

THE BOY DETECTIVE AND THE SUMMER OF '74

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That summer, the summer of 1974, all the boys in the neighborhood wanted to be Evel Knievel—John especially, who'd gotten a brand new bike with chopper-style handles for his birthday. He and his younger brother Paul and I, like a brother myself, raced constantly around the hot asphalt of the small block where we lived. We built rough ramps out of old bricks and leftover plywood, jumped Tonka toys, a rusty wagon, a battered Big Wheel.

Other times, we tried to be like the Six Million Dollar Man, sprinting from yard to yard, mimicking with our lips that metallic reverb that meant we'd engaged our bionic powers. We liked Kwai Chang Caine from the *Kung Fu* show too, and Paul sometimes thrashed his arms in karate chops as we wandered into the woods and fields behind our neighborhood—land that my father owned and that he was waiting to develop, same as he had built each of the nine houses that made up our small corner of that North Carolina town.

Turns out that while we aspired to be Evel Knievel or Kwai Chang Caine or the Six Million Dollar Man, my father had his own ambitions for me—that was another thing about that summer.

But one dream was mine alone. Secretly, I wanted to be Encyclopedia Brown. And the summer of '74 offered the chance for that dream to come true.

We found the first bone about midmorning one day in late June—the sun already high, the heat rising too. Meat still clung to it, chunks of muscle, scraps of reddish brown hide. The smell had drawn us to the small drainage ditch that separated John and Paul's yard from the road, and as soon as I saw it, I'd rushed home to get the Polaroid camera my father had forbidden me to use—the camera I begged my mother not to reveal I'd

borrowed. ("It's a mystery," I'd told her. "I need evidence, please don't tell, please, Mom, please.")

"It's not a leg," Paul said as I photographed what I already thought of as the crime scene.

"Well, what do you think it is, stupid?" John said. "An arm?" He gripped the chopper-style handlebar of his bike, twisting his wrist back and forth like he was revving an engine.

"I'm not saying it's an arm," Paul said. "I'm saying it's not a leg, not a human leg." Then under his breath: "Idiot." He puffed up his chest. He wore a *Keep On Truckin'* T-shirt, his favorite, which seemed to give him courage.

"Animals have legs," Christine pointed out, reminding us she was there—the new girl in the neighborhood, the one we didn't yet know what to do with. Red hair and big moony eyes and this slack-jawed look, like she was being surprised every minute of her life. When she'd moved in after the end of the school year—a military transfer, her father overseas already—our mothers had warned us to play nice.

"Who asked you?" they shouted at her, and "We're not stupid," and "We *know* animals have legs."

Christine peered over my shoulder. "What do *you* think it is, Cooper?" she whispered, close enough that the front of her shirt brushed against me.

"I think it's a cow," I said. The upper leg, I thought, but I didn't want to get John and Paul started again. *Shank*, I would have said—and wrote later on the photo once I'd learned the word. "Looks like a dog or something gnawed on it."

"It stinks," Christine said.

"Girls stink," Paul said.

"It was probably Frisky," John said, and we all looked over toward the pen in Mr. Futrell's backyard. "Old Man Futrell opens his pen after everyone's gone to bed."

Protection for the neighborhood, Mr. Futrell had claimed, bristling if anyone argued about it. The dog's real name was Buster—a big Doberman who liked to jump up on people, throwing his weight at them. "He's just frisky," Mr. Futrell had explained, bristling when people complained about that too. The name had stuck.

Frisky seemed to be sleeping. I took a picture of his pen.

"But where'd he get it from?" I asked. "You think Frisky dragged the bone from one of those fields back there?" Cows wandered inside an electric fence up a dirt road off our neighborhood. Half a mile tops, an easy walk. Once, we'd dared one another to see who could keep their hands on the hot wire the longest.

"Wouldn't there be a trail of blood?" Paul asked.

"Somebody could have thrown it from a car," Christine said.

John snorted. Paul rolled his eyes. "Don't you think we'd have noticed?" John said, but she had a point.

I stared at the bone, then took pictures of the grass browning around us

and the treehouse that none of us used anymore—John and Paul’s decision, ever since their mother said they couldn’t keep Christine out. I took pictures from various angles—gauging from each the distance someone would need to have thrown the bone.

All of it spelled danger—memories of danger suddenly everywhere: the spot where Paul lost one of his G.I. Joes in another drainage ditch; the place where a bike ramp slipped and John ended up with an oozing pavement burn; the black circle where Mark Sebastian had set his family’s yard on fire with a Roman candle; the boxwoods Mark and his friends had hidden behind on Halloween, waiting to jump out at us.

Over at my house, Milton the yardman unloaded the riding lawnmower from a trailer, ready to mow our grass and then several more in the neighborhood, and that prompted the memory of my father’s story about a man who lost his arm to a tractor blade.

Christine jumped when Milton cranked up the mower. It woke Frisky too. He barked at Milton, stalking the length of his pen and back.

I closed my eyes then and tried to concentrate, tried to imagine the middle of the night—moonlit, the houses quiet, someone carrying a bone. But all I could see were red splotches, that high morning sun beating through my eyelids. All I could hear were Frisky’s frantic barks and the roar of that mower and John urging us to give it up, come on, time to race our bikes.

Then, from the Sebastians’ house, I heard laughter and the slam of a car door. I opened my eyes. A Mustang pulled from the driveway, the car packed with teenagers, Mark Sebastian in the driver’s seat. Instinctively, I raised the camera and snapped a shot.

The car had sped away long before the picture developed, but I was left with that image of Mark’s face glaring at us through the open window and the sudden knowledge—solid, if unsupported—that he was key to whatever we were looking for.

I still have those Polaroids now, the carpet of centipede grass a sickly green, the treehouse faded yellow to white, the figures dimmed to ghosts. The childish cursive of the captions have faded too: “Friday morning,” and “sunny,” and then on one of the bone itself, “about fifteen inches long.”

Trying to get the full crime scene, I caught photos of my mother sweeping the porch, and off behind her, Milton circling that lawnmower, and Ms. Lottie too—John and Paul’s mother—in the window, her mouth open like she was singing. Christine half-in, half-out of a frame, one moony eye. Paul in his *Keep On Truckin’* shirt. John flexing a muscle for the camera—the bully of the bunch always, headbutts, titty twisters, and charley horses—even if that muscle today looks thin and frail.

And then there’s the glimpse of my father’s Cadillac tooling unexpectedly into view, his own face glaring through the windshield—his expression as surprised as my own must have been.

But without the guilt. He wasn’t the one caught doing anything wrong.

My father didn't park in his regular spot but stopped midway up the driveway that cut the length of our yard. He summoned me with a firm "Cooper!"—his face as stern as his voice, his jaw set, eyes unblinking. When I reached him, he held out his hand for the camera. "Not a toy," he said, and I remember wondering how he'd known about it, how he'd gotten across town so quickly, what punishment lie ahead.

But the camera wasn't why he'd come home. He had bigger lessons to teach that morning, and he marched me across the yard, toward Milton atop that John Deere mower.

