

THE RESTING PLACE

cool, dark, and peaceful

Will and Shane were both eight. They were as alike as two pups of the same litter – a little different in coloring, one with a clockwise cowlick and the other with the opposite twist. Their voices were both husky, but Shane’s held an edge of excitability while Will’s kind of sounded like Now let’s see... They had been best friends for only a few months, but it was as if there were something between them that would last forever, and already had.

They lived close by each other in the quiet, new development where you turn onto the quarry road a little north of town. Between and beyond their houses the land rose gently and there were woods to explore, a small, stinky, frog pond where your boots could smack the muck, a tiny clear stream to drink, rock piles to climb, and shallow, overgrown, wet-hole tests pits to probe where slate ledges broke the surface of the forest floor – pits the size of garages which late-19th-Century slate companies had dug to see where best to quarry. The actual, abandoned quarries were more than a mile further down the road, and beyond them the quiet road came to a dead end.

Within exploring distance of their houses there was no place, really, for a boy to drown or fall a great distance or even to become lost, for if one wandered far enough up the gradual slopes beyond the houses he would come to the silent tracks of a forgotten railroad. If he walked one way down the tracks, where whole trees grew up between the cross ties and where tree roots actually lay across the rails, he would come to an embankment of gravel fill. The rails turned as if to avoid the artificial hill – but not sharply enough – and disappeared under the mound of hauled-in gravel. Thirty feet up the bank he would hear the whiz of trucks and cars on the state road a little north of the turnoff to the quarry road.

If he walked the tracks in the other direction he would soon come first to a jumble of black slate slabs on

top of rotting wooden timbers on top of rusting iron wheels, at the far end of which stood the towering rusting hulk of a Shay-gearred steam locomotive, abandoned in the 1920's, along with the quarries and the companies that ran them and the jobs they provided, when one of the stubby wooden flatcars filled with slate, which the locomotive had been pushing ahead of itself, collapsed under its load, spilling its tons of flat rock onto the tracks. Not long afterward it must have been impossible to tell which flatcar had collapsed first. Much of the slate in those flatcar loads had since been carried away a piece at a time by people of the town, many of whose homes had beautiful fitted-slate floors and patios and rock walls.

But anyone lost in the woods behind Will's and Shane's houses would find the old train and would then know to turn the other way and walk to the highway, or to turn and trudge downhill until he came to the new houses not far below. (It might have been a third to a half a mile from the houses to the old tracks.) Beyond and north of the tracks abruptly rose a low ridge that also ran from the highway to the quarries. The here and there the ridge's rise was sheared off to a steep, but not very high, cliff. Above the ridge and its cliffs none of the boys had ever explored.

Will and Shane discovered the locomotive one day the previous fall, a year after their families had moved into the development. The first time they came to it they climbed all over it and pretended all the things they could think to pretend. Shane, with a voice shrill and urgent, kept making the whistle wail while Will called instructions to the train crew and made as if to turn valves and push the throttle stick, although he only guessed what the stick was for. The hulk was filthy with rust and with bat dung and with the refuse of picnics and drinking parties.

The next time they came to play on it they were driven away by maybe six or seven older boys, (probably even teenagers), who lived back in town and who had claimed it for their own hangout. Evidently, on their first encounter with the locomotive, the younger two had been lucky to hit it just right so that they simply weren't caught, but they had disturbed just enough of the litter to leave evidence of their visit, later infuriating the older

boys. After that, Will and Shane would creep, time and again, through the leafy undergrowth, on their own secret path to the train, and would crouch among some rocks to watch and listen to the Doots, as they called the older boys. Shane asked Will: If they're the Doots, who are we? and Will answered: The Hoots! And right there in the rocks they hooted quietly and snickered.

They never saw the Doots do much that was interesting. As they expected, the Doots would drink beer and smash bottles. Not as expected, one would climb from time to time onto the top of the cab or alongside the smokestack and would pee downwind. That was in the fall. The last time they went to the locomotive that fall - and this was the reason they stopped going - one of the Doots climbed onto the side of engine and loudly told an elaborate story about a boy who had disappeared one night when he said he was going to hide inside the engine. He never came home, and it was told that he had climbed inside the cold fire box, (through the iron doors in the front side of the cab), and if he ever came out again nobody knew because the doors were rusted shut ever since. Will and Shane had tried the doors the day they played in the locomotive's cab, and they were truly stuck closed. The story went on: The boy who became trapped inside the engine's belly could be heard moaning at night, and that's why nobody ever came near the thing after dark, because maybe his ghost was wandering through the trees looking for someone to come open the doors and let him - or his body or his bones or his dust - out.

But as the storyteller was spinning this yarn, one of the other boys, who had been leaning out the cab window, ducked back inside and fitted a steel bar behind the seam where the fire box doors met. He pried them open just a little with a terrible metallic creaking. The other boys, scattered as they were about the wheels and on top of the boiler, listened and peered toward the cab. Two or three started to move in that direction. But in seconds the one who had pried the doors stuck his head back out the cab window and raised a long white bone into the air, his mouth moving as if to shout something but no sound coming out. Doots dropped to the ground, those who were above it, and scrambled to their feet and fled, and the one with the bone chased the rest into

the forest with it, stopping eventually to laugh maniacally somewhere off in the trees. Will and Shane discovered themselves hugging one another and then charged back toward the surety of their wooden-walled adult-infested homes.

It was springtime before the Hoots dared to go back. Will and Shane had both turned eight in the winter. They were older now, and braver and wiser, and funnier and bossier. They set out farther and farther into the woods every day after school - as far as the wetness and their mothers' complaints of stuff tracked in would allow. They re-discovered their secret path to the train, and the first time they could sneak to the end of it among the rocks they watched the Doots gathering to hang out. But these weren't the Doots. They were all different boys. They were exploring it for perhaps the first time, and they liked what they saw. One said he used to come here when he was "a kid". Another said his dad used to run this locomotive. Will and Shane both snickered at this one. They both knew the thing must have sat here at least a hundred years or maybe two hundred, but the other non-Doots took that one seriously.

These new Doots, or as Will decided to call them, the Toots, discussed how they could take over this "property" from the official Doots. (They used a swear word in place of the "Doots", but Will and Shane knew whom they meant.) Then one of them said, Hey let's tip it over! I bet we can, with lots of long poles! The others howled and swore and laughed at him, and then one said, Hey, let's start it up! They all considered this one for at least a minute - We'd need wood, someone said, and lots of water because you have to fill up the boiler with water and then start a fire under it. The tracks were blocked heading toward the state road, but there was nothing blocking them going back toward the quarries except a bunch of forty-foot, straight-up trees. The Toots howled over this idea, and then kicked and swore and broke little pieces of glass into littler pieces. Then they all left.

