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The Island of Lost Boys: for the Son of a Childless Mother

Jacob calls me his childless mother. Can a son disown his parents? Jacob steals a car, a boat, a bike, a skateboard and flies away to prove it's possible. The skateboard was seventh grade, the mountain bike before he learned to ride one, the car his last arrest, the boat two nights ago, my birthday—so I would know that he remembered and understand how he thinks of me.

His gift is my fear, stars and sea, the hours I drift in a world without him. His gift is a battered boat washed ashore, morning fog that shrouds the island—five-foot swells and broken waves—the wordless night, our lives ruptured.

His gift is the moment he reappears: barefoot boy high on the cliffs, lost child found, climbing the ledges. He is rescued and restored, returned to his identity as Jacob Trace, Juvenile Offender.

My son lives in exile: *The Rock*, he says, *Escape from Alcatraz* his favorite movie. The thin copper bark of the Pacific madrone peels away to expose luminous green skin beneath it, smooth as human skin, so bright and pale it glows even in shadow. Madrones do not bend from the sea. They reach with long limbs toward the ocean—as if some night they might pull themselves free of rock and soil to dance their way across the water. These are the beings that guard Valadez, the island paradise where my son is captive.

To reach him, I have driven 857 miles, Salt Lake City to Seattle, then another two hours north, the end of the road, Kaslo, where I paid Michael Vouri and his pregnant daughter a hundred and twenty-five dollars to ferry me to Valadez in their bobbing tin can of a boat, to wait at the dock in the rain, and bring me back to the mainland.

Bargain, Michael said, *day like this nobody else would take you*.

I judged him: I thought Larissa was his child-bride, that he had stolen her from desperate parents. My scorn felt pure—and later, my humiliation perfect.

She's tiny, sweet Larissa, five-three, ninety-nine pounds, already more than six months pregnant. She's gained eight, she says, as if she's proud, *But look, it's all in my belly*. It's true: Larissa Vouri's arms are a little girl's arms, her legs all knot and spindle. She's one of those bloated-belly kids begging for relief, crying out when I open my mail.

I learned the truth on our return: *You know what scared him most?* she said. *That I would marry Tyler. I told Dad I wanted to stay with him, keep my baby, and he didn't even take a breath—he just said, Okay. We can do this.*

Mom's in Texas, three sons, seven horses, a fifty-nine-year-old husband she calls Papa. When I told her the good news, she said, Take care of it, Larissa. I asked her what she meant, and she said, Don't be stupid.

Jacob, I am writing a letter you may never read, a dispatch from my motel, Raven's Roost, damp nest in Kaslo. I walked half a mile in the cold rain, up the steep hill from the dock to the Madrone Cove School for Youth at Risk only to have your counsellor say, *Jacob doesn't choose to see you.*

It is your last freedom: the right to refuse me.

Rick Dushane, your advocate, your captor, says, *Perhaps you can spend the night in Kaslo, try again tomorrow.* Who is Rick Dushane, this pale boy who looks no older than you are? Does he speak your heart? Does this child think he knows me?

I AM A bad mother. I pop a cherry in my mouth at the grocery store. I sample the grapes, the coffee, the pistachios. I do not intend to buy. I want to eat; I'm hungry. Jacob, eight years old—eight years ago—sees and knows his mother is a thief, knows she gets away with it.

Driving home, Montana to Utah, after visiting Sean, the husband I've failed to divorce, Jacob's ex-father, nine-year-old Jacob and I slip into a motel still serving continental breakfast. Who will notice, who will care if the sad boy and his impatient mother scarf the last three miniature muffins and three glazed donuts? At Tastee De-Lite, where the sugar-sick pair stop for lunch, the bad mother borrows napkins, plastic knives, tiny packets of salt and pepper. *You never know,* she says, *when we might need these.*

I think: We paid for lunch; we're entitled. A lie, yes, but the world owes me something. My husband won't come home. My husband who is not dead sits in a dark house, shades pulled, hands trembling. He refuses to touch his child. He prefers his wheezing mother to me. He says only his sister understands him.

Jacob and I deserve some meager compensation from God or the universe, from the Antelope Inn and Tastee De-Lite which represent to me a world of abundance, a nation of wealth and waste, a bounty we no longer share, the numb peace in which those flung apart by lightning cannot participate.

Five days later, Jacob sneaks out alone to steal the neon green squirt gun I refused to buy him. It is not a delicate item. My son has no desire

to be inconspicuous. He's caught, of course, Jacob Trace starring in his first video, nabbed by an undercover security guard, a scruffy kid in hemp sandals and torn T-shirt, a half-man older than he appears, wearing tattered shorts despite the chill this October day, roaming the aisles of Smith's Grocery Store, looking for bad boys without their mothers, little thieves, fatherless strays like my child.

Trent Solovay, manager extraordinaire, calls to say, *I have your son*; and I say, *That's impossible. Jake's here, with me, in his bedroom, doing homework.* Mister Solovay softly says, *One of us must be mistaken.* I am forced to sit in his windowless office, view the video three times—as if the identity of the boy with the gun remains in question.

Trent Solovay loves the trap he's set. He loves us, two clever foxes snared in the net. The mother crosses and uncrosses her legs, tugs at her short skirt, all for him, a woman alone, wonderfully anxious. But the boy sits rigid, fierce in his silence, refusing even now to confess he stole the neon M-16, the world's most powerful squirt gun.