When my father raised his hand—a hello? a command?—Milton cut the engine. My father put his foot on the mower's blade guard, his wingtips shining next to Milton's tattered brogans. I stood close behind—witness more than participant, uncomfortable in more ways than one. Those pictures I'd already taken? I'd stuffed them down my pants.

"I'm hiring a helper for you," my father said. He guided me forward, hand on my shoulder.

Milton wiped his brow with a rag from his pocket. Grass clippings on the rag, smeared now on his forehead too. He was a tall, muscular black man, the barest hint of gray in his hair and sweat stains always under his arms. His yellowish eyes turned between my father and me.

"You want him to drive it?" Milton pointed toward the steering wheel.

My father laughed. "We'll let him work up to that. No, no, let him bag the clippings." He squatted down to look me in the eye. "A quarter a bag. Can't beat that kind of pay."

I don't remember speaking. I don't think it was really a question. Truth was, I barely paid attention. Over by the ditch, John stood over the bone and motioned for Christine to join him. Paul was sneaking up behind her.

My father kept talking, talking to me, past me: a learning experience, what's earned, what's valued, the choices you make, and Milton himself a good example of a strong work ethic.

"Cooper's choice to work or not to work," my father emphasized, and I did hear that—more news, and a potential out? I could get back to the bone, save the evidence. "But a lot of comic books a young man can buy with a handful of quarters, wouldn't you say, Milton?"

Milton swiped at his forehead, trying to flick away those clippings. "He should do the raking too?"

My father straightened but still stared at me—maybe measuring my size against a rake's. Paul had pushed Christine, but she'd spun free, and he and John were chasing her now.

"One thing at a time," my father said and left Milton and me to stare at one another.

Milton took turns mowing and raking, and when the piles were big enough, I swooped in with a big green garbage bag.

Between times, I continued my investigation—borrowing another bag to rescue the bone.

"You're saving it?" John straddled his bike, walking it beside me as I dragged the bone bag to the woods beyond my yard.

"It's disgusting," said Paul, tagging behind.

"It's evidence," said Christine.

I felt cheated that she said it first. The corners of the photos poked at my thigh as I walked.

After another round of grass clippings, I ducked into the house to hide those pictures in my room, then grabbed a notebook left over from the school year. I tore out all the pages I'd used—notes about "how to research" from my fourth-grade class with Mrs. Bartlett. On the cover, I wrote CASEBOOK in black Magic Marker.

I rushed through the yard chores. I rushed along that ditch and into the woods and even partway up that dirt road toward the cow pen. John and Paul taunted and teased at every step, while Christine skirted the edges. I filled up three pages with lists of evidence: cigarette butts and empty beer cans; candy wrappers and eighty-seven cents in loose change; a pocketknife John had lost (which sparked him to join me briefly in the search); a black widow spider in an old milk carton (which got Paul on board); a frilly pink bra.

"Hubba-hubba," John said, mimicking his dad. Paul picked it up and held it in front of Christine, who shrieked and ran.

Right under "bra" in my notebook is "popped balloon," but looking back, I can imagine what it really was. Paul had already made a comment about seeing Mark Sebastian and his girlfriend back here. At the time, that information had seemed proof that they were headed toward the cows—the pen I also walked to, counting the animals like I would know if one was missing.

"Something mighty interesting you kids up to," Milton said as I gathered up the last clippings.

I shook my head. I didn't want him reporting to my father. He didn't ask anything else.

Later in the afternoon, Mark came back. He was shooting hoops in his yard and that same girlfriend sat off to the side. When we asked why they'd been out in the woods, the pimples on his face flared up even angrier than usual.

"I will kill every one of you if you don't keep your mouths shut, do you hear me?" He clenched the basketball between his hands like he was going to launch it at us.

"More proof," I announced, after we'd run away. "And did you see that girl's face? She knows something."

"Maybe she just likes him," Christine said.

John and Paul snorted. *Girls*, they seemed to be saying, and Christine blushed too.

Be sure you include Christine. Do you understand me, Cooper?

Those words had become my mother's mantra each morning when I went out into the world.

But whether she said it or not, it had become clear pretty quickly that it didn't matter. Water-gun battles, hole-digging contests, even football or baseball—Christine wouldn't be shaken, despite our best efforts.

When we rode our bikes, pedaling furiously, she pedaled just as desperately, the tassels on her handlebars tearing through the air. "Tassels," said John later. "Won't catch Evel Knieval's daughters with tassels." And Paul said, "Not even Mrs. Evel Knieval."

When we'd taken turns to see who could hold their hands the longest on that cow pen's thin electric wires, Christine had looped her own fingers around them, told us it tickled. "A girl's word," Paul snorted.

When we climbed trees, daring one another to a higher spot, Christine always reached toward the next branch, even the time she wasn't dressed right for it—a yellow skirt, shiny black shoes, frilly socks—at least until John started chanting, "I see England, I see France," and Paul almost slipped laughing, and Christine shimmied down as fast as she could, her cheeks on fire. She stayed quiet the whole walk home, keeping up but also keeping me between her and the other boys—the lesser of those evils, I guess.

More questions inevitably in the evening too.

My mother always insisted on a sit-down dinner—cloth napkins, a full complement of silverware, and good posture—and my father insisted on conversation, even if that mostly meant him talking about the day's news: Vietnam, over but not over (never over), or Watergate or something that the nigras had done. (*We were Southern*. That's what I started to write, to try to explain. But really it was more complex than that.) If attention ever turned my way, it came out as another lecture: the value of a strong work ethic, the future laid out for me in the world of business, the same kinds of lessons he gave when he sprang those yardwork duties on me.

So whenever my mother interrupted to ask, "What did you children do today? Did you include Christine?" I mumbled something about riding bikes or being in the woods and told her that yes, I'd treated her well—because in the midst of sitting up straight and using the right fork and showing the proper attention, how could you explain that you felt good for having looked away from a girl's panties and yet bad for not facing that same girl when she fell in beside you afterward?

"Have you solved your mystery yet?" my mother asked as I was getting ready for dinner that day we'd found the bone.

I shrugged. "It wasn't anything serious," I told her.

"Did Christine help you?"

Later than night, it should've been satisfying to get the handful of quarters my father gave me, but I had other, more important work on my mind.

Those research skills our fourth-grade teacher had drilled into us? That set of *World Book Encyclopedias* my mother had been convinced to buy?

My casebook brimmed with information—the fact that cows had divided

hoofs, *cloven* the word, and then that word *shank* I found in the chart of butcher's beef cuts.

I held those Polaroids beside the different kinds of cows: Aberdeen Angus, Charolais, Hereford, Jersey, Guernsey, Holstein-Friesian. Wasn't Limousin the closest match to that scrap of reddish-brown skin? But were they only in France?

Among the many diseases of cows was *blackleg*, bringing "lameness, convulsions, rapid swelling, and high fever," but how could you tell if a severed leg had been lame or feverish?

That night was the first of many perched against the bedroom window, gazing into the darkness, watching the shrubbery and the shadows under the trees, waiting for the red glow of a cigarette somewhere in the distance. Headlights might drift down the street at any minute, or better, a car without headlights, its window rolled down and an arm hanging out, flinging stray meat. I strained for a glimpse of Frisky roaming between the trees. I eased the window open to listen for growling or gnawing. The smell of pine crept through the open crack, fighting the air-conditioning pushing it back out. I heard only crickets, an occasional toad.