The Hoots, Will and Shane, kept coming back, although the Toots apparently never did. The Hoots listened to the disgusting conversations of the familiar old Doots and often understood none of it. Then one day they

were just coming up the path and heard lots of shouting and screaming – crying even – and realized that there was a fight going on. It was worse than a fight, it was a war! The Toots had come back after all and were fighting the Doots. A dozen or more big kids were bleeding and being chased all over the locomotive and being pushed off, and it was hard to tell which group anyone belonged to and whether either side was winning. Will and Shane huddled in their rock hideout and watched and kept looking toward one another with eyes bugged out. They were not as safe there as they wished they were, either, for two different pairs of boys stumbled just short of the rocks swinging at one another. So the Hoots took the next opportunity and ran. They ran and ran and hopped logs and puddles and scratched their exposed ears and the backs of their hands and tore their windbreaker pockets on branches and finally came onto the perimeter path that ran behind all the houses. Here they flopped down and coughed and panted and cried and exclaimed unintelligibly over what they'd seen.

In the end, the Hoots made a pact never to tell anyone. They both heard their parents discussing the terrible fight after it made the newspaper. One twelve-year-old boy had a broken arm, another's eyeball was badly scratched, several had to have stitches. The town would see what steps might be taken to remove the old train. Maybe a scrap iron company would want to come remove the rails and the train pieces.

So the Hoots really never did go back and watch as before, and later that summer they heard the sounds, deep in the woods, of diesel motors and chain saws and heavy pieces of iron being torn from the surface of the ground, and they sometimes smelled the strange odor of iron being burned into little pieces. Once, when Shane was in the car with his mother and heading north on the state road, he saw the crane parked on the edge of the embankment where it was loading long, flat trucks with stiff spaghetti-shapes of rust.

In the early summer, Nick moved into the neighborhood, and here for the first time was someone the Hoots could impress with their story of the great brawl at the locomotive. Nick was almost seven. Whenever the Hoots told him something interesting, Nick made the biggest eyes of wonder Will or Shane had ever seen. The

perpetual expression of awe on his face made him instantly likable to the older two, and Nick was extremely grateful to have instant friends in Will and Shane.

He was immediately inducted as the third member of the Hoots, and the three went about on bicycles, staying to the streets so that Nick could learn the lay of the neighborhood, until Nick was brave enough to go into the woods. The only bad thing about Nick was his sister.

Kristen was twelve – almost thirteen – with big eyes like Nick that were full of feigned astonishment rather than genuine wonder like Nick's. She was smart and bossy and talked about how dirty and ugly little boys were. Will and Shane hated being called little boys and tried to enlist Nick's help to figure out tricks to play on her. But Nick only wanted to forget about his sister when he was out playing, so they stuck to the things that Will and Shane did best – exploring the forest and bringing parts of it home with them.

Nick marveled at Will's and Shane's ability to slip into the forest and emerge precisely where they said they would. They would say, There's a test hole up here we have to go around, and a moment later, there would be such a hole. Or it would be a junked gas range or a 55-gallon drum or a fallen tree. One time they said, There's an old car over there, and Nick looked and didn't see, and so Shane dragged him roughly by the arm through some branches and said, There! But still Nick didn't see it, and so Shane walked over and put his hand on a thing sticking up like a dead sapling and sure enough, if you studied it hard enough, the thing, not just the vertical part that Shane touched, but the whole thing altogether teased you with the shape of a windowless antique car pressed into the ground. A true pre-ten detective would eventually detect that there were the remains of wood-spoked wheels sticking out of the earth, and seat springs too. My dad says it's a sleeve-valve Willys, Will told the others in a sort of code language, Nick surmised. But the thing that amazed poor Nick was just how completely these two boys knew these entire woods.

One day they told him they were going to the puddle with the bedspring beside it and catch the old bullfrog, and after ten minutes of zigging and zagging through the trees, but pretty much keeping a straight course, they

hopped onto a leaf-littered bedspring and wetted their sneakers in the marshy grass at the edge of a huge puddle or a small pond, according to what different people call such a thing, in the center of which rose a huge boulder the size of a two-car garage, and Will said, The frog lives over here. And Will went over where he had pointed and caught the frog. Will showed Nick how to lay it on its back in your hand and stroke its belly until it fell asleep. Then Will lowered it into the water, and it floated on its back, legs stretched out, for a second or two and then flipped right side up and dove into the murky blackness.

Nick was distracted on this hike, as on several others before, by the rumbling and pounding and shrieking of metal deeper in the woods. So the other Hoots told him of the railroad that was being taken up and of the old locomotive that was probably gone by now. Nick begged to be taken to see this new wonder, and without pausing to get their bearings or confer between themselves, Will and Shane struck out in a direction a little away from the source of the noise. Nick had to run much of the time in order to keep up, so he couldn't ask: If they were going to see this railroad, why did they go away from the sound of it?

But, of course, after several minutes of breathless fast-paced run-walking and several stumbles on Nick's part, they paused among some huge round rocks – some as big as elephants, some as small as a bed or a couch. Will and Shane silently regarded what lay ahead, which Nick didn't yet see, and then they squeezed between two rocks and clambered over a couple more until they stood seventy-five feet from the fossil of a romantic steam engine. Then they sauntered up to it, and while Nick tip-toed around it and said, Wow! real quietly over and over, Will and Shane just looked at it and looked all around it in some uncertainty. Nick eventually realized that something was, at one and the same time, both right and wrong with the scene.

As they circled the monster's carcass, neither Will nor Shane could say exactly what troubled them, and they even shushed Nick after he had Wowed about fifty times. The tracks were still there, and the locomotive was too, although pieces of it had been stripped away. There had been rods and gears down one side of the boiler, and now these were gone and piles of grease lay on the disturbed ground. Some of the things inside the

cab had been taken away, too, but not violently, as you'd expect in a scrapping operation, but carefully, as if they might be used again.

In addition, the tracks had actually been cleared of trees and brush in front of the mounds of slate – that is, in front of the collapsed flat cars – that blocked the old engine's final run. The Hoots started walking along the tracks toward the mile-distant intersection with the state road. The green-topped trees that had been cut down from the right-of-way, still a generation short of maturity, were piled to either side.

Nick asked whether the piled trees were giant celery. Will and Shane ignored him, so Nick asked again. Nick explained without invitation: His mom always picked over the fresh celery in the store, and didn't the trees look just like it?

They walked toward the sound of the salvage operation now, and presently found themselves drawn up against the stacked butts of cut-down trees to hide and watch, like scavenging animals prowling the fringe of a pasture, staring at a machine which sat on huge black tires, the tires resting on a bed of whitish sandy gravel. The gravel had been hauled by dump trucks, visible in the background, and the machine – it was a crane – had a boom extended out over the rails before it. It was slowly tearing the rails out of the ground and stacking them beside the old roadbed, and then driving forward, toward the Hoots, until it was on top of the rails it would pick up next. The dump trucks backed up and poured sandy gravel onto the space where the rails had just been pulled up, and then the crane backed up onto the fresh gravel and reached out to pick up the rails it had just been straddling.

