nightmare this has been."

"All's well that ends well," the policeman says. In the dark, as he walks behind them, he reads from the label on the jars, " 'For Arts Sake' it says here and oh Good Lord, oil-based paints no less. 'Sunset Red'? And what's this other one 'Yellow Noon'? Just lovely. You ladies have your clean up work cut out for you."

Someone says they smell smoke. "It's their peace pipe, it's in my bag," the

policeman says, opening the bag halfway as Ma leans forward and sniffs. "Where an eight year old gets a pipe I cannot fathom," she says. "He forages in trash. He has more than a few lessons coming to him, this boy does."

The policeman hurries ahead, waddling like a fat black duck, his gun there on his thick belt and the flashlight and a black stick, like a tiny baseball bat, swinging from his hips, shining black even in this dark. His boots squish on the mud.

The streetlights of Paolo's block shine on the heads of people watching from the parked cars.

The policeman leads them around to a tight space in the gate where you don't have to climb. "A surprise exit," the policeman says.

On the street, people stand at the curbs and between the parked cars watching them as they come out of the lot.

A parked police car flashes orange and blue light on the faces of the watching people. The policeman cleans out the inside of the pipe with a rag and blows on it, spitting into the pipe and wiping it clean again, dropping it back into the bag. And as he walks toward the sidewalk with the bag, a boy holds the garbage can lid for him. The policeman puts the bag into the can. "You're a gentleman and a scholar." A wrinkled lady with a white handkerchief around her head taps the policeman's arm, and points at Cian. She says, "*Fiore*," and even the faces behind her start to point. Someone jumps onto a bumper and points and a fat lady with her hands on her mouth shouts, "There's a fire, fire."

Through the gate, far into the lot, a ball of yellow the size of a bush glows, orange and white, and the policeman runs to the car, talking into a square phone, shouting numbers.

As the voices around them get louder Nicy cries again and Aunt Ann tries to

shush her. Ma hugs him as she stares into the lot and she says, "It's a brush fire is all, Cian."

A man with a green bucket runs by and another man with a bucket follows him, both of them in such an emergency and talking to each other in Italian and seeing these people running into the lot as if it's *their* lot makes Cian want to run after them and stop them and tackle them, drag them up that S-shaped path and back out here. Because they don't belong in there. It's *his* property.

The fire is big now, he can see it, like a bad dream that gets louder as Nicy cries, screeching. More people come to the curb to watch the flames, yellow and glowing far in the lot, spreading now onto a tree like yellow water that goes up, up and around branches spreading orange at the tops of trees and Ma asks the policeman can we go? "There's not much good served having the children see this."

People crowd near the police car, tiptoeing near the fence while one girl who is Kathleen's age puts her hands on her mouth and stands on a car bumper to see better.

Cian's face feels warm but his insides feel so cold that he knows for sure he's sick. Ma bends down and asks him is he okay and he cries, crying into her warm chest, trying to breath as he cries but thinking about the flames burning up birds and crows and sparrows and squirrels and even the spider in their hideout, the fort maybe burning up too so he cries so hard he can't breath and he almost falls, spinning into nowhere, dizzy even as Ma hugs him and tells him it's *contained*. "It's a brush fire is all."

Aunt Ann says, "*That's no brush fire, Mary.*"

Someone shouts, "*Fiore, fire, come, down there, you see it?*" Voices yell over other voices, in Italian, and people crisscross each other, shoving by Ma, too close, a wall of people now standing against the fence to see the lot, people making moans and surprised voices like you hear on the Fourth of July when Mister Clancy shoots off

Roman candles. And hearing the moans as they repeat, “fire, *fiore*,” he feels so far away from the fort in there that he cries again and Ma hugs her arms over him, her arms pressing onto his ears till he can hardly hear the Italian shouting anymore. Just mumbles, all around.

And there are so many birds in the lot, squirrels too, and even those small red bugs maybe are burning up. His face is wet. Wet and warm in her arms and the sirens scream, far off, coming closer, the screams tearing the air.

The policeman opens the back door of the car. He tells Cian it’s okay, “Truly. This is why God invented firemen,” he says.

Cian slides into the backseat next to Ma. Aunt Ann and Nicy come into the backseat too, Nicy with her face still pressed into Aunt Ann’s shoulder.

Faces show in the windows of the houses. People running down Paolo’s block point past the police car, past the fence, as a siren screams, fire engines, coming to here, coming from somewhere.

As soon as Aunt Ann shuts the door, the police car pulls away from the shouting and as the fire sirens get louder and closer he wonders how far and what kind of jail do they put you in for making fires? Fires that you didn’t even know you made.

Catching his breath, he blows his nose in a tissue. The police car smells like shoe polish. Nicy snuffles but won’t take her head out of Aunt Ann’s hair to look up, not even once so he leans himself against the car door, resting his face on the cold window as they drive past Paolo’s building, the policeman waving his arm out his window to get the walking people in the street out of his way. A fire truck screams so loud, tearing the air and Aunt Ann pets Nicy’s head and whispers words Cian can’t hear but wishes he could. From the front, radio voices shout numbers in a speaker near the policeman’s legs. Ma tells him the fire was small.

“And it was probably junkies who hang out in there started it,” the policeman says. “Routine really, in there. It happens every other month.”

Ma says, “Whoever it was, no doubt it was an accident.” The policeman shakes his head. “An accident, no doubt,” repeating “accident,” again as if he didn’t believe himself the first time he said it.

The car turns, sharp, at the corner, speeding on.

“But the fire was in the *back*,” Cian says. “Where our fort is.”

“You’ve no *fort*,” Ma says. “Shut your eyes and don’t say anything anymore.”

His eyes are wet and tired and burning as the car swerves around corners, getting faster and faster. The car’s purring-moving makes him want to sleep. Sleep forever. He remembers the boat on the river with the green light and how good it would be to sleep on that boat right now. A boat going toward a place in the ocean that maybe even the people in the boat don’t know about.

The hill here feels to Cian like the hill near the schoolyard. And it is. Watching the blurring gates, he remembers, like a day that maybe didn’t happen, climbing that high fence, being so high and balanced up there, with Nicy on the sidewalk waving up at him, excited, so tiny down there.

As the car slows down Ma asks the policeman can he drop them off at the corner? “To avoid a complete scene on our own block?”

“Absolutely, no trouble Mary, all’s well that ends well. Important thing is we got our two lost sheep back into the fold and intact.”

“You did see the mess your son made of my daughter’s face and her dress?” Aunt Ann says, “I wouldn’t call any of this *intact*.”

Opening the door, the policeman winks at Ma, who climbs out, holding Cian’s hand. The policeman has green and gold and red ribbons on his shoulder and he

touches Cian's head. "Don't you fret, Robert. There's life lessons here that I'm certain that your Mom and your Pops will help you figure out." The officer shakes Cian's hand. "We stray from the path but get our comeuppance boy one way or another. Don't we though?"