Fearless child! I admire him for the code he keeps, deep and private, for his recognition that what is happening to him, to us—no matter what his crime—is ridiculous.

Jacob, I confess, I betrayed you.

Because he is a father himself, a good man, a husband, Trent Solovay offers to step into the fatherless void, teach my son the concepts of restitution and atonement. *Before it is too late. Before there's real trouble.* He wants Jacob for one day. *To rake my leaves,* he says. *Next Saturday would suit me.* Second wife, ninth child—he would propose this if the state allowed it.

Saturday morning, Jacob wakes defiant. He won't get dressed. He won't eat breakfast. He flies around the house wearing his Spiderman pajamas. I catch him. I pin him down. I am a small woman, it's true, but Jake is smaller, his little arms thin in my grip, his little body squirming beneath me. I say, *We have to do this.* He puts on cowboy boots and stomps to the car, Spiderman in disguise as a wrangler.

I deliver my son to Trent Solovay, who greets me at the door with his wife Heather, whose eight scrubbed children watch my child from their bedroom windows. In the Solovay's expansive yard, three grand maples, two weeping birch, and one quaking aspen have shaken themselves free: the lawn is heaped with yellow leaves curling up rust and brown at the edges.

At eleven-forty-five, Heather Solovay calls to the boy in the yard, invites him inside for lunch, offers hot dogs baked with macaroni and

cheese, but Jacob says, *I want to work*. Jacob says, *I'm not hungry*.

He won't take an oatmeal cookie. He won't eat an apple. All day he resists comfort. He drinks water from the hose, a wretched rubbery taste that makes him think of me, safe at home, what I have done to him. He refuses to go inside, leave his boots at the door, drink cold milk, sit at the long table with Trent and Heather and their eight wide-eyed, blue-eyed, spectacularly blond children.

At four-thirty-four, Trent Solovay calls, and I retrieve my little Spiderman, my cowboy, my hungry hero. Yes, Jacob Trace has learned his lesson, has learned already how wildly punishment exceeds transgression.

We do not speak of the green gun. A week from now I will buy one at another Smith's Grocery. Next summer, Jake will shoot straight with the M-16, drench my white shirt and see straight through me. We do not speak of the other children, those eight little Solovays who do no work all day, who stay upstairs, acting out their passion play from birth to resurrection. There are enough of them: Mary, Joseph, Baby Jesus. Wise men become Pharisees late in the day; shepherds weep like women. Three dogs play a holy cow, a little lamb, a camel. These somber children want Jacob to come inside and be their audience. He is mystified by their need, their strange desire, and they are baffled by the one outside, dark hair uncombed, pajamas filthy—a living martyr, yes, but where are his flowing robes, and why is his hair not golden?

I drive Jacob halfway up the canyon to eat at the Blue Coyote where he orders three plates of fat jo-jo fries and drenches them with ketchup. How can I object? I have lost this right forever. We rent *Escape from Alcatraz*, his choice because he likes the title. We sit on the couch in the dark and share a pint of Death by Chocolate ice cream.

Two nights ago, when Neal Lantos, Director of the Madrone Cove School, master on the island of lost boys, called to say Jacob and his friends Jesse Quezada and Dustin Flute had run, I knew where they were: I saw the whole movie in my mind, Clint Eastwood and his soaked companions on a sinking raft, bailing water, paddling with their hands, three cold fugitives desperate to row that impossible mile and a half from Alcatraz to San Francisco. Never found, not one body. Are the bones of three prisoners picked clean at the bottom of the Bay, or are they here, even now, hunched old men shuffling harmlessly among us?

Three o'clock Sunday morning, my first hello, *Happy Birthday*.

I'm on my way, I said, and Neal Lantos said, *We don't advise that*. He was calm, this wise man, very very calm, frighteningly gentle. He didn't see the boat. He didn't have my visions. *They won't get far*, he said. *We*

keep their shoes in lock-up.

Yes—the shoes of all the lost boys surrendered every night, returned to them each morning. *Cuts down on runners*, he said, *for the most part.*

Jacob, when you cried in the night, your father said, *Don't go, wait two more minutes.* And it was true: if I could have stayed, you might have sobbed yourself back to sleep, understood beyond words that loneliness is inevitable. But your hunger was a hole in my heart. I could not deny you. If I waited too long, you'd fret yourself sick and couldn't bear to be touched, as if your tiny body forgot the difference between pain and comfort. I came quickly, with unspoken joy. I loved the night, walking in the yard to calm us both, you cradled inside my down coat, the moon behind a wisp of clouds, showing its face, then disappearing.

Stay where you are, Neal Lantos said, as if *he* had the power to stop me.

Did this man ever lose his only son in outer darkness?

I carried you in my own body. I imagined you before you were conceived. Your egg was inside me before I was born. You were already here when I was small inside the womb of my mother—and I inside of her, before she was born. And so it is, through all time, through all beings: mother in child and child in mother. Let this be your proof: I cannot undo, I cannot unlove you.

Last summer, searchers found an eleven-year-old boy in the high Uintas, alive after four days, five nights near freezing. He slept in a crouch to keep warm, pulled his black sweatshirt over his knees, thought about owls and bats, creatures he loved, his cat at home, his dog licking him.