Will and Shane understood how it worked, how the rails were being taken up and were being replaced by a dirt road at the same time, and maybe Nick would have understood as well, if he were less nervous. The three of them returned to the engine and explored it some more. Will was anxious to check inside the fire box, but Shane said, You're crazy – I'm not looking in there! And Will said, Hey, the whole story with the bone was just a joke – they had it all planned! Nick asked: What bone? Shane said: A boy died inside this engine a long

time ago and we saw his bones last year, right in here! and Shane reached for the fire box doors, which were still ajar. Nick said: I'm getting out of here! and he scrambled off the locomotive. Will and Shane peered cautiously into the blackness of the fire box without getting close and saw nothing. They climbed down and found Nick by the hiding rocks. Nick was wide-eyed and said: Come one! Will and Shane just trudged around the rocks and walked slowly toward home. The charm of the old engine was gone for the older two and was lost on the younger one.

For the next few days they turned their attentions to making maps, since no matter how often they took Nick to one place or another in the forest, Nick couldn't lead them back there later. He needs maps, Will and Shane decided. So they drew and drew and made holes in the paper with their colored pencils as the sheets lay across flat but rough slate slabs. They taped nearly two dozen sheets together until they thought if they made it any larger they'd have a life-size map of the area. They drew their houses onto it, and while Will and Shane worked on one side, Nick colored in their houses and yards. They drew the ponds and puddles and streams and the tracks, which they labeled "dirt road" in deference to the fact that by the time the map was done the railroad would be gone.

Nick was fascinated the most with making sure the rocks in the forest were all correctly located and depicted on the maps. Rocks as big as cars – or bigger, if there were such a thing – were his favorite things, and he had spotted many of them in their travels. By the time they had spent several days on map making and had argued about where the rocks should be, Nick had no trouble telling Will and Shane, Look I'll show you, and had led them straight to the white rock like an upside-down boat and the bunch of brown ones that reminded him of a pile of doo-doo six feet high and the one with a shallow cave under it that a bear could sleep in and the striped one as big as a car with two trees growing on top of it, their roots like tentacles pinning the rock to the earth, and the one like an upright piano... He also showed them the edges of long rocks sticking barely out of the ground, ledges, really, which Nick could only think of as flat rocks lined up kind of like a

giant's knife blade almost buried in the ground.

If Nick couldn't find his way back to the frog puddle or the locomotive or the other obvious landmarks, he could march straight to every rock that Will and Shane couldn't remember seeing before. And so the map making became unnecessary. The hikes intended for scouting these features before marking them on the map became boring. Nick showed that he could navigate by the rocks and simply never understood why the others weren't doing the same..

Occasionally the Hoots, although they no longer used that appellation for themselves, went back to check on the railroad removal and were not surprised to arrive one day in time to watch the slate from the four or five old flatcars being loaded onto as six times as many huge pallets and carried away by truck. Even seven-to-nine-year-olds understood the economy of salvaging a hundred blackboard-size tablets.

Finally, only the old steam engine stood alone. The salvage operation was usually quiet on weekends, but one Sunday early in August the forest shuddered to the sound of some new metallic distress. The Hoots were there by noontime and watched the locomotive come apart into great curved chunks of steel that rocked, cradle-like, when they fell to the ground. The noise from the metal saws was screeching and the dust was choking and the light from cutting torches was piercing, and the Hoots didn't stay around too long. It scared Nick, and it made Will and Shane sad to watch.

The next day the forest echoed with the retreat of diesel equipment. The town had removed the nuisance, a scrap company had miles' worth of tracks and tons and tons of first-quality slate. Beyond the locomotive's clearing, the tracks still went on to the quarries, but they would never be taken up. On Tuesday, all was silent. Birds and squirrels and even cicadas and crickets had fled the neighborhood and the surrounding woods, driven out by days upon days, even weeks of unnerving noise. The boys zipped around the streets on bicycles and tried to act cheerful, but by one o'clock they sat on one of Nick's great rocks, still in sight of a rooftop, and stared at nothing. Will and Shane were glum, but Nick just rested his chin in his hands to be like the others.

When he'd had enough of this, Nick said, Let's look for bugs.

Will and Shane turned and raised an eyebrow apiece toward the little one. Yeah, c'mon, Nick urged, and they climbed off the rock, two without enthusiasm, one with eyes great in anticipation. Nick led the way, and they strayed only a little way from the perimeter path, lifting rocks and turning logs and saying *Eeeeyuuu!*

This was the new occupation for several days. They brought Ziplock bags and herded interesting, even fascinating creatures into them. These they took home every day for their moms to shriek at and their dads to identify. Only Shane's dad had any idea what some of them were, or else he made up names for them, but he sounded authentic. They brought home black-and-yellow salamanders and reddish newts, grubs and beetles. They even brought pieces of plants that had berries or interesting leaves.

The most fun came, though, when they were able to roll over really big round rocks or flip really big flat ones. One morning Nick found one of these flat ones, a piece of slate discarded in the woods, and they raised it only so far and then propped it up with a strong stick. They couldn't flip it over. That afternoon they found another in a different part of the woods. This time Shane nearly had his hand crushed when the stone slab broke its prop and fell thickly onto the toad underneath – a wide-mouthed, wart-proud king of the immediate underworld that Shane had been coaxing out. They raised the stone again to look at the flattened toad with all its pinkness squeezed out. Nick had the sensation of having his breath cut off suddenly and for good, the way it must have been for that toad.

Nick, of course, was the one who soon found a fairly square, flat slab of slate that looked much like a squarish version of the manhole covers on the streets. They were out after supper on this late-October afternoon. The new, interesting rock lay in a patch of ferns under a shady, almost dark canopy of high, wide poplars and hemlocks. The rock itself was completely covered by a tangle of sticks and matted leaves and dead ferns. It was distinguishable from the ground's surface only by its sharp-cornered shape raised slightly above the rest of the earth, and by the fact that when Nick stepped onto it, it was one step that wasn't squishy. It was

hard under the snapping twigs and spongy leaves. Shane or Will would have never guessed there was a rock there, and when they found it, the older two just shrugged: Leave it to Nick.

The boys were chest-deep in the tall ferns, their boy-clad feet damp in the soft decaying matter of the forest floor. With an overcast sky, the spot was lushly concealed. Such a rock ought to yield some wonderful creatures.

