

WINTERSET SPRING

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Fiction

The wind dropped flurries through the forest and made the fire lay flat — a full three seconds, Harold counted — while he waited for the senior patrol leader to get started. Behind him the tents ruffled angrily, the bungee cords straining to hold them in place. When the wind died down a slow hush descended over the campsite. It was here, at last, that the senior patrol leader spoke up. What they were about to hear was for present company only — no exceptions — and everyone understood he meant the scoutmaster, off running an errand at the ranger's. The words touched off an immediate excitement around the circle. On either side Harold heard whispers traded among the other Scouts, but he himself didn't participate. He'd already spent half the morning in panic, and even now he still hoped the ax might fall on someone else's head.

His worrying had begun on the bus ride to Winterset. That was when Casey had told him, in strict confidence, that the patrol leaders were planning serious payback for one of the younger Scouts. But despite all guesswork and finger pointing, Harold couldn't get him to cough up who it was — or what exactly the payback involved. It was typical of Casey. Whenever he got hold of a secret he would either talk it to death or else dangle it from the shortest leash. Eventually, Casey grew tired of Harold's pestering, so he turned to him sharply and said, "Don't worry, you'll find out soon enough!" From then on, the mystery took a dark hold of him. Halfway to Winterset he tripped over the unthinkable — that Harold himself might be the boy in question. Forget that the older Scouts barely knew who he was — that didn't stop Harold's imagination from getting carried away. Mile after mile he watched the empty farms rush by, while in his mind he fell victim to one grim scenario after another, each one allowing a slimmer margin of escape.

Presently, the senior patrol leader poked the coals with his walking stick as he looked at the circle again. He said the whole business dated back years ago, when a group of Scouts had come to Winterset to get rid of a boy they all hated. "You know the kind," he said sneering, and went on to describe a burnout that everyone in his troop, his own scoutmaster no less, wanted gone. "A bottom feeder," he declared. "A cancer to everyone. One of those kids who either pumps gas his whole life or ends up in jail."

The other patrol leaders smirked at each other while Harold, along with everyone else, turned to look at Tony Colbetti. It was undeniable — Tony fit the description to a T — and yet Harold, having now been

let off the hook, was left feeling strangely, inexplicably, disappointed. He watched Tony stretch his arms behind his head and let out a big yawn, as if ready to take a nap right then. He seemed perfectly unfazed by the nasty looks being directed at him, a show of indifference Harold found completely astonishing. He wondered if anyone could really be so oblivious to that much hatred.

"So," the senior patrol leader continued, and immediately drew back everyone's attention. He explained their plan to get rid of the boy — whose name, he added, was Abel Fitch. The Scouts had planned on taking Abel on a long hike through the forest, to a hidden spring they knew of where they would all gang up and toss him in. "Everyone knew he couldn't swim," said the senior patrol leader, "so what better way to make him disappear for good?" For a moment he prodded the center coals with his walking stick before looking back up again. "It was simple enough," he said. "The boys threw him in no problem, only they didn't stick around afterward. They didn't have the *guts* —"

The senior patrol leader shook his head as if reliving the moment himself. "Of course, Abel was stubborn like they always are — so he somehow managed to dog paddle to safety. That's right — the guy didn't drown. He got away and ran tail between his legs, straight for those caves over there ..."

All heads turned to follow his walking stick, which he raised toward the line of hills beyond the forest. In another second the senior patrol leader returned it to the fire. "Sure, old Abel was proud of himself — and why shouldn't he be? He'd gotten away, hadn't he? He'd outsmarted the other boys? But guess what — Abel fucked up too. He hid so deep in the caves he ended up getting lost. For a whole week he was stuck in there — remember, that's a week without sunlight, without food, without seeing another human being. A week of hearing bats fly around in the dark. Sure," the senior patrol leader went on, "Abel found his way out again, but it was too late. By then he could still hear bats in his attic."

He pointed to his head and made the sound of a cuckoo clock, triggering ripples of laughter around the circle. The senior patrol leader himself turned deadly serious, however, and told them that Abel Fitch was still known to slink around the forest at night. "I wouldn't worry about him though. Abel's too afraid of getting caught again, and with good reason. Next time he *is*," said the senior patrol leader, his head swiveling until his eyes were directly on Tony, "I can guarantee he won't get off so lucky."