"We need more cow," I remember saying, aloud, out into the darkness.

The appearance of a second bone, this one in a ditch behind the Sebastians' yard, confirmed my instincts about Mark. John still made noise about better things to do—his Evel Knievel vs. my Encyclopedia Brown—but he was curious. Even Paul started coming up with ideas to solve the case.

"You could put up posters," he said. "Offer a reward."

"How is he going to pay a reward, idiot?" John pushed his shoulder.

Paul swatted back. "We don't have to pay. Whoever answered, they would probably be guilty."

"Uh-uh," I said. "That would tip them off."

Them, I thought. And then *Mark*.

I swiped my father's camera again to take more pictures. I wrapped this bone in a fresh bag and laid it near the first one, even though animals had already gnawed through that plastic, stripped the meat completely. I made another list of clues, indiscriminately—uselessly, I see now.

John, Paul, and Christine huddled around me as I drew a map of the neighborhood, marking the placement of the bones and other evidence. Together, we constructed a full list of everyone who lived there, their jobs, their schedules. (I added an "es" to make *Dobbyses* and *Williamsses*, trying to remember what we'd learned about plurals in school. I remember being proud of spelling *bookkeeper*, having learned from Encyclopedia Brown that it was the rare word with three sets of double letters.)

I made a list of other people who came into the neighborhood: Milton, of course, and then Percy the mailman, and the old man who delivered the paper in the afternoon, whose name I didn't know, and then the trash men who roared around our block twice a week. The stink of the bone and the

stench that trailed their truck linked them inevitably.

We tracked the comings and goings of our neighbors—scrupulous notes in my casebook.

Wednesday, 4:25 P.M.—Old Man Futrell takes out his trash. Two bottles of Old Crow. Party? Guests must come at night.

And:

3:23 [no day listed on this one]—*Mrs. Crawford sits on porch, wearing housecoat, reading. And then: Later—piano music through open window at her house, singing.*

I entertained other suspects, asking my father about our neighbors the Crouches, who'd opened a new restaurant.

"Do they serve steak?" I asked. "Flank steak? Or brisket?"

"Not fitting to eat," said my father, not looking up from his paper. "We'll get you a rib eye when we go."

I asked my mother if Mrs. Crawford's husband had died under suspicious circumstances?

"Cancer isn't suspicious," she told me.

"What does she do in there all day? She never comes out."

"She plays her piano. She reads."

"Doesn't she get bored?"

My mother thought about that. "I don't think so. Lonely maybe—lonely, of course."

"Is that why you go over there? Because you feel sorry for her?"

"She's a friend, Cooper," my mother said—maybe too insistently. "You don't need to be afraid of her. She's just different—different in many ways."

Different meant *strange*, I'd thought. *Different* meant *dangerous*.

"I'm not scared of her," I said, though I was a little, how she kept to herself and the way she pulled her frizzy gray hair in a ponytail, not like other old women. John and Paul were convinced she was a witch. We avoided her house at Halloween.

Another time, I told my mother that Mr. Karr snuck cigarettes on the back porch, smoking in the darkness.

"Don't tell Mrs. Karr," she said. "Let that be our secret, okay?"

Whenever my father invited business associates over—"drinking and dealing" as he said—I took note of the license plates, without any idea how to trace them, and I rushed out the next morning expecting another bone. But the yards were empty.

Still, no one was safe from speculation. Eavesdropping on my mother's phone calls, I wrote down *cut* and *die* and *would do it at home but don't want it to bleed*. Now, it seems clear that she was saying *dye*—a hair appointment—but for several days, I kept her under close scrutiny: watching her choice of knife when she cooked, studying the thin muscles of her arms and the curiously mottled texture of the back of her hand.

Most of my casebook was devoted to Mark Sebastian.

Saturday, 1:23 P.M.—Sound of door opening and closing at the

Sebastians'. Laughter, Mark and two girls. Small bathing suits. Mark sees us.

Tuesday, 5:18 P.M.—Mr. Sebastian comes home, drives around basketball, parks car, picks it up, picks up a cigarette butt, examines it, carries it inside.

Thursday, 7:27 P.M.—Sebastian cookout, just family. Mr. Sebastian sees us, calls to join them. Mark whispers. Mr. Sebastian says "Grow up, Mark"—angry. We run home.

Saturday morning—Items in Sebastian yard: Six pine cones not under pine trees, three cigarette butts in backyard, Zero bar wrapper, basketball in driveway again.

I gathered those cigarette butts and kept them in a bag in my room, and the Zero bar wrapper too. I'd collected other items: a stray newspaper flyer, a four-leaf clover, thirteen more cents—a number that seemed significant. If it seems obsessive, it's only because I'd learned my lesson the first day, when I'd gone back to retrieve our evidence and the bra was gone.

How often did the Sebastians see us crouched down in their bushes or wandering the ditch behind their house? One afternoon after we found the second bone, Mark and his friends chased us out from behind the boxwoods, Christine giggling and John shushing her—the shushing louder than the giggling.

Another afternoon we traipsed along behind Mark and his girlfriend in the woods, crawling over branches and stumps and through vines. Soon I realized they were walking in circles, trying to lose us or maybe simply tire us out, same as John and Paul sometimes did with Christine.

"Will you go the hell home?" Mark threw a stick in our direction. John dodged it at the last minute.

"You're not supposed to say *hell!*" John shouted.

"Leave me and Felicia alone!" Mark shouted back.

"Felicia!" said Paul, and he and John began chanting "Mark and Felicia, sitting in a tree . . ." Even Christine joined in, her voice low and restrained but trying to take part.

I kept quiet. At that rate, we'd never figure out where they were going.

Somewhere in here, Christine had a birthday party. Between finding the second and third bone? Right after finding the third bone? At the time, it hadn't seemed as important as it does now.

Christine had passed out invitations she'd decorated with glue and glitter. John and Paul and I were the only kids invited, probably the only ones she knew, moving in after the school year had ended. Three gift bags stood on the counter when I arrived—a ball inside mine, a couple of toy cars, a package of baseball cards. Same with John's and Paul's, I imagine, but they never showed up.

"We'll have cake later." Christine's mother gestured toward the oven. "I'll call when it's ready."

Christine led me around like a tour guide, those big moony eyes like they

might burst into tears at any moment. Much of the house seemed unsettled: piles of boxes on the edges of the living room and in the guest room, no pictures on any of the walls. They'd barely moved in before her father had shipped overseas.

Christine's room was different—both from the other rooms and from the ones where we boys lived. A canopied bed, all pink and ruffles, teddy bears across the pillows. Raggedy Ann and Andy in oversized versions, Barbies in several outfits, a token Ken. More toys were crammed into a pink chest, her name written on top in a curlicued script.

"Do you like books?" she asked when she caught me looking at her bookcase. "We could read together." She knelt down by the shelves.

"I wonder if John and Paul are here yet."

She stood again when I didn't plop down beside her.

"Maybe you could borrow one another time—I don't mind."

I shook my head, even though part of me envied her copy of *Where the Wild Things Are*, which my own parents had never let me read.