With all three boys lifting, they were able to raise one edge only an inch. This only let them glimpse the tapered edge of the dark gray slate. The slab rested in a custom-fitted depression as deep as the stone was thick. Shane thought of getting something to use as a pry. Will, the thinker and planner, thought he should stay by the rock and let Shane and Nick go get a pry bar. He would stay and help the others find it again, but Nick said he knew right where it was, so they all went back to Will's garage and borrowed a wrecking bar. It was heavy enough that they had to take turns carrying it back into the woods. Nick led them straight to the exact spot. Again they worked, and finally had the four-inch-thick rock up enough to stick a hand under. But no one wanted to stick his hand in and get it bitten or crushed, so they stuck a fallen tree branch into the gap and pried further along the edge.

In time, they had it pried and propped high enough to stick a head safely underneath, held up precariously by a stout stub of a crumbling tree trunk. Three boys on hands and knees, shoulders pressed against the duff, peered into the slit without actually sticking a head inside.

There were no bugs underneath.

There was no dirt underneath.

There was nothing underneath, except air. Black, bottomless air. They could see the shadowy shapelessness of the loose chunks of sharp-edged shale and limestone forming the sides of the hole. It didn't appear to go straight down, like a well. It was an angular-shaped hole and went sideways, sort of, like a groundhog hole, only bigger, and lined with stones.

A cave! Will said instructively in a reverent whisper. (The words echoed a little in the hollow space underground.) A tunnel! said Shane. We need a light, said Nick. They stood and dusted themselves off.

I can find it again! Nick told the other two, a little exasperated by the questioning look they gave him. So away they walked again toward their houses, briskly, single-file, passing the wrecking bar from hand to hand. As they left the cover of the trees on the perimeter path, they felt the first drops of rain. It was not a sneaky hurry-by-you shower. Nor was it a maybe-I'll-rain-maybe-I-won't shower. These were heavy, splattery drops, even though they weren't coming down fast just yet.

They were closest to Will's house when they came out of the woods. But Will didn't want to go inside, because he'd be made to stay in. Shane didn't know where there was a flashlight at his house. Nick made a face of resignation and rolled his eyes and said, kind of in a monotone: I'll get one. So Nick skirted Will's garage and headed across the street. Will sneaked in the back door of his garage and laid the wrecking bar down with a Clang! He dashed back outside to stand with Shane.

Will's mother called him. Will! Will! Come inside before it rains!

Will shoved his hands into his pockets and scuffed the ground as he obeyed. He looked back over his shoulder at Shane. Shane made a face and struck out to follow Nick. But halfway to Nick's house Shane's dad drove up on his way home from work. He stopped to let his son hop in. Rain spoil your plans? asked Shane's dad. Yeah, was all Shane could answer.

Nick was returning with a sturdy metal flashlight when, from behind a hedge, he glanced and saw Shane getting into the car. He raced on to Will's back yard bordering the woods and cast about for his other friend. From the house there was the sound he knew so well from home: Through an open bathroom window he heard the water running in the tub and heard Will's mother's voice exclaiming, today as every day, about how an eight-year-old could get so dirty.

The rain still fell with the promise of a drenching, but when Nick stood under the trees he was completely

dry. Even though the wind was coming up, he was warm enough, because he almost always wore a light jacket when it was cloudy outside. Something in the little boy said: If you let the rain stop you now, it will rain for days and it will be as many days before you can check it out again; go and see what's under there!

Nick wasn't afraid of anything that he could think of in such a hole. Bugs were all that came to mind, and worms and salamanders and toads. Snakes didn't cross his mind. He knew of snakes, of course, but neither did kangaroos cross his mind at this moment, mainly, perhaps, because snakes are not a problem way up north where they lived, and neither are kangaroos. So Nick turned from the sounds coming out of the back of Will's house and disappeared into the undergrowth. A moment later, not quite running, he crossed the perimeter path behind everyone's houses. In about six or seven minutes, after swishing through low spruce branches and hopping and climbing over pine needle- and leaf-covered rocks – going more directly and a little more slowly than he would have if being followed by his fellow Hoots – Nick came to the propped up flat rock.

It was summertime, still hours from darkness, and still the rain had no effect at the forest floor. Nick knelt and shined the light into the hole. It was a deep, narrow cave anyway, if not a tunnel, slanting off in the direction of the houses. There was no floor to the cave, as such. No packed earth. The rocks lining the cavity were clean and damp, with no dirt pressed between them. There were some skinny roots wrapped around and between many of the stones, and, once his eyes became accustomed to the beam-absorbing darkness, Nick could see that the roots also crossed the center of the cave a couple places. Then he saw something glisten, way back in the sloping tunnel. It shone less like water and more like faceted glass or crumpled metal. First he could see it, then he couldn't, and then he could again. Eyes! Was it eyes?

Nick rocked backward very quickly and sat among the ferns, his eyes wide with surprise, not fright. A thousand feet above his head the treetops swayed in the darkening wind and loose leaves lost hold of their twigs and swirled among the branches. Nick felt one raindrop. He also heard a far-off rumble, but it might not have been thunder. It sounded like a garage door being pulled down by a rope, like the one at his house.

Bravely, he knelt and looked again into the cavity. With an effort, he could make the spot glisten again.

Nick scooted backward a couple of inches and felt the piece of thick wood holding up the rock. A strong man could kick it out from under there, he thought, but he could barely budge it by pushing lightly against it. He stuck his head all the way under the rock and then brought in the arm holding the flashlight. It smelled good inside the earth! Cool and damp and sweet. Lying on his belly, Nick maneuvered the light around and tried to point it ahead, but every time he attempted to get his hand beyond his head he would lose his balance a little. His other hand was out of the hole, of course, instinctively clutching the stems of several ferns. The piece of softening tree trunk which held the rock off the ground was beside his ribcage – touching but not pressing. His belly was getting cold from the dampness soaking through his shirt front, and Nick grew a little nervous about his position. He turned the light off and stuck it's lanyard between his teeth and clamped down hard. With his free hand inside the hole Nick found a friendly-feeling rock straight below him and leaned his weight onto it. He breathed slowly for a few moments and then, in order to help propel himself backward out of the cave, he shoved against the rock inside the hole.

Instead, the rock handle gave way and tumbled from his grip, clattering into the darkness. Nick gasped and lost the flashlight from between his teeth. It too clattered away unseen. Worse, the edge of the hole directly beneath his belly sagged with his small weight, and as his hand flailed inside for another rock to thrust against, he slipped further in so that both shoulders were under the big rock. Then the fern stems let go and his other hand outside the hole flapped against the forest floor like a landed fish. This free arm, which had nothing to grasp, Nick drew swiftly inside the hole too, to steady himself, and as it jerked past the prop, the rock lid – the manhole cover – dropped a little.