In less than a second Tony had jumped to his feet. His face was bright red and he pointed a shaky finger back at the senior patrol leader, saying the story was complete bullshit. In the version *he'd* heard, the boy had gotten thrown in for dressing up like a fairy — something he

said the senior patrol leader knew all about.

The other boy didn't answer him. He didn't have to — his friends started in immediately with loud cat-calls and whistling — and in no time the jeering spread like wildfire around the circle. Even the younger Scouts got involved, and Harold, shocked by the sudden turn of events, debated nervously about joining in. Tony was a head taller than him and had bullied Harold more times than he could remember, but he appeared a lot smaller suddenly, almost as if he were shrinking under the intense barrage. For several more seconds Harold carried on an anxious debate, until he noticed, just to his left, that Casey was starting to stand up. His friend winked quickly at him — offering a smug smile like he had on the bus — and that's when Harold realized what was coming. Casey had been preparing a payback of his own; he'd been waiting all along to make a showing in front of the older Scouts. A bolt of jealousy shot through Harold. A spontaneous hand, as if acting alone, pinned Casey's shoulder back down, and a second later Harold had launched himself forward instead.

What followed was something he could barely account for after the fact. A string of angry words spilled out of his mouth. *Crack-head, Burnout, Waste of Skin*. The insults came in a mad gush that was about five times louder than Harold expected it. By the time the words had run out, he discovered an entire circle of onlookers, every last one of them fallen silent. Even the wind died down again, giving way to the quiet cracking of the trees. Harold's heart switched gears suddenly, and he realized exactly what it meant to be the center of attention.

A few minutes later, as the boys came up to congratulate him, Harold wanted to explain what had really happened. He wanted to tell them it was panic — not bravery — that had made him stand his ground. Panic that had held him in place when Tony charged from across the circle. Only thanks to the senior patrol leader — who'd intervened in the nick of time — had Harold been saved. But he never succeeded in explaining himself. The compliments were dished out too quickly, the praise sank in too deep for Harold to fight it off, until at last the boys persuaded him he'd actually done something to earn their admiration. On a cloud of fame he wandered back to his tent, where another surprise was awaiting him inside. Casey yelled "*Bravo!*" as he threw Harold a hard slap on the back, and in his eyes Harold could see the boy already planning his next revenge.

The scoutmaster returned from the ranger's to give everyone a quick briefing before the afternoon hike. He didn't plan on tagging along but required each boy to partner with his tent mate. Casey, still sore from earlier, wouldn't give Harold the time of day. Harold had no problem with this — it was worth giving up Casey for the show of respect he

got from the older boys. For the first time they'd welcomed him into their company, giving him random pats on the back or sending him secret looks of encouragement. He decided to let Casey pout if he wanted to. Harold himself was more than happy to move on.

The troop set out as a large group along the trail. On one side the path was flanked by a small, grassless gully, and on the other side stood the dark forest wall, which was broken up by soggy patches of snow that lay between the trees. At the head of the pack, continuing the theme from earlier, some older boys were explaining how a person could easily survive in a cave for a week. It wasn't even a question, one of them argued, as there were plenty of crickets to eat. "High in protein," he said to a friend, who winked back at him and answered, "Sure, you start with bugs, then you move up the food chain. Bats, bat shit ..." Everyone but Tony started laughing.

Casey, who'd abandoned Harold for the front of the pack, launched into a story about some lost hiker in Alaska who had survived in the forest by eating ground nuts, trapping squirrels with deadfalls, and using quartz and tinder fungus to start fires. Harold wanted to laugh out loud. He couldn't believe it — almost everything Casey was saying had come straight out the Scout Handbook, yet the older boys were allowing him to go on anyway. Casey had a way of adding to the story to make it interesting — while at the same time infuriating Harold. Especially a few minutes later, when he discovered he'd gone right on listening along with the others.