We will find them, Neal Lantos said. Your presence here won't change that.

Jacob, if the green light spilling through the tall canopy of broadleaf maples on Valadez is God, if light is love, it is a love so vast you can never be outside it. If the sharp, sweet smell of red cedar is just one way God has of waking you and bringing you to your senses, where on this earth can you go where love will not find you?

Last June, when they found that boy alive in the mountains, I thought it was the web of faith that brought him home, the love of all his rescuers. *The way in is the way out. There is one path. You have already chosen it.* The boy lived because others believed. When one began to stumble, one hundred others prayed as they walked, as they rode their horses and ATVs into the woods: *Sweet Lord, if it be your will, if there is a choice, let me be the one to find him.*

On the seventh day, God rested in his love. He stopped creating new

things and made every thing holy. On Sunday, the third day the boy was missing, three thousand came to search; three thousand people continued to call it rescue, not recovery. Did he feel their faith, their hearts around him? If too many had surrendered to doubt, would the boy have died in the night, thirsty and hopeless? They called his name, tenderly, as one might call to a child still in the womb and fearful. They searched as if he were their most beloved son or youngest brother. Some walked fifteen miles that day. They rested in their love. And every step was a word of prayer—until the need for all words vanished.

Jacob, I refused to abandon you. *Wait*, Neal Lantos said, and I made this compromise: to drive, not fly, so that you would feel me moving toward you without haste or fear, a woman's terrible need, a mother's frenzy—so that you would have time to choose and turn—so that you could feel my patient heart, and your heart would rise up toward it.

Crazy, the bargains we make with God and our children.

I know a man whose son disappeared five years ago. Every year when the snow melts, Daniel Carillo climbs back into the mountains to look for a pile of bones, a torn shirt, the sweet beloved remains, a boot his boy was wearing.

Whatever happened last night has still happened this morning. Every day when we wake, the truth of the night is with us. And still I drove with faith that all my love might free you. Driving meant I didn't have to wait for a flight. I could buy cigarettes and smoke in the car though I'd gone six years without them. I could pray without ceasing, without the voices of others to jangle my skull, without the terror of Homeland Security.

I could love you and nothing else for a thousand miles.

I was afraid, it's true. I confess: I wanted to give your rescuers time. I wanted to know before I got there. I couldn't bear to see you wet. I wasn't ready to see you broken. Do you blame me for coming slowly? Do you scorn me now as your father did before you?

When I climbed the hill in the cold rain, I heard sweet, high voices cracking, the Madrone Cove Boys' Choir. *O Day of Radiant Gladness!* They were singing, *I come with joy, loved, forgiven.* They prepared the way! O, how sweet the sound arising from them! I tried to find your voice, but no, you were in isolation, sequestered, keeping to yourself, mouth and eyes tightly closed, secrets forever sealed. The boys sang through windows and walls, absorbed in a single thought, *World without end!* God had entered them in one breath so that they might love the sound of themselves, so that they might love one another.

What do I know of a boy's sorrow?

My brothers ditched me in the woods or locked me in the closet. They liked Hide-and-Seek. I never found them. Nick left bruises on my wrists and thighs, fingerprints in green and violet. Pretty Will broke my nose. Brian dislocated my shoulder. They didn't mean to be so rough; I didn't want to be so fragile.

Will liked to dress in Mother's clothes, crêpe de Chine and slinky rayon. I caught him swirling in a velvet cape, Sweet William naked underneath it.

One by one, my brothers found other girls to tempt and torment—lush, buoyant girls to drag under their beds or into their closets—giggling girls who moaned as they sank down deep in piles of dirty clothes, damp and fragrant with that boy smell. When my brothers no longer tortured me, I mourned, I missed them. I want to ask Will's wife if he ever slips into her softest nightgown.

What you say is true: I am a childless mother. You belong to Rick Dushane and Neal Lantos, counsellor and director—you belong to Angela Flowers, your caseworker. You belong to the states of Washington and Utah, to your judge and prosecutor and defender who reached this agreement, nineteen months on Valadez instead of trapped in a squirrel cage, a lock-down prison for boys on the desert side of Salt Lake City.

When you return, you will be eighteen and free, responsible for your crimes, accountable for your whole life after. But tonight, one last night, as your mother, I defend you.

Jacob didn't steal Ryan Colt's eye-popping yellow mountain bike because he wanted it. It was too big for him to ride, and he had to run away pushing it. He hated the chittering bike with black striping, a giant deadly bee always buzzing up behind him. He stole the bike because it was Ryan Colt's most precious possession, the love of his life, this instrument of terror. He hated the boy more than the bike—not for scaring him, but for that day when fourteen-year-old Ryan pushed skinny little seven-year-old Ivy Meloy to the ground and lay on top of her.

The yellow bike hissed through wind over gravel, but Jake wasn't afraid now: he was the one wheeling it. He took a hammer to the paint and a screwdriver to the tires, and he left the blistered bike in the alley, hoping Ryan Colt would be the first to find it.

Jacob loved Ivy Meloy years before he had a word for it. Ivy: four years old the first time he saw her, wearing only underpants and red plastic sandals—Ivy pedaling her tricycle, so tiny and white the sun seemed to blast through her, hair lit like filaments, body only particles.

What is love if not sheer wonder?