"Do you want to play something else? We can do whatever you want."

Her closet was half-open—the folding doors parted slightly—a crowd of dresses and skirts, plaids and pastels, frills and bows inside. I recall some soft scent of perfume, but that could hardly have been true.

"I brought a present," I told her finally. "I left it downstairs."

Christine squealed with joy when she saw what my mother had helped me pick out in the Piggly Wiggly's toy aisle: the board game Clue. We played immediately. "I'm Miss Scarlet," Christine said, flicking her hair back. I'm certain she let me win.

Christine's mother and I sang happy birthday. Christine blew out all eleven candles with a quick whoosh, and then turned those moony eyes my way like they had their own wishes.

The icing on the cake was so sweet that the back of my throat curled up.

"He wants more, Mama," Christine said, after I'd choked it down. I didn't feel like I could say no.

"I hear from Milton that you won't be getting paid this week." My father leveled a hard stare at me across the dinner table. "That's a lot of comic books you won't be able to buy. When I was a young man, I wouldn't have passed up that chance."

Whenever Milton had waved me over to help that day, I'd waved back, waved him off, kept moving through my investigation. I wouldn't have put it this way then—couldn't have, I'm sure—but somehow I'd realized that except through my father, Milton had no power over me. He drank water from the hose outside instead of asking for a glass and wouldn't even come in for the bathroom, even when my mother asked if he needed the facilities.

When I didn't seem regretful enough, when I reminded my father that he'd told me the work was a choice—my choice—he got huffier.

"A man chooses to earn his way. You reap what you sow, don't reap what you don't."

My late nights at the window were leaving me exhausted, drowsy over my cereal. My father was whispering to my mother words like *derelict* and *lazy*.

But I couldn't kid myself that I was accomplishing much with my own "work" either. I had my criminal—Mark Sebastian—but no motive, no real evidence.

By the time the third bone showed up, John and Paul had fully lost interest, but Christine stuck close.

"You'll solve it soon enough," she told me, her forehead nearly touching mine as I laid out the fresh garbage bag, even as I knew the bone's eventual fate: ripped plastic, bugs, maggots, rot. A strand of hair fell across Christine's eyes, and she blew it free of her face.

She reached down to smooth a wrinkled edge of the plastic, then took a corner of the bag as I lugged it toward the woods. Sally to my Encyclopedia Brown, that's what I kept telling myself, despite the way she'd looked at me at her birthday party.

As we walked, John and Paul whizzed by on their bikes. "Cooper and Christine, sitting in a tree . . ."

The whirring of their spokes was shrill, then duller as they sped past. The Doppler Effect, we'd learned in school, but that knowledge didn't do me much good.

Encyclopedia Brown had a calling card: "Brown Detective Agency, 13 Rover Avenue, Leroy Brown President, NO case too small, 25 cents per day, plus expenses." Brown's father, the chief of police in Idaville, relied on Encyclopedia to solve the tough cases, the ones that had stalled in his own hands, and he always found the key clue. Of course, electric clocks don't *tick!* Clearly hard-boiled eggs will spin longer than uncooked eggs! Obviously there's no Z on a telephone dial!

Night after night, reading about his adventures and solutions, I burned with envy. Nothing about our case made so much sense.

I didn't have a calling card, but it was easy enough to write a letter:

Dear Chief —

Here are pictures of the bones we found. There are three of them. They belong to a cow. Maybe the same cow. Can we help you solve the case? We are investigating.

Cooper Hobbes
324-3684

I pictured photos of the chief and me in the paper. *Boy Genius Cracks Case and Newest Addition to Police Force*.

"I don't know why you're so sure Mark did it," John said as I led him and Christine on the long walk to the police station downtown.

"He acts guilty."

"Didn't you say we'd need *hard evidence*?" John had started taking that role, trying to beat me on my own turf, the turf I was trying to claim.

"One of the bones was near his yard."

"The first bone was *in* our yard, doofus. Does that mean that me or Paul did it?"

"You wouldn't have had any reason to."

"And what reason did Mark have, huh?"

I didn't answer. More investigation ahead, that was the point of the letter.

"We're gonna get in trouble if we go any farther," John said, and when I didn't stop, "You better turn back or I'm gonna tell."

"You wouldn't." I whirled on him. "You won't."

He stared at me, his hands opening and shutting. *See my finger, see my thumb*, he sometimes said. *See my fist . . .* But I didn't blink. Christine looked nervously from one to the other of us. Paul wasn't there at all. That morning, he told his mother he'd brushed his teeth, but when she checked, the bristles were dry, so he was paying the price. Maybe the reason John tagged along now. Nothing else to do.

"You're as stupid as you look," said John, but he and Christine both fell in behind me when I kept walking.

Our town was not large, the walk was not long, but it seemed as if we crossed several worlds on our walk. The white columns at the First Citizens Bank. The smell of discarded vegetables from the back of the Piggly Wiggly next door—eighteen-wheelers at the loading docks. Lush green lawns lined one street. Dogwoods and azaleas and boxwoods fronted sturdy brick colonials. Then those gracious houses and manicured grounds gave way to the older section of town, the colored section we'd have called it, all sagging porches and rotting wood. Those yards were dusty, chain-link fences around the border. In one yard, I remember a young child hoisted in a makeshift swing—some part of an infant's high chair hung with a couple lengths of rope.

The child's mother stared at us as we passed, and John called back, "What are you looking at?" When she didn't stop looking, John spit out an ugly word, the kind of word his own father might've said, but always behind closed doors. I tried to shush him, I called out an apology. The woman never spoke. When I glanced back, she swung the baby steady as before.

More to that day's mission, of course—more about my ambitions and fears and failures there at the edge of what I hoped would be my first success as a boy detective.

The scuff of John's shoes against the sidewalk downtown, irritatingly unhurried. The offbeat tap-tap-tap of Christine's as she dodged cracks, fearful of breaking her mother's back.

The smoky tint of the police department's plate-glass window and my hesitation peering at the old men loitering within.

John taunting me, "Go on in, why don't you?" Then the ringing of the

bell above the door as Christine pushed through first, dragging me behind her.

A tall counter, impossibly high. A man perched against it, his neck bulging over his collar. The breath of the woman leaning over the counter, stale with cigarettes and coffee. The way her blue hair gleamed. The way she called us *children*. "Well, hello there, children."

And then the man with the bulging neck talking to me, too—"You're Frank's boy, aren't you?"—and me panicking, thrusting the envelope at the blue-haired woman, shouting "It's for the chief," before I pushed my way out, the door's bell brash as an alarm.

Laughter behind me, and snatches of words: "Got a confession there" and "Bet he nabbed us a criminal" and "Got that girl leading him around." And then outside, more laughter—John telling me what an ignoramus I was.

Every one of those details stung me to the core, chased me all the way back to our neighborhood.

But in retrospect, none of it stands out today as much as what John called that black woman in the dusty yard and the memory of her steady eyes and her silence—even as she was the last thing on my mind at the time.

For days after our visit to the police station, I stayed indoors—waiting for the chief of police to call.

"Why aren't you outside today?" my mother urged me. "Do you have a tummy ache? All that ice cream you ate last night."