After a half hour he felt a gnawing cold start in his bones. By then the group had split in two, with the younger Scouts trailing behind as they chased each other into the woods. With Casey further ahead and now basking in the spotlight, it was only Tony who paid Harold any attention. He walked with a slow, puffed-up stride, his eyes slack but somehow alert, reminding Harold of a large cat in the wild. He wasn't sure if the boy would really dare fighting him again, or worse — whether the older Scouts would come to his rescue this time. Harold decided not to risk it. The next time Tony appeared to be looking elsewhere he fell back quickly to join the younger Scouts, hoping Tony would accept this as a sign Harold had backed down.

The younger Scouts were playing the game ghost in the graveyard; as newcomer, Harold was made ghost and required to swear revenge in the name of Abel Fitch. In his first turn he caught someone easily, and as the boys regrouped, he looked ahead to notice the other party of Scouts, Tony included, putting more distance between them. He felt embarrassed all of the sudden. Of course Tony had been bluffing, the trouble had all been part of Harold's imagination. And Casey's too, he realized. He blamed his friend for having spooked him earlier, and then he blamed himself for having let Casey get inside his head

so easily.

In the distance, he began to see the creeping foothills. The pink and pale gradations of rock rose above the treetops, and Harold felt seized by an aching ambition to get there. Strange things started happening to him. In the midst of playing he felt his senses sharpened. Perfect hiding spots called out to him. During the hunt he made blind turns around imposing tree trunks, ran full stride through a tangle of underbrush. No one came close to catching him. The game stopped when an overweight boy named Darren Hubbell became ghost. Someone led a chant of *too fat, too slow, where'd his shadow go?* Another boy suggested turning him into a human snowman, and the Scouts got as far as turning him on his side before Darren started crying, so they let him off by making him ghost again.

The next time Harold glanced ahead, he noticed the other group of boys had gotten a good half mile in front of him. Sure enough, Casey still walked out near the lead. Scanning backward, he was struck suddenly by a flash of terror. Tony was nowhere to be seen. Squinting, Harold searched all over for him without any luck. He'd been right all along, he realized. Clearly his enemy had to be hiding somewhere, lying in wait to ambush him, and Harold thought fast on how to save himself.

The idea came when the next round began. As the boys ran into the woods he stuck close to the pack, trying at first to remain camouflaged among the dark jackets and ski hats. As the others peeled off one by one to hide, however, Harold kept right on running. He didn't dare look behind him. He ran so fast his head started pounding, while in back of him he could hear the shouts growing more and more distant, like errant noises on a playground. The sound of Darren's countdown actually seemed to take longer, rather than hurry up, and Harold wasn't sure if it was his own speed or a trick of the forest. Before he could think about it he was ducking to avoid the surprise lank of a hawthorn branch. In doing so he snagged his foot on the heavy, thatched roots between two trees, and ended up diving headlong into a somersault. Knees tucked in, he finished in a sitting position, where he remained for a second as his wind came back. A branch snapped somewhere — a starter's gun that sent him off to the races again — sprinting as if his life depended on it. He pushed himself deeper and deeper into the forest, as if his fears were something he could actually outrun. The whole time he refused to look behind him. He ran farther and farther until his legs felt rubbery and a fire burned in his lungs, and his whole body finally collapsed.

At the end of it, Harold still wasn't sure he'd gotten away. He stifled his loud breathing, and instead of hocking up mucous he wiped a long

slug onto his glove. Lying on his back, he saw the naked reaches of ash trees above him, the tiny branches stitched together in a black, thorny tangle. The sky was like dish water and grooved with ragged clouds like a sand bar. Standing again, he listened for the other Scouts but couldn't hear them. He couldn't hear anything, really. There was no snow on the floor, just pine needles and a mottled carpeting of leaves, and some acorns that looked like small polished stones. A narrow path came out of some tall holly bushes, and it occurred to him what the scoutmaster had said earlier — that all main paths eventually led to the ranger's cabin. It was the only plan he could think of, so Harold started down the trail with the renewed hope of arriving safely.

The path led through a long meadow patched with fern grass and what he thought was poisonous May apple, with large, double-breasted round leaves like lily pads. Walking, he didn't feel cold anymore. Aside from his down coat and other externals, he wore top and bottom longjohns, two wool shirts, and two pairs of thermal socks. He paused for a moment and gazed up at what little sky showed above the treetops. The sun's position didn't worry him. There was plenty of daylight left, even though the sun itself blurred into a heavy fold of clouds. Through the meadow the trail cut straight across, like a clean strip of masking tape, and coming out of the far end he was surprised to see a shallow brook. The water ran fast down the middle but near the edges it was clotted with mud and ice and became a trickle littered with shiny stones. Over the hurried whisper of the current came a sudden, changing wind through the trees, a noise that tried drowning out everything else.