Jake was seven, her brother Griffin's best friend, big boys who dressed in camouflage to stalk wild animals with bows and arrows. They drowned a snake; they slayed a pigeon. Jacob wanted to be proud, but he was sick and sad and tired, and the only good thing in the world was Ivy Meloy's bare shoulder.

Now, translucent Ivy is a tough Rasta girl. She's pierced her eyebrow. She's pierced her navel. She hasn't combed her twisted hair since seventh grade, twenty-seven months ago. But when she lies on Jake's bed in late afternoon light, he sees the fine web of blue veins in her eyelids and temples, and this fragility scares him more than her tangled dreadlocks, so thirteen-year-old Ivy is the one, always the one, to touch first, to kiss, to say, *You can't break me.*

What does any mother know of her son's sacrifice?

Since Jacob left me five months ago, he's grown three inches. His bones hurt. He cannot ignore them. When he comes home, if he chooses to come home at all, he will be too big for his blue room, too long for his bed, too heavy for Ivy. He will be baffled by all the clothes that chafe and pinch, that must belong to some other child, that little boy lost who's left his pants stuffed in Jake's drawers, his narrow shirts hanging limp in Jake's closet.

Jacob swears he did not intend to steal Dale Piper's pink Mustang. The garage door opened with the slightest touch, and there she was: the 1966 glossy pink Hi-Po convertible, so deliciously pale, Jacob saw that it was not a thing of solid metal, but a billion sparks of soft light swirling all around him.

The kids at school tease Jake for hanging out with Dale. They call the man Tinkerbelle, the pink Mustang the Fairymobile. They don't know: Dale Piper saved that wild car from the junkyard, cleaned the engine piece by piece and faithfully restored it. Who cares if it's deco pink? Inside, it's high performance V8, 271 horse power.

Dale Piper loves Jacob—not as the kid next door, not as a little brother, but as if they were boys together, Jake the one true friend, kindergarten through high school, the one most cherished before Dale's son Garth or his sweetheart Judi.

Even in the dark garage, the Mustang caught the March light and glowed, and gave light back to the eye without flash or burn. Jacob called to Dale four times before he cracked the door that led to the hallway that led to the kitchen where he stopped and waited and called again—where he had a choice to remain Dale's friend or become the intruder.

The house felt strange and still—as if everyone had vanished—even

the cat, even the canary. But the keys were there, lying on the counter, and now a slant of sun through kitchen blinds sparked off silver, and Jacob scooped the keys from the light and bolted.

My joyful son was three hours gone, halfway to Reno, driving ninety-five miles per hour across the Great Basin Desert when four Highway Patrolmen in two cars miraculously managed to stop him.

In court, Jacob found the judge ridiculous, just a frail old man draped in a big robe, one more failure of a father trying to look stern and benevolent. Jake wished he were anyone but himself: a bad boy in shackles, a flight risk, a rabbit. He wished he had assaulted his teacher or his mother like the one the judge called Mister Dakota. He wanted to be dangerous, a kid with a knife who might slash his brother's little ear off.

Because if that were true, if he were bad, his punishment would fit his crime, and he could make sense of it.

The day the Highway Patrolmen spread Jacob face down on the hood of Dale Piper's car to wrench his arms back and cuff his hands behind him, Dale sat in my kitchen and wept, and told me *he* was sorry.

In the end, it was Dale's grief, Dale's plea to judge and prosecutor, that led to compromise and exile, your latest crime, your disappearance. For fifteen hours, you concealed yourself as rock and tree and wind and water—to make me believe—to make me imagine and begin to bear my childless life in a world without you. When I called your father to tell him you had run, your grandmother Lenora said I should have sent you home, to them, *years ago, at the first sign of trouble.*

Home is a cabin by a creek in Libby, Montana. Home is where your father lives with his rasping mother and bloated sister, where his dead father walks winding paths through trees, carrying his ax, chopping firewood he can't carry. Home is the only place Sean wanted to be after that day on Naomi Peak when lightning struck and rain pelted him. Even now, twelve years later, he trembles, raw nerves in constant tremor. He sweats for no reason; then he's wild with chills and can't stop shaking. *Cover me*, he says, *I'm freezing*, and I do, but it doesn't help, and he's so angry. Your aunt Alice is a nurse who can't work. She's too fat to be on her feet all day: Alice's poor hips won't hold her. Sean is her reason to be, her patient, her savior.

Light hurts—not just his eyes, but his whole face, his bare neck, his hand—anywhere it touches. *It's not the heat*, he insists. *It's just the light, the waves, they jolt me.* After lightning heaved him fifty feet and knocked him flat, he hated Salt Lake City. *Scorched earth*, he said. He loves the north, the snow, the clouds, winter that lasts September to June, shades pulled down

tight no matter how dark the day, no matter how brief it is.

His tongue is a tongue of fire, as if truth burns there, but he won't speak it. One day he can't taste anything, and the next morning taste roars back and everything's hot and bitter. He takes a sip of milk to soothe the tongue, but it's terrible to taste, poison. He spits and weeps. He's made a mess of himself. Alice cleans him up—again. *It's okay, sweetheart. We'll try later.*

Your father lost thirty-one pounds in six days after lightning lit him, sparked his metabolism to flames, left his body a cannibal. He gained back five, then lost seven. That's your father now. He scared us. He even scared Kishey, though the dog adores him.