Another night, I heard my father tell her, "He's certainly grown fond of the phone."

"Maybe he's got a little girlfriend," my mother said.

"He doesn't see any girls other than Christine."

"Well."

Stupid, stupid, stupid, I thought—harder on myself than John ever was.

Then one afternoon, the call *was* for me.

"Head for the treehouse, Coop," said the voice, John or Paul, I still don't know which. "Now."

John and Paul were already rocketing out of their back door. When I saw Paul's backpack, my mind short-circuited. Had they found a fourth bone? Would they have put it in a backpack?

Christine raced from another direction. Had they called her? To the *treehouse*? But she belonged there, she did.

Paul scrambled up the ladder, the backpack wobbling. John waved me past: "Go, go!" But when I got to the top, I saw why he'd stopped first. Christine hadn't been invited at all.

"Not you." His fingers stabbed the air, a hiss in his voice, his mother's warnings suddenly thrown out the window. "No girls allowed"—like something out of a comic strip or one of the *Little Rascals* cartoons they still showed on TV. Christine looked like she'd been slapped.

Pine straw matted in the corner of the treehouse. Sitting in it, Paul stretched his lips into a wide, lascivious grin as he opened the backpack. I caught a glimpse of something we didn't see on *Little Rascals*: a *Playboy* swiped from their father's drawer. Nothing to do with the case after all.

"Wait," John said when Paul started flipping through the magazine. John had climbed up, perched himself in the doorway, one foot hanging down, like he was ready to kick at Christine. "She'll leave soon."

I looked out one of the thin windows that their father had cut into the walls. Sniper holes, Mr. Bill had called them. Christine clung to the bottom of the ladder—those doe eyes, that slack jaw.

Evel Knievel, the Six Million Dollar Man, Kwai Chang Caine, even Encyclopedia Brown—those were easier roles to play. Sometimes—I think I knew this even then—there were bigger stakes about who you were going to be.

"Will you *wait*?" John shouted before I could say anything, and then he snatched the magazine from Paul's hands and thrust it toward Christine.

"See!" he said, shoving it in her face. "See why we don't want you here?"

"What are you doing?" Paul jumped up, slipping on wet pine needles.

"Go tell your mama." Spit flew from John's lips. "See if we ever talk to you then. Go on and see what happens."

Christine's eyes were as wide as ever, but her lips had shut firmly. She stared at me—not angry now, not sad, but simply empty, so blank I could hardly meet her look.

Another chance to say something. No one stopping me this time.

Finally she turned, and slowly, silently made her way across the yard and out of sight.

"Do you *know* what you did?" Paul asked. "How much trouble we're going to get in?"

"She won't do anything," John said. "Not a damn thing."

The first time I'd heard him curse. Some rite of passage there. Several.

We were rapt in the presence of the *Playboy*, its wonders and mysteries—those other kinds of mysteries. A woman lying back in the surf, her body wet and shining, and another woman, a bride, slipping out of her wedding dress and beckoning to us. We sped through the pictures, then went back and lingered over them, then again and again, day after day—everything except a short photo spread of a black woman.

"Who would want to see *that*?" Paul said.

"They ought not put it in there," John said.

Maybe black men read *Playboy* too, I thought, but I didn't say it.

We read the cartoons, too, even though the jokes flew over our heads, and an illustrated ABC of sex, whose words I wrote down on a separate page in my casebook. *Cuckold* and *frigidity* I found in the dictionary, and *rhythm* and *method* as individual words, and *wife* and *swap* too, even if I couldn't add them together to anything that made sense.

The cover was a cartoon, too, brightly colored—several children at the

beach, three boys and a girl, coincidentally enough, and the little girl looking sad, which couldn't help but make me think of us boys and Christine. In the middle of them stood a woman, a real woman, not a cartoon. She held an inflatable raft shaped like a horse, bending forward over it and looking out at the camera. She sucked on a popsicle.

I'm not making this up.

Same as those Polaroids, I still have the magazine—the August 1974 issue—torn in places, a little waterlogged, but intact. I salvaged it when John and Paul finally got tired of it.

After all, despite my initial reaction, it did turn out to be evidence. Of a sort.

Two nights after John and Paul stole the *Playboy*, I was keeping my usual watch before bedtime, the bottom of the window cracked, the warm air seeping in, the smell of freshly cut grass from where Milton had mowed. I could still smell grass on my own hands from bagging the cuttings—guilted into doing my job, guilted in every way.

We hadn't seen Christine since the treehouse episode. She was an absence, a silence, and through the window, the whole world seemed more silent than usual.

Then I heard a bark.

I grabbed my casebook. "11:06 Friday," I wrote. "Intruder?"

Several minutes passed. The house and the yard and the world beyond—all quiet again.

"11:14," I wrote. "Investigating. I am close to solving the case."

I pulled a pair of jeans over my pajamas, shoved the casebook in my back pocket, and tiptoed down the hallway.

Inside my parents' bedroom, my mother was pulling a cotton ball across her cheek. No sign of my father. From the first floor came silence—no television, no lights.

The living room was empty. ("I came down for water," I would've said if caught.) Beyond, a dim light shone in the back room where my father usually entertained his business associates. Pressed against the kitchen wall, I heard papers being shuffled, a clink of ice.

I stepped across the floor, high, long steps, careful not to make any sound. When the kitchen window didn't offer any clearer view, I moved to the door. The deadbolt clicked free like the cocking of a gun. The creak of the door sounded like a crypt vault opening. I waited for my father's voice—"Who's there?"—but my luck held.

Easing through the crack of the door, I gazed out and, before I knew it, found myself out in the yard. I didn't close the door fully, afraid to risk that creaking and clicking again.

Investigating, I'd written, and I was determined to do just that.

Dense shadows surrounded the pine trees at the edge of our property. Beyond it, moonlight shone more clearly on the Huffmans' yard and the edge of Old Man Futrell's, but I couldn't see whether Frisky was in his pen. The Huffmans' house completely blocked the Sebastians' from view.

John and Paul's bedroom windows were dark. I was tempted to whisper-shout up at them, but the lights were still on in the living room downstairs.

I thought about sneaking over to Christine's, but after everything at the treehouse . . .

Tree branches shifted slightly in the breeze, scraping one against the other. Grass blades swayed, and I had the impression that some invisible animal was crossing.

I crept forward, the ground soft beneath my bare feet.

Frisky's pen was empty. *She knows me*, I told myself, *I'm not a stranger, she wouldn't attack me*, but even I didn't believe it.

Near the Huffmans' garage, I could finally see the Sebastians' house, a single light above the front door. It looked as if the door itself might be opened, same as I'd left our door ajar. Mark's car stood in the driveway, and I knew I needed to check if the hood was warm, another trick I'd learned from Encyclopedia Brown.

Then I heard a yelp near Mrs. Crawford's house. A shaft of light appeared in her backyard, only for a second. Then darkness again, followed by a low growl.

I scrambled into the Huffmans' garage, crouched between Mr. Huffman's car and a stack of two-by-fours left over from building the treehouse. My heart throbbed. Was Mark over at Mrs. Crawford's? Was *she* involved somehow? A witch, John and Paul had said. And maybe her husband's death hadn't been cancer after all.