Then things quieted down. Only Nick's hips and little legs lay on the ground outside the leaf-lined slit in the earth. If someone had come upon him just then, he would have seen what looked like a little boy being bitten in half in the earth's mouth. Nick's face was getting red and felt full of pressure, as it did when he hung upside

down for too long. His hands had found some more stones to lean on, but whenever he leaned hard against them, he felt them wiggle slightly and knew he couldn't climb backward by pushing on them. So he paused for a long time by holding his body stiff and as straight as he could and by leaning on his hands only as much as he dared. But his body was becoming fatigued and so he had to let more and more of his weight rest on his hands. And of course his arms started to become fatigued and his wrists ached from being bent backward for so long, and so Nick shouted Help!

Help! he repeated, but it sounded so – so contained! – as if his voice were underground... He couldn't even shout so that it sounded loud even to himself. And so he began to cry quietly. Every ten seconds or so he jerked with a great, involuntary snuffle and bumped his head on the rock above.

Slowly, Nick let his body relax and bend at the waist and then let it lie along the contours of the edge of the hole until his shoulders were against the stones in the wall of the cavity and his cheek was against the straight edge of a cool rock and his arms were stretched out below himself, relaxed but still holding on to prevent a further slide. But his arms were going to sleep and needed desperately to be lowered, or in this case, raised, along his sides. Outside, the wind whipped and beat the trees and the undergrowth, and hard rain had begun to soak Nick's pants and feet. Miniature rivulets of water ran through his shirt and out onto his neck. A trickle ran from his chin down onto the tip of his nose and out into the blackness below.

Next Nick tried a squirming motion to wriggle backward. For several seconds it seemed to be working. Then he realized that he was not really moving upward, but that the edge of the hole was crumbling little by little. When he paused in this effort, the thick piece of old wood that still held the rock manhole cover shifted and then shifted again. With the greatest of dread, Nick felt the massive stone press itself ominously, but not very hard, against the small of his back. His shirt, no longer tucked in, was halfway up his chest. The bareness of the rock against the bareness of his back made him shudder continuously.

Fear beyond description made the little boy act decisively. There was no way he could back out of the hole.

And if he stayed still, the prop holding the rock would slowly give way more and more. Nick realized, through his sobs and aches, that the only thing to do was to slip carefully all the way inside and then as quickly as possible, get to his hands and knees and crawl upward and out by going frontward. But it would be a terribly tight turnaround. He would have to be quick but also careful not to erode the walls of the opening.

Nick prepared himself for the maneuver, thought it through, decided on trying a somersault, felt around for the widest dimension of the hole, tucked his head, and let go with his hands.

Gravity should have been sufficient to pop his hips through the slit beneath the rock's edge, but it took more than mere gravity; Nick had to reach down and pull himself inside with his hands. He pulled, and his hips and legs came through, but a second later so did the prop – the fat, crumbly, loose-barked, ragged-ended hunk of tree trunk that had been his doorstep. Nick's feet were held in the closed jaws of the earth, and he screamed one long scream as the post crashed past him, loosing moldy strands of wood like soft horse splinters. He was now stretched out over – for lack of a better word – the floor of the steeply-slanting cave. Bits of the rotting wood went into his mouth and a lot of it went between his shirt and his skin. He still couldn't turn right-side-up. In a rage, he coiled his body like a caterpillar and fought for his feet. The lip of the hole was soft and loose enough, right at the very surface of the ground, that one foot came quickly free, sore and bruised. Frantically, ignoring the dirt mixing with his tears and saliva, dirt in his ears and up his nostrils, Nick tore at the rock next to the surface that was pinning his other foot. The ankle was turned very oddly and it ached. Bits of dirt and several other smaller stones fell free. As Nick moled away the lip of the hole, he was gripped by a sickening impression, more a feeling than a thought made of words: The lid, the manhole cover, the giant slab of slate that was supposed to reveal marvelous bugs and sleeping amphibians, was now the keeper of a little human boy.

When the material that held his other foot came loose, Nick fell a short way and came to a stop, still nearly upside down. A sharp stone jabbed his back, so he quickly writhed into a sitting position.

No matter how he adjusted his position, something poked him, and everything hurt. Two of his fingers kept sticking together. He recognized the syrupy feel of blood between the knuckles, but there wasn't a lot of it. His head had a cut above one eye. Both his feet ached, one more than the other. His canvas high-tops had protected them well, though. He tasted blood and ran his tongue across a bulge in his upper lip.

Only minutes before he been enjoying the wonder of curiosity. Then he was forced into the calmness of careful thought. This had been followed by panic and then the need, like a trapped animal, to escape. Now Nick was angry. There was no object of his anger. He directed it at no one, at nothing – not at himself nor at the rock above him nor at his friends Will and Shane nor at his parents. But the anger was a mighty force within him. He was crying loudly and yelling anything bad he could think of.

Still in a rage, Nick stood up, slowly, in order not to bump his head. With his feet on separate perches on opposite sides of the tunnel, he raised his arms and reached up. The great rock was just above his head. It was not quite level, but was tilted a little.

Nick stood a long time and reasoned it through. He felt along the edge, the lip where the rock met the wall of its cavity. Only in one place was there any trace of outside matter – leaves and broken sticks. This was where he'd fallen in, where he had dragged bits of the world in with him. Nick tried to loosen more debris. He would try to create a hole beside the great cover. But how much of the slab above him was nestled onto that lip of rock – that recess in the duff that let the giant stone lie flush with the surrounding ground? A good six inches in some places? Nick seemed to think that, while the stone was fairly square, the opening had been somewhat oblong, even triangular. There was at least six inches that he would have to dig away from the wall before he could then make any more progress toward creating an opening for his body to squeeze out past the cover.

And so he dug and tugged and slung stones into the hole below. He worked without thinking. After a long while, or maybe only a short while, Nick discovered that he had been standing stock still, asleep perhaps in an odd way. He dug again, but was less sure all the time that he was digging in the same place. Besides, what he

was actually moving was only the small stuff, the pieces like the stone that had originally given way when he rested his hand against it and shoved upward. The giant cover rock was really resting on pieces a few of which were half as massive as the cover itself. Once, as he wept and pulled on a brick-shaped piece of stone, the great lid over his chamber settled a tiny bit. Stifling sobs in order to clench his teeth, Nick pressed the back of his head against the cover and pulled some more on the same brick-like rock, wiggling it slightly from side to side but still unable to dislodge it. Suddenly, several pebbles spilled from around his hands and the slab above dropped even more – half an inch.

Nick still held his shoulders against the lid, but gradually relaxed himself completely and lowered his body through the absolute darkness to where he could sit. For a few seconds he only looked and felt and listened. If the storm still raged outside this tomb, this would-be sarcophagus, he couldn't hear it. If the sun still shone beyond the clouds, he saw no trace of it. The blackness of the hole was total. The sweet dampness that he had first noticed underground now was more of an acrid dankness. Would he suffocate? Would Will and Shane bring someone to dig him out? Tonight? How would he stay awake? Where would he lie down?