Harold kept walking, waiting for the stream to change course, but as it took on more water it continued in roughly the same direction. His toes grew cold; on one foot both his socks had slipped below the heel, so he bent down to unlace the boot and adjust them. His fingers were fumbling with the strings when a terrible thought crossed his mind. What if he weren't on a main path? "Oh, *stop* it," he muttered aloud, as if to prove he wasn't a coward. He knew that going forward beat going nowhere at all, and in a little while he felt rewarded by another trail marker. But the water continued drawing his attention. When he could no longer resist it, he bent down at the river's edge and took his glove off. Dipping in a lone finger, he made it as far as his second knuckle before a shivering recoil shot through his arms and legs. He wondered how water this cold couldn't be frozen. Leaning closer, he discovered his surprise reflection in the muddled surface, and as his own shifting image stared back at him he imagined just how dreadful it would be to get thrown into such water. It aroused a strange and unexpected sympathy in him. Thinking of Abel Fitch, he wondered whether anyone could ever make peace with someone else

who wanted you dead. He didn't blame Abel for swimming for it. As Harold saw it, the boy had had no choice. If he got out alive, he could always seek revenge on the others, but if he succumbed to the water then the only person he'd ever end up punishing was himself.

Another hour went by. Still the river carried on in the same direction, only the banks grew wider and the water drew to a standstill, leaving only a few small eddies lathered around obtruding rocks. The sky seemed closer than before, like a dark lid drawn over the forest, while the outlines of the trees had faded into deeper shadows. Harold felt his hopelessness return; all along it had been keeping quiet pace with him, like lazy driftwood. Meanwhile, everywhere he looked his eyes and ears played tricks on him. Was he imagining it, or did the river empty into a giant opening up ahead? A sudden hole in the forest, it looked like. As he approached it he saw the clearing was rimmed with white pine trees and sycamores, and there in the middle — he couldn't believe his own eyes — a clear blue water funneling to the surface. Harold perceived the change in color before he actually understood it. While jogging toward the pool he half-expected it would disappear — like heat waves in the dead of summer — only this turned out to be no mirage. Up close he found the same mysterious blue water, a dazzling skyful in the middle of the forest. It was so exciting he almost called out at the top of his lungs. Would any of the other Scouts believe him? Of course it was the spring he'd been told about, the very same one those boys had tossed Abel Fitch into. Harold hadn't the slightest doubt in his mind. Except, as he continued staring at the water, a creeping sensation began to take hold of him. It was as if everything in the woods were also focused on the spring, like hothouse plants to a fake sun. He perceived a delicate balance around him, something he could easily shatter with the slightest misstep, and suddenly Harold recognized what was happening. He drew away quickly from the water, and from the voices urging him onward. They were the same ones he'd heard earlier today — on the school bus, at the campfire — only this time they were telling him to dive into the spring and hold his breath — and see if he could swim all the way down to the unknown bottom.

On pure adrenaline he ran almost the entire way back. Taking only a couple of short breaks along the way, he realized how slowly he'd been going earlier, how weak and spiritless he had walked. But now he felt uplifted by his secret. He'd found the legendary spring — Harold knew this like he knew what season it was — and the only thing he cared about was telling Casey. Casey would know what to do with the secret; together, the two of them could use it to their advantage.

Arriving in camp before dusk, Harold barged into his tent to find Casey relaxing on top of his sleeping bag, reading a comic book by the sallow light of a propane lantern. When Harold tried speaking with him he closed his eyes and yawned. "You're an idiot," Harold shouted, still panting from his long run — and he immediately pledged a silent treatment of his own. He felt more entitled, anyway, since if anything had happened today it would've been Casey's fault for abandoning him. But Harold soon realized, almost as quickly as he'd made it, that keeping his vow would be the hardest thing he'd ever done.