Alice isn't afraid of his weird smell or cruel temper. Sean is Sean, and her body is strange too, and nothing matters as long as he stays home, as long as she can keep him. He's safe in that house, small in the cradle of his single bed. Alice brings hot chocolate with a scoop of vanilla ice cream, *to fatten you up*, she whispers, and the warm chocolate flows through the cool cream, and it's good tonight, sweet and not too hot, and her older brother who is her little brother now drinks it all, and she's so grateful. Lenora lives to smoke, sneaks outside to puff her Carltons, then comes wheezing back happy and high to hook up the tubes to her tank of oxygen.

This is home. This is where Sean and Alice tied a rope to a branch and leaped in the river. Here are the dark woods where they walked hand in hand barefoot together, where they tore their feet on stones and scraped bare skin on thistle—to get home, where Mother smacked their butts before she washed their wounds and kissed them.

Home is the ground between pines where they and their father buried nine birds and five cats, a terrier that climbed trees and a coonhound that climbed after him, a black poodle that weighed sixty pounds, and a scrappy little rat-catching long-haired wild thing that weighed seven.

Long-legged, gray-eyed Kishey would have been a queen among them, but entirely herself, humble and generous: she who never barks would have gracefully endured the others yammering. Kishey might have saved your father on Naomi Peak, but she stayed behind with us instead of climbing with him.

Home. Would you find peace there?

When I told my mother Sean was gone, she said, *Don't worry. He'll be back when he's himself again.*

Or not, my father said, and *good riddance*.

He was tough, my dad, Marlan Dario. I could never touch the place

that hurt, the secret he kept secret. He worked the copper mine, a blaster, packing explosives down holes a hundred and fifty feet deep, blowing a mountain to pieces.

Now he can't remember Mother's name—he calls her Lulu, Doozy, Darling, Daphne. He pretends it's a joke, love talk between them. But later I see him crumpled in his chair, staring at his thin fingers, hands too weak to make a fist, lips too slack to curse or whistle.

This is home. This is where my father hacked the limbs of the white oak because he caught me climbing out into a night so clear and full of stars I thought I could swim to them.

Here is the mystery I can't unravel: my mother's endless patience with him now, as if she forgets his fits and fury, all the times she got out of the car and started walking: home from the store; home from the party; home from our family vacation, Flaming Gorge, 1969, Wyoming. As if she forgets his fist through the bedroom wall, the gaping hole, the months he left it unrepaired to remind her of what she denied, and what it cost him.

Maybe it was his ruptured eardrum, the roar and rage, his loss of balance, the beach at Normandy, ten thousand dead in three weeks, all the dead still floating toward him. Was that really his own bone piercing his pantleg? Maybe it was seven months in a hospital afterward, two hundred and sixteen days to remember a man carrying his own arm, three men bursting into fire.

I might forgive him if this was the reason why, if he could prove it. But soft-skinned Uncle Roy who never married said, *Your father was always this way, a bit argumentative.* When I ask mother to explain her tenderness now, she says: *He's an old man, and every old man deserves kindness.* Mother says, *It's yours, the past, to keep if you want it.*

Mine, yes. I love my rage. I love my terror. I remember my fear that he would shoot the dog, the fear my mother would leave us.

I have never seen her more peaceful or elegant: lovely June, slender in silk, slipping through the house, utterly efficient, smiling to herself as if something unspoken and unseen—something too subtle for an angry daughter to perceive—delights her. Perhaps it is a ray of sunlight illuminating swirling dust. Or a pattern of leaves, shadows on the wall and floor trembling, too beautiful to bear because the light will change—you'll lose the leaves—you know it.

Mother says, *Imagine if you could paint the shadows somehow, the way they make the green wall a darker green. Imagine if you could hold them here and still keep them fluttering.*

She has time to ponder these things sitting in the living room with

my quiet father who has grown harmless as his little brother. She has time to comb his thin white hair, time to clip his brittle nails. This is a day's work. This is grace, the mercy that feels like death, the pain of my mother's betrayal.

Everything's in order now. Everything is perfect.

But I see Daddy with the .22, going out to scare the stray, the one I've lured home with scraps of meat and shreds of promises. I see Daddy carving at the tree, Daddy's knuckles bleeding. The saw is wet with sap, its teeth forever sticky.

Yes, I fell in love with Leo Trace, Sean's father. He fed birds as if he knew each chickadee and sparrow. I loved to watch him in the woods; I loved to watch him lay the fire. All was one with him: the rain, the tree, the air, the soil—the leaping flame, his laughing people. I love forever the night I found him awake, alone, in a chair by the fire—Leo sewing button eyes back on Alice's rag doll, that tattered little toy as old as Alice.

He wants to do these things even now, but he can't open the door, and our human voices hurt him.

Leo's death is the loss from which none of us ever recovered, the absence that makes Lenora gasp, the sorrow that swells Aunt Alice. Leo's death is the grief that starves and cripples your father, the force that makes the dogs and cats and birds stay still in the ground, forever buried. His death is the stiffness in Kishey's hips, the weight of despair, the family she carries.

He felt the change months before he told us. *Bob, Ray, Al, Billy*. He knew the signs: lungs stiff, the struggle to keep breathing. *Joe, John, Mick, Harry*. Fifteen friends he'd walked to the border. *Mesothelioma*. He didn't need an X-ray to reveal quivering shadows, pleurae full of tumors, too scattered to cut out, hopelessly malignant.