Where there had been curiosity, panic, terror, anger, and rage in the heart and soul of a little boy there was now fatigue. And with the fatigue there was also pain and a croaky thirst.

Nick shivered. And he began to moan: *Mommy, Mommy, MommyMommy, Mommymommy, mommymommy mommymommy...* The flashlight! Where was the flashlight?

Slowly and carefully Nick lowered himself kind of sideways further into the hole. He was sure he couldn't just fall straight down, because he had seen the passage; it was slanted enough that he would only need to sprawl and his body would hold against the "floor" of the cave. What if he slipped, though? What if it suddenly opened into a giant chamber, like the caves in National Geographic? Sharp, unfriendly shapes gouged at his ribs and arms as he eased himself downward. Something else began to gnaw at him: What if...?

First one foot and then the other found purchase on a wide, almost horizontal stone that didn't give when he

stepped onto it. Carefully, Nick stood up. He let go of the jagged rock wall and remained standing, his neck just a little bent so his head would clear the "ceiling". Still very carefully, still muttering *Mommymommymommy* Nick squatted without moving his feet, so that he could feel the stone below him with his hands. It was long – longer than he was if he stretched out full-length. He crawled along it and began to feel all its edges. What if he found...? Groping slowly, Nick touched the cool, rough surface of the crumbling old piece of wood that had failed him as a prop. What if he found the remains...?

Still squatting, Nick carefully touched the cave floor right next to his feet. Close beside the piece of wood lay the flashlight. Fumbling frantically, and crying anew, Nick twisted the bulb end and a beam shot forth, bright and strong. Instantly Nick covered the lens with his other hand, and the light shone red through his fingers. He didn't want to cast the light into the depths of the hole just yet. What if this were the place where someone had disappeared years before and not the locomotive fire box? Even if the boy had really died inside the engine, wouldn't it have felt about like what he felt now?

Nick sat flat on the rock floor with his knees drawn up, huddled in a tight ball. Slowly he uncovered the light. Words that before this had never held any meaning for him came to his mind: six feet underground. I'm in my grave! he thought.

Carefully, he passed the light over the entire extent of his cave. He was in a room shaped like a narrow pup tent. Before his face, one slanting wall of the room was actually the flat side of one huge boulder or piece of slate – one he had not even seen on the surface. Up above, if it had protruded higher than the surface of the forest floor, this great rock would have been only a few paces from the slab that was trap door to this cave.

To his right was the chute he had descended to reach this level. He was relieved to see that he could easily climb right back to the opening, if ever it would open. To his left the cave continued onward and downward at about the same pitch and aperture as the passage he had taken so far. It went fairly steeply for a way, with a wildly tilted floor, and then seemed to level out again as it was where he sat. Behind him was another wall,

slanting toward the ceiling to meet the boulder before him. This last wall was jagged and glittery in places. Several long, fat crystals like chunks of broken glass stuck out from the wall. Nick was practically leaning his back against one. How Will and Shane would covet these beautiful rocks!

Nowhere did the beam of his light strike the whitened bones of anyone long dead. But everywhere there were odd, mostly dark shapes that could have been roots or rocks or – or anything.

Nick pulled the old piece of log over toward himself and kneaded it with his palms to try to crush it a little – to flatten it if he could, for a pillow. It didn't give much, except on the ends. Nick turned off the light and laid his head onto the log and – and woke up to the sensation of something dripping onto one arm and onto his chin and neck. He cast about and found another spot to lie where nothing was dripping from above, and he went back to sleep.

Sometime during the "night" he peed himself. All night he cried – deep inside himself – not so that anyone sitting beside him would hear. But of course, nobody was sitting beside him.

Nick thought about clouds. He thought about his dad's guitar and how, even though the man could only play two or three tunes, they sounded so reassuring when Nick was in bed and he heard the strumming. Then he would hear his mother say she was tired of those tunes, and the music would stop. He thought about sugar. He thought about his sister's piercing voice. Kristen had only one tone of voice for her brother, which made everything she said sound like: You idiot! Indeed, that's what their mom called it: Kristen's You Idiot voice. He thought about the smell of new paint. He thought about the throbbing in his lip and his foot and the stinging feeling between two of his fingers. He ignored all of these things.

From time to time he lay still and cried tears, so that occasionally he would sob with a great big spasm. Without knowing how, he went from thinking good thoughts – about things like his collection of paper napkins printed with different logos and his house's front steps and the smell of grilled fish – and slipped into dreaming. He dreamed of a restaurant where the waitresses were all Little Mermaids. They stumbled and fell

with the trays of food, because they were mermaids and mermaids can't walk, and no one ever received their orders, and it made Nick laugh in his sleep. He dreamed he had a book collection, and when he looked, the books were not his books at all, but big, serious, hard-to-read books like grown-ups have – and he cried in his sleep. He dreamed of riding in the car, in the back seat, and of feeling the car jerk suddenly to the left and then there was a bright flash. He lurched upright from the flash and slowly remembered his circumstances.

When he could no longer sleep and could no longer think about digging out, Nick thought he would look for another opening to the cave. He crawled deeper into the earth, first by shining his light for a few seconds, and then creeping in the direction that the beam had shown, until he thought he should stop and check again. His father had taught him this trick. They had camped sometimes in the woods at night, and his dad had showed him how to shine the light ahead for a few seconds, turn it off, and then walk in the direction the light had shown them until they came to a tree or some other landmark at the end of the light's ray. Then they would do it again and walk further. This way a flashlight's batteries could last many times longer in the darkness of the forest. Or in the darkness of a cave, although his father had never mentioned caves.

Mostly Nick's tunnel went gradually down and down. It turned sharply left, then right, went straight for a way and then zigzagged again. A couple of times it went straight down for as far as Nick was tall. Twice more it widened to a space the size of the room he had slept in, but more often, it narrowed to where he could crawl easily but nothing more. And at least twice he had to squeeze between layers of flat rock that nearly crushed his chest as he pushed through. The floor of the cave was usually a tilted slab. Sometimes, though, it was like crawling on knife blades turned on edge. And here and there it was actually sandy and soft – and wet. More and more Nick realized that a trickle of water was following him down, and the trickle grew wider and faster and he had to crawl in it and slide across it when he was crossing slippery flat stones like the one he had slept on. For a while there were no roots such as there had been where he first fell in. But then there were lots of roots and he fought not to become snagged by them.

The urge to move his bowels became strong, and Nick considered this for a long time. Every time he turned on his light he glanced about for a place to do it so that, if he decided to go back, he wouldn't crawl through it. Eventually he came to a tent-like room, the largest thus far, although still tiny. This room had a triangular-shaped floor where there was a natural, out-of-the-way corner, higher than the rest of the floor and littered with crumbly slate gravel, and so Nick relieved himself as neatly as he could. He wiped with his underpants and left them covering the mess – he could do okay with only his tough old jeans on.