At dinner that night he nearly broke down several more times, but each time Casey signaled him to back off. Meanwhile, in small groups the younger boys discussed what precautions they would take in case Abel Fitch happened to show up. Throughout dinner the story grew in proportion, with each Scout trying to outdo the next. Someone said Abel wore a necklace of teeth from all his victims; another claimed he snacked on dried squirrel tongues like beef jerky. Overhearing, Harold couldn't tell how serious the other boys were. What they all agreed on was that, if attacked, a flashlight would be the best defense — better than a knife, even — because Abel's eyes were so sensitive to light. At that point, with the scoutmaster hovering nearby, Harold's patrol leader broke in and told them to shut up. Everyone would be fine, he said, so long as they didn't wander away from the campsite.

At bedtime, Casey nodded off almost as soon as he'd bundled into his sleeping bag. Harold felt like talking to him but knew better than to waste his breath. He zipped himself in tightly, leaving only a peephole's worth of air, and then he waited. But he couldn't say exactly what for. By then it was hard to separate everything he believed from everything he hoped was true. Trying to stay awake, he kept his hands folded over his chest and his ears wide open, but once his eyes were closed he felt his mind begin to stray outside the tent. He could hear the patrol leaders talking with the scoutmaster, their voices blending together with the sounds of the campfire and the occasional rise in wind. For now the fire would keep them safe, but Harold knew the night sky was waiting just beyond, ready to collapse on them like one big blanket of cold. Without new logs, the fire would have to go out. The coals would turn gray and dim, and soon they'd be left with only the whisper of dead flames and the rarest flicker of protection.

Asleep, Harold stumbled straight into the cold water. From the bottom he could see the sun breaking into narrow shafts on the pool's surface. A group of boys stood overlooking, waiting with rope in case he got out. He held his breath and tried swimming but the drag of water held him back. The current had turned thick and soupy, as if congealing into ice, and before long he couldn't move a single muscle. His body began sinking. From his lungs he felt the last of his air start

to drain, and it was only in the final moment before death that he miraculously escaped.

The world to him had turned pitch black, soundless, and devoid of shape. Its only movement his own heart pounding rapidly in his chest. He unzipped his sleeping bag and sat up, saying, "I saw it, Casey — I swear to god I saw that pool today!" His voice sounded scratchy and distant to him. He leaned over to nudge his friend but Casey rolled away from him. "Would you shut up, you were dreaming," he said, and seemed to fall right back asleep again. In a flood of panic Harold worried the boy was right.

He was awakened the next morning by his patrol leader, who stuck his head into the tent and said, "Let's get cracking." As Harold rubbed his eyes he discovered that Casey had already left. His neck hurt from the foam bedroll and his head filled with all kinds of doubts from the previous night. Had he actually spilled his secret to Casey? And if so, would the boy run off with it and make it his own? Stepping into the campsite, Harold was grateful for the smell of breakfast and the morning air that refreshed his lungs. Even the sky had changed flags since the day before. A brand-new sun emerged above the fir trees and a flock of free-standing clouds drifted past, with large billowy caps and bearded shadows underneath.

After breakfast, three patrols set off on an all-day hike while another group went with the scoutmaster to build a footbridge over a dried-out creek near camp. The rest of the boys planned to return to the caves, and in the midst of choosing up partners Casey suddenly turned up out of nowhere. "Where have *you* been?" said Harold, but Casey held a finger to his lips as he slowly pulled Harold away from the others. He pointed over at Tony and a greasy friend of his, named Marcus. The two boys had ditched their patrols and were investigating a scrub trail into the woods. They'd tied red bandannas around their heads and were horsing about with their walking sticks.

"Let's follow them!" said Casey. His eyes were alight but he kept his voice down. "If we catch them, we can get them thrown out for good."

"Catch them at what?" Harold asked, and Casey looked at him with surprise.

"Drugs, what else?"

Of all his ideas, this was by far the stupidest. Harold thought the risk far outweighed the pay-off, and besides, he would rather go see the caves, he told Casey, since he'd missed his opportunity yesterday. What he didn't say was that by visiting the caves, he hoped — somehow — either to confirm or put to rest what his exact feelings were about the story.

"You've got all day tomorrow," Casey said. "And besides —" he was pointing his finger, "*you* need this more than anyone."