Or maybe lonely Mrs. Crawford was indeed a victim here.

For several minutes—an eternity—I sat paralyzed in the garage. Move ahead? Run home? The growls deepened in the distance. Was it Frisky? And if it wasn't Frisky . . . ?

What would Encyclopedia Brown have done?

Mrs. Crawford's yard stayed dark. The street lamp shining through the trees cast more shadows than light. The low growl became a wet gnashing sound. Another bone there, I knew it, the fourth bone, and this animal—Frisky, whatever—was devouring it.

Something will happen here, I thought. *Something soon*.

Then the light above the Sebastians' door went black, and even with the moonlight and the streetlamps, a new darkness settled over the neighborhood. At nearly the same moment—at least it seems that way in memory—whatever was in Mrs. Crawford's yard began to lumber out into the light.

I never saw it clearly, only the outline of its dark shape, the bulk of the beast, and those bright eyes, otherworldly, reflecting toward me the orange light of the street lamp.

I didn't look twice; I leaped out from the corner of the garage and ran as fast and as hard as I could back toward my house.

Our kitchen door still stood open, but the lights were all out and my parents' bedroom door closed. If they heard the door locking or my footsteps up the stairs, they never came out.

I lay in bed with darker fantasies running through my mind—and a new

word echoing, not *stupid stupid stupid* now but *coward coward coward*, and I didn't know which word was worse.

Dew glistened on the ground, wetting my feet as I walked out early the next morning. The sun peeked through the trees, but shadows lingered here and there. Everything was eerily tranquil, as if waiting for something—for me, maybe.

Frisky waited in his pen, too, like he'd never left it. When I came closer, he lifted an eyebrow. No blood spots stained the cement floor, no meat hung from the sides of his mouth, but it must have been him. If I hadn't seen the empty cage the night before, hadn't heard the growling in the darkness, I wouldn't have believed any of it.

I found the fourth bone in the back corner of Mrs. Crawford's yard, near the small trail that led through the woods toward town—the one that John, Christine, and I had taken to the police station. Chunks of flesh had been shredded and torn from it, same as always.

I turned to the map in my casebook. When I added the new X, I saw how this bone helped to complete a square of sorts around Mrs. Crawford's house, and I understood that whatever was happening had been completed as well—and not only because of the shape.

A cow has four legs. I'd now found the full set.

The sliding door on Mrs. Crawford's back porch was open, and I thought about the shaft of light from the night before. All those open doors—the one I'd left ajar at my house, the one I thought I'd seen at the Sebastians', all of it coming together. This wasn't simply Mark and his girlfriend playing in the woods. They were involved in something more devious, more tragic.

"Mark Sebastian," I said, aloud. "He killed her."

He'd had been watching her place, he and his girlfriend. They'd used the bones to keep Frisky occupied. The last bone had helped them break in. Mark had stolen jewels, money so he could escape his father. He and Felicia had eloped. I pictured different headlines this time: *Old Woman Killed in the Night* and *Boy Misses Chance to Save Neighbor* and *Teen Criminals Escape—Whereabouts Unknown*.

"You, boy," I heard then, and I turned to see Mrs. Crawford opening that back door wider. "What are you doing?"

"It's me, Mrs. Crawford," I said—startled, relieved, perplexed. "It's Cooper."

"I know who you are. I asked what you're doing."

I looked down at the bone, debating whether to tell her about it.

"It's a bone," I said, walking closer. "We've found four of them now."

"Bones?"

"They're not people bones," I told her. "They're cow bones. I think someone was trying to throw off Frisky—Mr. Futrell's dog. I think someone broke into your house."

"Bones," she said again, but not a question this time and like she hadn't

heard the rest. "From a cow." I thought she laughed, though I couldn't understand what was funny.

Her housecoat was blue, a royal blue I'd say now, fraying slightly at the edges, and her hair hung down at all angles, not yet pulled up into that ponytail. She looked off beyond my head toward the trail where the bone lay. A long moment passed.

"I think I would know if someone had broken into my home, don't you agree?"

Behind her, through the door, I caught a glimpse of bookcases. None of the books seemed to have been torn down, nothing was strewn around the room. The piano stood silent. A single mug sat on the coffee table. How long had she been watching me?

"Have you checked all the rooms?" I asked. "Maybe—"

"Nothing is amiss," she said, the word standing out so clearly that I wrote it in my casebook later. "If you'd like to come in and see for yourself, I've put on some cinnamon rolls."

Her words were welcoming, but her tone was formal, the way I'd heard other adults talk—offering something that they didn't really want to give.

"No, ma'am," I said. "I'm glad you're okay."

"Out early today?" my father asked, reading the paper, enjoying his breakfast. My mother stood at the stove. "Hard at work, or your usual lolling and moping?"

I shook my head, joined him at the table. My mother set down a plate of bacon and eggs. "Don't slouch, Cooper."

My father folded his paper, placed it with great purpose on the table. "We have company tonight. A businessman from the Outer Banks. A potential investor to help develop the woods and fields." He waved behind him. "You can learn something from this, and . . ."

And what else did he say? A cookout, I knew, and the Huffmans coming over, Mr. Bill and Ms. Lottie and John and Paul too—a community of support, a family community—and from my mother, a "shouldn't Christine come as well?" but I could barely hear any of it.

Would they be going in the woods? Did I need to hide the bones? And Christine coming? We couldn't face her, didn't want to.

Somewhere in the middle of these new troubles and worries, my father hustled me away from my half-eaten breakfast and into the Cadillac—"a lesson in preparing a pitch, start to finish," he said, some steaks to pick up for the cookout. "Rib eyes. First-class, honest, American."

As we drove out of the neighborhood, I stared at the Sebastians' house with the same suspicions, at Mrs. Crawford's with fresh ones. My father's hand rested lightly on the top of the wheel, as if he didn't even need to hold it.

"Aren't we going to the store?" I asked as we passed the Piggly Wiggly.

"That's why I'm going to pick up the steaks."

He drove us along the same streets that John, Christine, and I had

walked: past the lush lawns, toward the dusty ones, and then a left turn deeper into the colored section of town.

"Your mother doesn't like to drive here by herself," my father said. "Bet you've never been down this way at all."

A black man sat on the porch reading a newspaper. His gaze followed us. A dog crept around the corner of another house, sliding close to the wall. The makeshift swing sat empty.

My father turned again, pulled in front of a small wooden building. The front was all plate-glass windows, "Meat" frosted on it in big letters, and a few cardboard signs propped on a small ledge: "Spareribs" and "Hog Jowls." Inside, two black men bent over a refrigerated case.

Dust kicked up as I shuffled behind my father through the gravel. A bell tinkled as we entered.

"Morning, gentlemen," my father said.

"Yes, sir." One of the men stood straight. He wore an apron, some of its red stains still glistening. The other man placed small packages of chicken beneath a sign that said "Fryers" in red Magic Marker. The cartons were thick with juice.

"I need a half-dozen steaks, some nice rib eyes," my father said. "About an inch thick?" He held up his fingers.

"Yes, sir." The man turned through the door behind him. I caught a glimpse of a pig, headless and hoisted on a hook. The other man kept loading the refrigerated case. Ground beef now.