All those years, he said, *breathing asbestos*.

Leo is silent because he wants us to hear the creek flowing under ice, a rabbit hiding in the brush, pines so cold they're crackling. He wants us to listen until we hear snow falling on snow—because if we could be that alive, that awake, we could be where he is now and know everything.

Your grandfather mourns his son's loss—not because he thinks weakness is bad, but because he sees how Sean heaps suffering on pain, blaming himself for the nightly failure of his body. In the heart of his heart, Grandpa Leo still believes Sean might love himself and learn again to be your father.

Lenora is right: I should have sent you home to save them. I imagine you in the cabin by the creek sneaking cigarettes to your emphysemic grandmother. I see her absolute bliss, the relief of the moment. Who cares about hacking in the night, the oxygen tank that might explode at any moment? Who cares about blood and phlegm? It's dark in here. The shades are pulled. No one in this house will see stains on the pillow.

The sweet dizzy high of smoke is now, and all the rest is later.

Those nights when your father's legs are too weak to hold him, you might help him walk living room to bedroom, ease him to the bed, lift his legs as he lies down, pull sheet and blankets over him. You might hear your grandfather say, *This is all; everything's done until tomorrow.*

Aunt Alice kisses your neck and then apologizes, and you, in your kindness and your grace say, It's okay—it's okay to kiss—I forgive you.

I loved your father as I loved my brothers: because he was quick, because I had to climb cliffs, hike thirteen miles, swim an alpine lake to catch him. But unlike Nick and Will and Brian, he wasn't trying to torment or lose me. He waited on the other side, as cold and thrilled as I was.

Later we were down in one sleeping bag, still naked, lying in the sun, trying to warm each other's skin, trying to keep our bones from freezing. Sean said, *Water that cold can stop your heart.* And I said, *Yes, or open it.* We'd only known each other three months. He blew hot breath on my fingers. *If we survive the night,* he said, *I'll take you home to meet my father.*

It was a joke and not a joke—because we were cold enough to die—and it was a vow because he knew if I met Leo, I'd love the father as the son and never leave them.

That night the stars came out one by one and then a hundred by a hundred. They never stopped: the whole night the whole universe kept expanding. Sean said, *I hear stars falling in the lake. I feel them on my eyelids.*

Two years later, we painted the night in your little room: rose and coral near the floor, the green edge of twilight—clear blue rising up the walls, a cobalt sky, the blue-black ceiling. We splattered your night with stars, silvery white, a galaxy whirling. We wanted to show you how it was, there, in the beginning.

I wasn't afraid for Sean the day he climbed Naomi Peak alone and we stayed behind to walk through wildflowers and Kishey stayed with us. She hobbled, hit by a car in February, pinned hip still healing. You were only five and small for your age, and your father liked to hike fast, so we kissed him goodbye and we let him go, and nobody—not even Kishey—was unhappy.

I taught you the names of flowers: *Golden smoke, wild rose, star lily,* so that you could see them in your mind: *blue-eyed grass, mountain loco.* I showed you the one with your name, *Jacob's Ladder.* I thought we might return to each other as memory, as chiming bell and fairy trumpet, as a field of fireweed in August, as ourselves and not ourselves, as the day,

whole and perfect.

I wasn't afraid when I heard thunder. Your father would want us in the car, windows rolled tight, tires safely grounded. We moved quickly, but without panic. When lightning split the sky, I imagined Sean crouched low, hands over his ears, feet pressed close together. A survivor. At fifteen, your father swam through snow, freed himself from a wave of avalanche. After that day, the boy began to bury himself on purpose. He hid in caves of ice and waited for the search and rescue dogs he trained to catch his scent and dig him out, to leap and love and save him. He'd scramble down the wet slope when the rain stopped, so glad we had not left him.

It was best to wait—and I told you so—minute after minute. I told you again, insistent even when you cried, even when Kishey scratched the windows, clawing at the rivulets of rain, frantic to find him.

You wanted to go for help—five years old and smarter than your mother. You trusted the dog more than you trusted me, and this was right: you were right to do so.

I didn't imagine your father shot, lifted up and flung and dropped limp by lightning. I didn't see Sean paralyzed for more than an hour, legs pulled up, the man fetal. I didn't feel the burn at the base of the spine, deep in the nerve, a scar invisible. And so I lied; the great lie continued: *Daddy will be here any minute.*

Storms end, always. Lightning cracked one last time; thunder followed. I opened the door and let Kishey go. She bolted, forgetting the pin in her hip, the pain that crippled her. She found him less than a mile up the path. So close we could have carried him.

He tried to say her name, but his swollen tongue lay thick in his mouth, useless. For the first and only time, Kishey barked, mongrel blood gone feral. Who was this crumpled man, and why did he smell like fat on fire? He tried to stand, and got to his knees, and fell flat and curled again, quivering. Even the soft rain hurt: ear, lip, knee, eyelid—everywhere it touched it seared him. Kishey circled, whimpering now, and finally he did say her name in that weird smoky voice, and she came to him, understanding that whatever he was, this being could not harm her.

When we met them on the trail, you saw your father crawl, dragging his legs, hands torn, legs streaked bloody. Kishey prodded him—nudged and nipped—to give him faith, to keep him moving.