It was a snotty comment but Harold let it go. Deep down he was happy to have his friend back, and grateful Casey had chosen to include him on the adventure.

In a few minutes they set out after the other boys. Harold got into the spirit of it at first, hiding behind trees at Casey's command, squatting down military-style in the underbrush. But they kept so far back that it was hard to hear what the other boys were saying, and pretty quickly the excitement grew stale. After a mile of it Harold was ready to turn back. Not least because it had occurred to him, along the way, that even if they caught Tony and Marcus in some illicit activity, it would only be their word against the others'.

The two boys stopped walking in front of them, and Harold received a quick elbow to take cover. "My money's on hash!" Casey said excitedly. But after removing their daypacks the boys didn't produce any contraband, they only faced off with their walking sticks and began to sword fight. Their sticks made loud deflections in the forest but lagged a full second behind the action, like a movie with the sound out of sync. Tony's got knocked out of his hands and he bent down humbly to retrieve it, but on his way up he gave Marcus a surprise chop to the knees. Suddenly the sticks were dropped and the two boys were on the ground, trading positions in a wrestling match. After a few minutes it ended in a draw, with both of them lying side-by-side on their backs, huffing and puffing. Tony leaned over and put Marcus in a friendly headlock, and they both started laughing.

"I knew it," Casey whispered. "Homos!" He looked at Harold contemptuously, as if Harold himself were somehow to blame.

Sometime later, after they had fallen well out of range of Tony and Marcus, Harold started to grow anxious about something else. "You never told me about those caves," he said, trying to sound casual. "What you guys found there yesterday."

Casey was excavating a fallen tree trunk with the heel of his boot. A colony of ants bled through the tree's smashed heart, and Casey held a spit bubble on his lips before dropping it dead center. He turned to Harold slowly and looked at him for a moment, then shrugged.

"Not much proof I guess." He turned away and started walking, but Harold quickly caught up to him and demanded an explanation.

"Quiet!" Casey ordered. He cupped a hand to his ear and squinted through the trees, and in a few seconds Harold heard it too. Farther ahead, where the trail began to turn, a fast-moving stream merged alongside. It looked a lot smaller than the one from yesterday, but Harold wasn't sure. The quick glimpse he'd gotten of the trail map had

indicated a number of blue lines throughout the woods, but that didn't stop Harold from all of the sudden feeling protective. Perhaps no one else had been meant to find that spring, and perhaps Harold's biggest mistake had been blabbing the news to Casey.

His friend looked at him carefully before he shrugged again.

"Like I said, not much proof. Just a pile of dead bats — a torn neckerchief. That rusty canteen could be anyone's." Bending down, he collected a fistful of pebbles that he slung into the water, pitting the surface with soft, slooshing sounds like rain. "A few of us are going back tonight," he said. "If you're up for it."

His eyes cut quickly to Harold, who in a deflated instant knew that Casey was lying. The question still remained if Harold would go anyway.

"It's okay," Casey said grinning, "you can decide later if you like." With a slap on the back he suddenly became his old self again. Running ahead, he seemed excited by every aspect of the forest, like a hound let loose after a smell. He stopped to examine the long flanks of moss running upside an ash tree, as if they might contain clues to a hidden treasure. He kneeled before some wild mushrooms with wavy orange caps like butterfly wings, and after finishing his survey he announced, "Edible." At the next patch he declared, "Non-edible," even though to Harold's eye the second group looked more or less the same.

By now the riverbanks had grown over a full body length apart, and the water looked to be a few feet deep. Without warning, Casey backed up and took a running start, and his back foot barely cleared the water on the other side. He stood perched on a small boulder in the river and stamped his heel, saying:

"This side's mine, unless you take it from me!"

He folded his arms and stomped again, but this time his foot landed funny and he lost his balance. "Watch it!" yelled Harold, but Casey's foot had already broken the plane of the water. He wheeled his arms furiously as his foot shot underneath, and Harold, even as he started toward him, knew that in a million years he would never dive in after.