At last, Nick came to the biggest tent-room of all. When he stood up straight, he could barely reach the peak of the ceiling with his fingertips. The floor pitched steeply downward and toward the far end Nick saw a pool of water. Beyond the pool rose a barrier, a vertical rock face that slanted away from him but which looked too steep to climb. Nick knelt by the pool and shined the light into the clear, still water, swirled only where his friend, the trickle, ran into it. He lowered his lips to it and drank. In spite of the amount of sand elsewhere through the chambers and tunnels of the cave, the bottom of the pool was nothing more than the smooth rock he was kneeling on. Cold water sloshed up his nose and he coughed on it and spat and choked a little. Then he tried again. It was good! – so good! He drank at least a pitcherful.

Nick hated to walk in the water he had to drink, but he had to go further. Slowly he shuffled deeper into the pool – over his toes, up to his ankles, above his ankles – all the while shining the light first before his feet and then on the precipice ahead, trying to see over it. Pointing his light upward, Nick could see space enough in a sort of vertical shaft that he could fit through if he could figure out how to go straight up. And it looked like the crawl space of his tunnel continued horizontally at the top of the cliff.

It happened so fast, like a car wreck: Still shuffling forward and looking upward, Nick's feet slipped right into nothingness beneath the water. A foot and a half before the cliff face, the flat rock floor he had been walking on ended, leaving a gap. Nick's body went straight down and his butt hit first right where his feet had last stood, but he flopped backward and his head hit too, slowed by the buoyancy of the water. He lay

submerged and felt the cold water that now covered his face start seeping into his lungs.

Violently, he wheezed and sat up and screamed and coughed and spat and shivered. Sitting, with his feet dangling into the drop-off, he was chest-deep. The flashlight lay on the floor of the shallow pool next to him, still shining, its wide, bulb end hanging out over the blackness below.

Nick slowly reached for it. But he was shivering, and his arm wasn't steady. His hand swirled the water. The flashlight tipped before he touched it. Nick started to withdraw his hand. The flashlight quickly obeyed gravity under water and pivoted downward. It tumbled, slow-motion-like, down and down and down into the crevice, wasting batteries.

As he watched it go he stuck his feet out as far as they would reach and pressed them against the cliff face opposite him.

Slowly, carefully, disbelieving, Nick scooted backward, still sitting in the water. When the water just covered the backs of his hands flat against the floor, he turned and crawled away from the pool. He crept higher into the room and dropped. In a minute he fell asleep without even planning to.

All the while he slept, his body jerked and his chin trembled and he whimpered. He tried to remember a word that gave him comfort, but it wouldn't come to him until some time later, when he awoke mumbling *mommy mommy mommy mommy*.

Nick sat up and shook from the coldness. He was not disoriented, the way he would be in his own bed if he'd awakened in total darkness. His clothes were soaked, his body numb. The hard stone floor sloped away at his feet. How long had he slept? Five minutes? An hour? A day? Had he wet himself again? He couldn't tell. And in that case, he decided not to drink any more from the pool.

He immediately thought about the passage ahead and the passageway back. He managed to recall the details of the vertical shaft he had seen in the last beam of his light: Flat damp stone wall before him, rocks and roots above and behind him, bottomless water hole below him, darkness everywhere. If he turned his back to the flat

wall, though, and leaned against it without stepping into the bottomless crevice, he could grasp the roots and any other purchase along that shaft and climb to the top of the precipice. If he fell – well, Nick though, I can swim, but maybe I wouldn't want to bother.

Nick slowly waded into the puddle and with his hands felt high up the rougher wall beside him as he went. There were roots nearly to the floor of this room right next to the crevice where the pool became deep. Without thinking about it much at all, Nick stopped where he figured the drop-off would be in the water, reached forward and felt the wall, then turned and leaned backward over the crevice so that his back was against the short cliff, reached upward where he figured the opening would be in the ceiling, crouched slightly, and leaped half-heartedly, grasping for anything his hands could seize.

They seized a root and a rock, and both held while he kicked with his feet until they found one of the roots dangling into the room. He stopped. He was suspended somewhere over that pool with his dead flashlight far in the bottom. Or was it still tumbling toward the bottom? Nick snaked upward through the opening with far less effort than he thought it would take but with almost more effort than he had left to give.

At the top, he turned and flopped onto his belly on another steeply-slanting slab, much like the one he had been sleeping on only minutes before. This was a new room, he figured, and where he lay was the top of the same rock that made the cliff in the last room. Jagged layers dug into his chest, so he had to scramble and cut himself a few places rather quickly in order not to fall back. Without thinking, for he could no longer think except in spontaneous bursts of partial dreaming, Nick crawled onward.

Even though the original direction of his descent had taken him toward the houses and therefore downhill underground just as he would have gone downhill above ground, he now repeatedly had to scale less imposing versions of that one ominous cliff behind him, so it seemed as if he might be going up more than going down. He couldn't judge. Up a rock-cliff the height of his chest, down a tunnel, around a zig or a zag, up a big rock, down the other side of it, a squeeze, a tent-room, a flat stone to crawl on, jagged sheets of stone to crawl on,

water following in trickles, more roots, fewer roots, no light, no sound but his own scraping and gasping and – and crying.

The stickiness of slowly-leaking blood was everywhere on him. Three times, five times, twelve times his head had struck things hard and either pointed or blade-like – different rocks jutting into the darkness from the sides or from above. The fabric of his jeans wore off at the knees. Then his skin wore off too, in layers and shreds. His jacket had fallen away, he guessed, about the time he lost the light. His chest was crisscrossed with scratches, his shoulder blades were raw, and his chin was an open sore full of fine dirt. Dirt was in his eyes, in his ears, in his shoes, in his pants. At times he fell forward and lay his cheek on the floor and panted. Sometimes he knew he was hungry and began to wish for bugs, even. Without a light, he'd never know they were there unless they crawled onto him. Where were all the bugs that lived underground? Even a soft spider body would be tempting, if he could see, if he could catch one, if he could see to kill it first and probably discard the legs.

He drank whenever he found water, and sometimes licked the rock where he felt a rivulet running. With his jaw hanging and his eyes wide open and staring in disbelief straight ahead he crawled when he could and wriggled through when he had to and climbed up or slid down when these were his only options.

Nick's dad, Jack, called Will's mom, Debbie, just at dark. Please tell Nick I'm coming over to pick him up now – it's too bad a storm for him to run home in the rain.

Debbie had to ask: Will, where's Nick?

Will had to think. He went home when we did, Mom.

Did you see him go home?