Jacob, life everywhere is life—not before, not later—now, exactly as we are, here, in the place God circled. What if every living being is God speaking? Yellow lilies on the pond, lichen breaking stone, harbor seals laughing. Imagine it is true: the great blue heron with its dangling legs is

God, rising. The turkey vultures hunched in fog—God, watching. When they fly at dusk, their wings span sixty inches. They rock the night with calamitous flapping.

On your island, the mink is gone, the wolf extirpated, but the little red fox slips his paws into the speckled flowers of the foxglove and runs away, leaving no scent of his own, no imprint to follow.

We live with the ones we see, and the ones we imagine. Your grandfather walks these woods with elk and bear as companions. The kinglet flashes his ruby crown; the cormorant flies underwater. Tree frogs sing after rain, your holy, captive choir.

I want to tell you how it was, driving here, imagining you, loving you, calling you back to this sweet life every moment. I tried to wait; I did wait—thinking that if I did, there might be some magic between us, some peace arising from my patience to make you reappear. At three-thirty-three, twenty-nine minutes after Neal Lantos called, I made coffee so hot it scalded my mouth, and still I drank it. At 4:07, I was on the road, heading north: Tremonton, Ogden, Twin Falls—where the night began to give, and the sky began to tremble. I stopped for cigarettes. I didn't eat; I couldn't swallow.

In Boise, my cell phone caught a signal. Safe, I thought; my boy, they've found him. And yes, it was Neal Lantos, telling me the other boys had returned just an hour after he'd called the first time. They kept their secret another hour, until searchers found the shed with broken lock, and the boys confessed to the boat they'd stolen. So now I knew you were alone, that the vision I'd had in the dark might be true, that you hoped to paddle from Valadez across the strait to Canada.

Pendleton, Hermiston, Yakima—suddenly so far, suddenly so tired, eleven hours gone, already afternoon here, my birthday quickly passing. I had to stop and rest, the edge of town, a view of distant volcanoes ready to spew ash and smoke at any moment. Here, I got the call. They'd found you. Climbing up the northern cliffs—for no reason you can explain, or none you'll ever tell me.

I asked who. I meant who had risked the rocks to talk you down to safety. I wanted to thank this person in my mind, pray the name over and over as I drove: *Emery Glass, Emery Glass, Emery Glass*. I began to love him, this stranger, this savior. I wondered if he had a wife, a father, a mother still alive, a little sister, children of his own, a dog named Bear or Julius.

I didn't confess. I didn't tell Neal Lantos how close I was, two hours from Seattle. I said, *I'll catch a flight this afternoon*; and he said, *We'd prefer you wait a few days, give Jacob time to stabilize*. I said, *I prefer to come now; I'll*

see you in the morning. Neal Lantos reminded me: *Your son may face criminal charges and a transfer.* He meant jail; he meant prison. He meant it no longer mattered what I preferred: you belonged to them, to the owners of that battered boat, to a judge we didn't know, to the law of the land in Washington.

Emery Glass, Emery Glass, Emery Glass come save us.

I wanted to drive straight to you, fly like a cormorant underwater, but I passed out—there's no other way to describe the sleep that slammed me. When I woke forty-seven minutes later, I couldn't move. Something burned at the base of my spine, and my limbs felt numb, impossibly heavy. I had to think about each toe separately—thirteen minutes before I could move my legs, thirty-two before I had strength enough to walk around the car, get the blood moving. The drive, I thought, the fear—I'm tired. But it was Sean: he wanted me to feel all of it: his terror last night, his pain on the path, his sorrow through the years, his helpless waiting.

It rained all night on your island; I knew this. I remembered how cold your father was when he dragged himself down the mountain. I remembered what Neal Lantos had said about your shoes in lock-up. And I knew that wherever you were, wherever you'd been, your feet were cold and cut and bleeding.

Emery Glass, Emery Glass. I prayed he carried dry socks and shoes and bandages.

When I heard you were alive, I was proud; I confess it. You were the leader, the hero—Spiderman without his boots, Spiderman, barefoot. You and your roommate Dustin Flute climbed out your window. It was easy. You waited in the rain for Jesse Quezada who left his roommate Nate Cantu in a sweat of fitful dreaming.

You wore jackets, but your socks were soaked in two minutes, so you peeled them off and left them. You hiked a mile through dark woods to the boathouse where you used a rock to hammer rusty screws and rotting wood until the door splintered and the hinge of the lock hung loose enough to pry out with your fingers. Now your hands and feet were bleeding—but you didn't hurt, not yet, because you were happy. And you thought, *If these good people didn't want us to break into their boathouse, they should have had a better lock, a stronger door, a sliding metal bar to stop us.*

You found two pair of work gloves, and you each wore one glove, and because it was only fair, you left the fourth one in the boathouse. You found a kayak with one seat, four folding chairs, a little table for picnics. You were dizzy with hunger, but you took three deep breaths and the worst wave passed, so you kept moving. You found the rowboat at the

back of the shed. You loved it because there was no motor to make noise and no gas to spill and no key you needed to find to start it. You felt your way along the shelves until you touched the cool cylinder of a flashlight; and by its blessed beam, you saw the boat was blue as your room at home, and you took this as a sign, and considered it permission.

You don't understand storms or tides, the strength of waves on an open sea—you don't have a map of the islands in your mind—you have no idea how far away the mainland lies, how long it will take to paddle with the single oar your kind benefactors have left you.