Somehow Casey recovered his balance. His boot came out dark brown to the laces, his face drenched with scorn. "Why do you yell louder than a girl?" he asked. As his friend stared at him Harold very nearly laughed out loud. It was astonishing — he couldn't believe it had taken him this long — but for the first time he was finally able to see through Casey. He recognized, as the boy stood shaking away the extra drops from his boot, that Casey lived even deeper in his imagination than Harold did. So deep that he would fight tooth and nail to protect it. Well, he didn't have to worry anymore — Harold would never stand in his way again.

He'd turned and was already starting back toward camp when Casey jumped across to his side and caught him by the arm.

"Wait, take a look!"

He pulled Harold along by the coat sleeve, dragging him toward a line of paw prints backing into the woods. On hands and knees he got down and put his nose to the snow, as if picking up the scent of an animal. "I don't believe it," he said. He looked over his shoulder at Harold, shaking his head.

"What?" Harold asked. "What is it?" He watched Casey run back to the river and gather up a handful of rocks. Returning to the same spot, Casey immediately began launching them one by one in the direction the tracks led. "What do you think it is?" Harold tried again, but his friend ignored him. The stones made a terrible racket as they pounded the trees. Harold could see them ticking off branches, catching other limbs in their descent, spraying off stumps before they disappeared. Casey came back with another handful that he threw all at once, and the rocks reverberated like grapeshot throughout the woods.

But there was no report of a wild animal. All Harold heard was the heightened alarm of an unseen woodpecker, but still he kept looking. He found himself, despite how stupid it felt, simply unable to tear himself away. Here Casey must have figured him out as well. He realized that as long as he tried pulling something from the forest, Harold would be at his mercy.

"Are you crazy?" Harold shouted. "There's nothing *there!*"

Casey turned then, a strange gleam in his eyes, and he said, "Oh really?"

Two seconds later Harold heard it as well. His skin crawled, and even before looking he knew what the savage howling belonged to. He turned to see Tony and Marcus charging along the river, their heads scalped with red bandannas and their walking sticks raised high in the air like spears.

"Good luck!" Casey said, right before he bolted. Harold never even thought of doing the same. His feet went stiff and his muscles locked in place, as if every danger he'd been contemplating had turned into a straitjacket he couldn't get out of.

Next thing Tony was on him. A quick punch to the stomach doubled him over, and a jackhammer between the shoulder blades dropped him flat and face down in the snow. "You've got three seconds —" Tony said, barreling on top of him. Three seconds to apologize, he meant, for what Harold had said the day before.

Harold had every intention to. More than anything he now felt sorry for Tony, believing the boy hadn't deserved the humiliation heaped upon him. But with his breath taken away, even so few words of apology were out of Harold's reach. The count of "three" came

suddenly, and with blinding speed Tony shattered a dirty snowball against Harold's face. A kick in the side after he'd jumped off — a steel toe that sent waves of pain traveling up Harold's back, and that shrugged his body like a medicine ball. It was his eyesight that now left him, and by the time it returned several seconds later, Tony and Marcus had taken off.

Harold could still hear them though. The boys had vanished but their wild cries emanated from every corner of the forest, as if instead of fleeing they were circling him in victory. He saw fat strings of saliva hanging from his lips. A shower of red dots covered the snow in front of him. Breathing again, he choked back sobs and began crawling over to the nearest tree, whose trunk became a resting place for his head. As he thought about Casey a sheet of anger burned him up. But it wasn't just Casey, it was a whole list of people who had tricked him. In his mind he began running through everyone, starting with the senior patrol leader and continuing on down, until Harold realized, with a terrible wave of shame, the person who was most responsible.

For a few minutes he simply lay there, watching as the sun cut low-angled bars through the forest. High above him the treetops had started to obscure, while in his boots he could no longer feel his toes. He was tired suddenly, in a way that had nothing to do with fatigue, and as he closed his eyes he knew he shouldn't lie around much longer, that it wouldn't be safe to. The best thing was to get up and get the blood circulating, he told himself. Yet each time he shifted he was stung by another bruise. "One more minute," he decided, but even then Harold didn't realize how far along he was. All of a sudden, like a match blown out, he was gone from the forest. He'd been kidnapped to a place unreachable by the others, hijacked to a world even he could barely believe. A world, no doubt, in which he still fought back the freezing cold, the heavy night, and the drowning water.