The bell tinkled again. A black woman began sorting through the chickens.

"Y'all got any smaller ones?" she asked the man. "This big, sometimes they's tough."

"A couple there at the bottom."

She found one. "This'll do." She pulled a small change purse from somewhere inside her purple dress.

"Take the time and get the best, right, ma'am?" my father said.

"Pay more for a big bird," the woman said, "too tough to eat."

"Some people like them bigger breasts," the man behind the counter said, winking at the woman as he handed over her change.

She bent her chin down and glared at him. "Some people get they spindly chicken neck wrung if they keep talkin' like they do."

"Come back soon," he called as the bell rang testily behind her.

"You working on hamburger patties?" asked my father, pointing to another counter. A trail of fresh red meat fell from a large metal grinder. A stack of patties stood to the side. "We'll take five or six of those too."

"Yes, sir." He turned to wrap them.

My father leaned down toward me. "Maybe it's easier to go the grocery store, or more convenient, but you don't go for what's easiest but for what's best—best quality, best deal." He patted my head.

Soon the hamburgers were laid on the counter, and the first man returned with a large package wrapped in white paper.

"This all you need?" he said.

"That'll be it." My father pulled out his wallet, handed across the money. "Where's Milton today?"

I felt my attention tighten.

"Milton?" I said, so softly that I don't think anyone heard.

"He off this weekend," the man said. "Left town this morning for his sister's up in Greensboro."

"I'll call him later," said my father. "I have some extra work for him next week."

"Our Milton?" I said again, or maybe it wasn't aloud. Still no one noticed.

The door to the back still swung lightly. The pig on the hook beyond. And more meat too. Cows, surely. Cow parts. And maybe, I thought, the things that Milton had taken from the neighborhood.

The truth about the case shifted in and out of focus—about the crime and the criminal both.

Either way, not Mark after all.

My father had me carry the burgers, heavier than I'd expected. As we left the store, I turned back and looked once more at the counter and the swinging door beyond, and the two men flanking it, guarding it, watching us leave.

The freshly wrapped beef sat between us in the Cadillac. All the way home, a rich metallic smell filled the car, different from the bones we'd found—fresher, tangier—but something familiar at its core.

My father lectured me more about business, about possibilities, about attention to detail. I didn't know what to say—how to tell him we had a thief in the neighborhood, a thief my father himself had brought there.

"I didn't know that Milton worked in a meat department," I told my mother back home. I tried to be nonchalant.

"I think he does part-time work here and there," she said, distractedly, pulling her finger through a cookbook.

"You know where meat comes from?" I asked her. "Cows."

"Thank you for telling me that," she said. "I hadn't known about that. Very interesting."

I knocked on Mrs. Crawford's door with renewed conviction.

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Crawford," I said, when she answered it. "Someone has been stealing things from your house."

She smiled. "There's that imagination of yours again."

"No, really," I told her. "Milton is stealing from you. You need to do a search, a complete search of the house."

She stared at me, no longer smiling. She brushed that gray ponytail over her shoulder. "Does your mother know about this? Does she know what you're suggesting?"

"No, ma'am, but—"

"There has been *nothing* stolen from this house, nothing." Her voice had

turned stern but her face didn't look angry. *Vulnerable*, that's the word I would use now picturing her expression. "You need to think about what you're saying before you say it."

"I'm sorry, but—" *But I'm right*, I was going to say. *A search is necessary*. She had already closed the door on me.

When I knocked again, she didn't answer.

When I went toward the back corner of the yard to retrieve the bone, it was gone, as if it had never been there at all.

It was the cookout that brought the whole truth together, even if I was still struggling so hard to make sense of it all that much of the evening seems a blur. My father and Mr. Bill and that business associate tending to the coals, the new man's shirt as big as a sheet and his belly protruding so much I wondered how he kept from toppling forward. The women sipped wine on the patio—the man's wife tiny with a thin face and thin brown hair, wispy fingers with large, oversized rings on them. ("She must be on top when they do it—else he'd squash her flat," Paul said later, pressing one palm hard against the other, nodding grimly. That *Playboy* had made him an authority.)

John ran back and forth through the smoke billowing out from the grill, mimicking karate moves, thrash-thrash-thrash with his hands: "Sniff my arm. I'm made of *fire!*" The sun rode low in the sky over the woods my father planned to develop, the woods where three of the bones rotted.

Our parents talked about the news, I know. Nixon had resigned—the day before? Weeks before? John and Paul had news, too: Evel Knievel's plans to jump Snake River Canyon, live on TV, and then the commercial Paul had seen for the *Planet of the Apes* TV show. I hadn't heard about any of it.

"Evel Knievel's gonna be on an Skycycle X-2," said John. "People all over the world will be watching it. Russia. England. Australia."

Paul shook his head. "That's a one-time jump. *Planet of the Apes* is gonna be on every week."

"Why don't you kids go play for a while?" my father said. "A game of hide and seek. We'll call you when dinner is ready."

John looked at me. "Hide and seek?" Like we were little kids again.

Paul shrugged.

And then they both looked at Christine, who'd been standing off to the side, in one of those same frilly skirts and wearing lipstick today, it looked like. Her mother had shown up, too, sitting back with a glass of wine herself.

I avoided looking at Christine's mother, and Christine too. (Had she told her mother about the *Playboy*?) But I couldn't dodge the glance my own mother gave me. *Play nice*, it said. *Include her*. She was the one who'd invited them.

That look from my mother? My guilt about how I'd sent Christine away from the treehouse? Everything I owed her about the case?

Whatever the reason, once Paul had been tagged “it,” I ran off with Christine to hide—followed her same as she’d led me into the police station that day.

“In here.” She pulled me into my parents’ garage, and we ducked between my father’s Cadillac and the wall, under a window facing the side yard. Sunlight seeped through a gauzy curtain, leaving most of the garage in shadow.

“Ready or not, here I come,” shouted Paul, his voice distant. I peeked through the window and saw him already checking behind trees in the side yard.

“He’ll see us as soon as he comes past that corner,” I said.

Christine was breathing heavy—from the quick run or taking the game too seriously? She pointed to the Cadillac, opened the door, climbed in the backseat. I heard Paul yell, “Got you!” and John shout “Jerk,” and I dove in behind her.

“They’ll find us anyway,” I said—started to say. But Christine was already smearing that new lipstick against my own lips, not slack-jawed anymore but openmouthed in a more purposeful way.

“I know you’re not like them,” she whispered, pulling away. “You missed me. You’ll miss me.” Something like that—and something different in those moony eyes, lonelier, more desperate.

What happened next was probably fallout from so much of everything else that summer: her birthday party and the way I’d always been nicer to her than John or Paul, the way she’d helped with the investigation, John and Paul chanting out our names together, that *Playboy* magazine.

Playing doctor—that’s what you might’ve called what happened in that cramped backseat, if we’d been younger.

Petting, heavy petting, if we were older—that language, those times.

I don’t know what to call it at that in-between age—didn’t know what to feel about Christine pulling her shirt up, about that pale stretch of belly, those flat breasts, nipples smaller than pennies.