You know there are cones around the island, jutting rocks big enough for one tree, and you could land on one of them—boat broken against jagged stone, three shivering boys clinging to bare branches. You tell Jesse and Dustin this won't happen. Already they are afraid. Already you know they'll leave you.

They help you carry the boat down to the shore, but when they feel the cold water slap their sore feet, Dustin says, I don't think we should do this; and Jesse says, Maybe we can try again; maybe it won't rain tomorrow. You want to weep because it is always raining now, in October, and this is your first and last chance—this night your whole life, what's left of it, and you tell them this, but your two companions want to hike back up the hill, slip through their windows, sleep in their little beds and pretend this bitter night never happened. You know they will be caught, that you have twenty-two minutes, each one of them sacred, and you climb into the blue boat. There are a billion stars behind these clouds, but the night has swallowed them, and your friends, your soon-to-be betrayers, push you off into the sea, and you feel the water on your feet, and you realize there must be a leak, but you want it to be untrue, so you keep going. You who cannot swim a hundred yards—you who are bone-heavy—you who have no fat, no flesh to float you, you, my only son, my beloved child, you paddle hard with all your heart and mind and spirit. You wail in the rain now that the other boys are gone because the water rises around your feet and you know—you know: the only time left is the time it will take to row to shore, to the exact place you started.

I made it as far as Issaquah last night, just east of Seattle, Motel 6, safe and anonymous. I woke at 4:30, and it was dark, of course, but I knew that it was morning, October third, that a whole day was gone, a whole lifetime, and we had lived through it.

I started out again at six. Before nine, I'd found Michael and Larissa Vouri in Kaslo, and we were on our way to Valadez. The girl's tiny swollen shape hurt me as if she were my fugitive daughter. I judged the man,

imagining he had estranged us. I felt sanctified by the night of fear, my love for you, the long journey. I climbed the hill in the cold rain as the beautiful boys sang, *O Day of Radiant Gladness*. A day, yes, and nine hours, thirty-three in all it had taken me to reach you. But here I was, your mother, and Rick Dushane said, *Jacob doesn't choose to see you*.

I write these words to you from my cell, the Raven's Roost in Kaslo. At the literacy center where I tutor immigrant children, my students speak twenty-nine languages: Javanese, Kikuya, Navajo, Farsi. They come from Kosovo, Cambodia, Belize, Zimbabwe, Laos, Rwanda, Estonia, Uruguay. They have survived malaria and tuberculosis, influenza, dengue fever. They have lived beyond earthquake and famine, fire and flood, drought and tsunami. My children have witnessed what they will never understand: their own people murdering one another.

They have stories to tell, but language fails them.

Together we have painted a mural that circles the room: night into day, rainforest to desert, up to the white Himalayas, down to the blue-green ocean. A wide river runs through it all, bringing us here together. Everywhere you look you find another tiny face: poison arrow frog, coiled cobra, pink flamingo, Chihuahuan raven—black baboons and golden lemurs—scarlet ibis, vervet monkeys—a tortoise swimming in the sand, an owl that looks prehistoric—leopard, lion, fallow deer, fish flying in the treetops—a luna moth with no mouth, one sweet-smiling camel. Behind every stone and tree, another almost human child appears in shadow, ready to flee in fear or leap out and kill you.

Last week, two nine-year-old girls and one small boy who survived a fire in their school in Guadalajara came prepared to dance, because they said, *We have no words to tell it*.

They were only children wearing bicycle helmets, little firefighters with flashlights, illuminating our stunned faces one by one—tiny dancers finding sacks of flour, using all their strength to lift the bodies of their friends and carry them outside to weeping parents—three sad survivors crawling down hallways, choking on an illusion of smoke, discovering one slumped teacher who might live if only they could drag her out together.

They wanted us to witness their grief, to feel the weight of loss in their little bodies, the weightlessness of love for the dead who come as smoke and air, who are forever with us. They cradled the sacks or lifted them to their shoulders. They gave us hope in the face of despair: they believed to the end of time they might find one child crouched in the dark, blinded by fear and flame, still miraculously breathing.

They gave me faith: their silent bodies said, *All things by love are*

possible. I saw through the veil of smoke: you and your father and I might dance our story one day so that each could see what the other suffered. We might let our bodies speak the truth, and take turns carrying one another.

I have been awake all night, writing the letter you may never read, waiting till it is light, till Michael and Larissa can bring me back to you on your island. If you refuse me a second time, I pray I will have strength to wait—all day, all night if necessary.

You will know that I am here, and you will know that *I am*, always.

Now, while the dark of day protects us, I want to steal a little boat and row to you across the water. I want to hide you in myself, my body's most amazing secret. Lord, let me speak as birds speak, with a heart that grand, with tremulous music. I wish to bring you to this room where you shall reveal yourself in all your beauty, where I will be free to wash my son's torn hands and feet, free to wrap them in white gauze so that we can be healed.

Sweet savior, you fall asleep on my bed, and I lie down quietly beside you. In this dream of ours, I call your father. I whisper so we will not wake: *Night is breaking into day; I hear stars falling. Darling, everything's okay. Jacob's safe—here, with me. We're coming home. We'll be home tomorrow. We want to see you. We want to be with you—now, exactly as you are, in this moment.*