Before I could begin to understand any of it before a face appeared in the backseat window.

Paul had found us, and then John was jabbing a finger at the glass, a vicious smile on his face.

Vulnerable. That idea again—that word, if only I’d had it.

Same as what I’d seen in Christine’s face too—both when she’d kissed me and again now that we’d been caught. Same as what I saw with Mark and his girlfriend, trying desperately to hide something from us. And in Mrs. Crawford’s eyes, too, I realized, and now I was inside the feeling myself.

Many things I was learning, too many things becoming clear, sharply so.

The light through that gauzy curtain, the shaft of light cutting the darkness at Mrs. Crawford’s house.

Frisky and that wet gnashing sound and those bones from the meat market.

Milton, tall and muscular and afraid to come into the house to use the bathroom.

Mrs. Crawford and the husband she'd lost.

Lonely, my mother had said. *Lonely*, of course. And *different*, *different in so many ways*.

Our parents sat with the fat man and his rail-thin wife at one picnic table. The four of us sat at another one, half-sized—the kids' table still.

Paul dove into his burger, juices dripping on his shirt. John chewed more methodically, looking back and forth between Christine and me. He squinted his eyes at me, raised a finger and wiped at his top lip, signaling something.

I wiped my own mouth, expecting mustard or ketchup, but instead pulled away a pink smear. Christine's lipstick.

"Cooper and Christine, sitting in a tree . . ." John whispered, but the word he spelled out next wasn't K-I-S-S-I-N-G. The *Playboy* again, the education all of us had gotten there.

Paul giggled.

Over at the parents' table, my mother lifted her head and turned our way, even though there was no way she could've heard.

Under the table, Christine laced her fingers with mine. I slid my hand away just as quick, then slid my whole body farther down the bench.

I didn't look her way again—couldn't, feeling whatever I'd felt the day we'd caught sight of her panties as she climbed the tree. But out of the corner of my eye, I saw her hands twitching when she lifted some potato salad from her plate.

Soon, she put the fork down and stopped eating at all.

The days after the cookout were crisp and cool and brilliantly sunny, but I didn't leave the house.

"Why aren't you out playing?" my mother urged me. "Is everything okay?"

I was fine, I told her. Or I didn't feel well. Or I didn't feel like playing. Day after day of it. Through the windows, I caught sight of John and Paul tromping toward the fields or racing those bikes. Out another window, I saw Christine wandering alone, aimlessly.

Thursday brought a heavy storm.

At least then I had an excuse for staying in.

As my mother sat reading, I hunkered down by the window and watched the heavy drops spatter the panes and the puddles beginning to form beyond. Over at John and Paul's house, a face appeared in the window, then disappeared as suddenly, the curtain still.

"Did something happen?" my mother asked. "Because I haven't seen the boys lately. Haven't seen Christine either, and I wondered—"

"Nothing happened."

"Well, is there anything you want to talk about?" my mother asked. "Because I'm here if you need me."

Outside the puddles widened and deepened. I thought about Frisky getting soaked in his pen. I could feel my mother watching me.

"Her family's moving, you know," she said. "Is that what's wrong? She told you that, and . . ."

I didn't answer.

You missed me, Christine had said. And then, *You'll miss me?* Maybe she had indeed tried to tell me. Maybe that was where her urgency had come from.

The rain smacked at the glass now—loud, pelting. Beyond, everything seemed gray. Suddenly, even in the midst of it, the summer seemed a long time ago and the neighborhood far away, as if I was watching it all from a great distance, none of it part of me anymore.

"It's natural for a young boy—a young man—to have feelings for a young woman," my mother said. "You might want to see Christine and talk to her before she moves. I think—"

If it hadn't been raining, maybe I would have run from the house, jumped on my bike and torn down the driveway. I would've raced alone around the block, again and again until I was out of breath, then come home panting, gasping too hard to talk anymore.

But I didn't move, not even to turn back and look at my mother when I spoke.

"Do you know that Milton sometimes sleeps over at Mrs. Crawford's house?" I asked. I couldn't see her house through the rain, but I aimed all of my attention at it. "Do you know why he sleeps over there?"

Only then did I turn, my mother's expression looked like I'd broken something, something that couldn't be fixed.

But she wasn't asking about Christine anymore.

Maybe I'd expected a torrent of questions as strong as the rain outside, but instead my mother stood up abruptly and said she had some laundry to do. She didn't go to the washer or dryer, though, but shut the door of her bedroom. I thought I heard her voice on the phone.

That night, dinner brought the same cloth napkins, the same spread of silverware, the same quick reminder from my mother to sit up straight, but my father said nothing about the day's work or Nixon or anything. His jaws clicked lightly with each forkful.

"The man who was here the other day," I asked, to break the silence. "Is he going to come back and work on the project with you?"

My father looked as if he were surprised to see me. "That deal fell through," he said. "But good to see you taking an interest in business, son. In fact—" He gave a glance at my mother. She didn't meet it. "I'll tell you what, son. Since you've finally become interested in how we *earn* something in this world, I've got a proposition. Get you started on a little business of your own."

"A business of my own?" I said. I tried to catch my mother's eye, but she'd turned away from us both.

"A lawn care business, opening up right here in the neighborhood. Not only the bagging, but all of it—the mowing, the raking. A few yards, easy enough to handle. Fall's coming on, only a few more weeks of mowing anyway, and then next spring, when you're older, we'll start fresh." His enthusiasm picked up. "Not quarters but dollars now. Dollars. A growing boy needs to earn his way. What do you say?"

I never saw Christine again. The moving van came, the boxes were loaded, their car pulled away from the empty house.

Soon, Mrs. Crawford's house would be empty too. A real estate sign in the yard, only a few glimpses of her peeking past the drapes, and then a quick purchase, another moving van heading out. Only years later did I find out that my father had bought the house himself. "An investment," he told me without explanation, when he finally told me at all.

Milton simply disappeared from our lives. The next time my father bought steaks, he bought them from the Piggly Wiggly.

By the time Evel Knievel tried to launch that Skycycle over Snake River Canyon, John, Paul, and I were at least halfway back to normal, as if Christine had never been there. We sat together in front of the TV as the rocket built up its head of steam and flew over the canyon. John nearly wept as the parachute opened early, dragging our hero down, short of his goal.

Ford pardoned Nixon that same day, and our fathers cursed the decision, but none of that was important to us.

Soon *Planet of the Apes* would begin. Soon Paul would get his first cavity, and Ms. Lottie would buy him a *Planet of the Apes* action figure to help ease the pain. Soon Paul would get nearly all of them the same way: the astronauts and Galen and General Urko and even Zira, with her skirt and some hint of breasts. Paul would later claim that Zira wasn't worth a trip to the dentist, even as he idly rubbed those breasts, making crude comments, keeping John and me away from her.

As for Encyclopedia Brown, I . . . well, I gave up reading those stories, believing in them, believing in the idea of becoming Encyclopedia Brown myself. Being a boy detective was a foolish wish, the cost of it too steep.

Things were happening or failing to happen, changing or failing to change—and how were we to know which of it mattered? At that age, how could we have understood what any of it meant?

I was just a child, I kept telling myself—keep telling myself—still only a child. 🐾