Yes – well, not all the way to his door. (Intuition...) He went to get a flashlight. But we didn't go back out there.

Out where, Nick?

To the rock we wanted to look under.

What rock, Nick?!

The one that had kind of a cave under it.

Listen, Jack, Nick didn't come here at all, and Will's talking about a cave in the woods.

Is it okay if – heck, I'll be right over to talk to Will!

Will explained to Jack as best he could how there was a rock flush with the forest floor – flush with two square miles of forest floor! – that revealed a cave or tunnel when lifted. It was still propped up out there. They asked him if he could take them to it. Well, not really. Nick was the only one who knew where all the rocks were. It was like his gift, his genius, to know where all the rocks were. He couldn't remember where anything else was, only the rocks.

The police came and lots of other people. Shane came. So did Nick's sister Kristen, and for what seemed like hours she glared at the two boys with the eyes of a predator. Everyone came through the door dripping like beavers newly arriving through the underwater entrance to a beaver house. What was there surrounding this covered-up hole in the ground, Will? What landmarks? What kinds of trees? What rocks? What puddles? How far into the woods was it?

They made Shane tell his version of the place separate from Will. Their stories matched. At first no one wanted to believe that there was a flat stone out there, flush with the forest floor and covered with forest floor debris, which only a six-year-old boy could discover in the first place and find again in the second place. But Shane told the same thing without hearing Will tell anything. And when the grown-ups asked them what they were trying to hide – did they tie their little friend up somewhere and make up this tale? – Will and Shane broke down and cried and swore they loved Nick and there was nothing else that happened.

The police made Jack go look for his flashlight. It was missing. Then an older man in the room named Pete, someone Will and Shane had never seen before, said these hills were laced with underground crevices and

aquifers and caves, because there was a geological fault along through here. Someone who had watched Jack's house being built, a couple of years before Jack moved his family into it, spoke up and said he remembered how they had blasted ledge in order to go deep enough for a foundation for Jack's house, and by golly, he had seen such a vertical crevice in that ledge himself, just before they leaned the concrete forms up against the hole and poured the wall.

So all that night and all the next day people spread out through the woods, under the punishment of still more rain and the assault of still more wind. Everyone was cold and shaking in a few minutes, but still they searched. They used flashlights in broad daylight. They called to one another behind Will's house all day and again into the next evening. Hundreds of people searched every inch of the forest, from the state road almost all the way to the quarries, and then searched it again. They suspended the search during the second rainy night, and then resumed it again on the second day. Hundreds of people parked their cars at Will's house and used the toilet and made phone calls.

Will and Shane were made to go out with different people and try to find the spot. Someone lamented that it was too bad the rain had certainly obliterated all tracks the boys might have made. Tracks, Will thought. There were never any tracks, anyway. You make tracks in mud. There was mud around the puddles. He thought the guy was stupid.

They were made to explain their map, over and over again. (Will's mom, Debbie, had salvaged it from the garbage barrel in the garage.) They hadn't had time to mark this special, cave-concealing rock on their map. Heck, they'd thrown the map away when it was clear that Nick could find his way by following rocks, the way birds follow stars.

The police issued missing-person reports, of course. More people came and searched for crime clues. Finally, a geologist, a pretty woman named Katrina or something like that came from some college and talked seriously with Will and Shane. She believed them no matter what they said, and they only told the truth. Shane

remembered how Nick had noticed the ridges of rocks in the forest floor. Ledges, the lady called them. And she believed what they said about the squarish flat stone with the hole underneath. There could be many such places in the forest, she cautioned. She knew about the test pits that the slate miners had dug, which were now the many frog puddles or lesser "foxholes" in the woods.

Katrina was also deeply interested in the boys' map. Nick's crude rectangular rocks, solidly colored in with a pencil, were scattered with seeming randomness across the taped-together sheets, except for an irregular, diagonal line of six or so that meant something to her.

She stayed at Will's house overnight and on the third day after Nick's disappearance she hiked all over the woods with the boys and with some other people, mostly men who were a bit too jolly and interested in Katrina herself to Will's way of thinking.

Where they found some of the ledges sticking out of the ground, Katrina hammered on the rocks with a small pick-hammer and listened to the sound they made. She kicked and kicked at the ground, as if she might uncover the large flat stone. She did find some of the rocks the boys had turned over in their search for bugs. How she could tell, after all that rain, that a spot in the forest floor had recently been disturbed, the boys never knew. But she could tell. She talked with the adults on the hikes about drilling "core samples". No one thought much of this idea. Then Katrina left, promising the grownups a "report".

On the – was it the third? – evening after Nick's disappearance his sister Kristen lay across her bed and cried. She had all the lights on and had some music playing – loud, drown-out music without melody – to shake her out of bad thoughts. But she felt sick. She had not been fond of the little boy once he grew out of diapers. He was a loud, stinky, snoopy nuisance. But no child deserved a terrible ordeal of any kind. She believed none of the story about a rock propped up revealing a cave, in spite of the credence given it by the adults. Those other two boys had done something terrible with her brother and they were doing a good job of covering it up. She was sick because somewhere a little boy was enduring a horrible nightmare, or had endured

it and – No! He hadn't died! He was alive, she had to convince herself of that, even though being alive meant he was even still suffering something unspeakably awful, frightening, possibly even painful. But what also made her sick was the suspicion that Will and Shane were telling the truth – that her brother was somewhere underground! – and that her bedroom, in a north corner of the basement of their house and next to the woods, was also was underground in a way – that she was symbolically underground with him. Once this suspicion formed itself into a coherent thought, Kristen went to her bathroom and threw up. That made her feel better, and she turned the music and everything else off and allowed herself to drift off to sleep in the cool silence of her dark room.

Nick lurched along on hands and bloody knees even though he was passing through yet another large chamber. There was water on the floor of this one, and he drank from it mechanically, almost without breaking his slither. He expected to find a deep part to the pool and planned to crawl right into it. The water tasted foul, too, but maybe that was only because of the sores in his mouth. When he came once more to a narrow exit on the other side of the chamber, he crouched and cowered at the thought of going on. Something played at his lips, like a word not spoken: *mommy mommy mommymomm...* Wump! booma-Wump! booma-Wump! booma-Wump! booma...

Nick drew his mind together long enough to regard this new sensation. His lip stopped forming the almost word that he could not remember.

It was his heartbeat, he decided. Wump! booma-Wump! booma- Wump! booma-Wump! Booma...

He listened for a while longer. It wasn't a sound, really. It was a – a feeling that resembled sound, and then it stopped. Had his heart stopped? There was a pause of a few seconds, and then the pattern changed. Wump! ba-bumba! Wump! ba-bumba! Wump! ba-bumba! Wump! ba-bumba! Nick poked his head and shoulders into the crevice he was supposed to enter next.

Wump! ba-bumba! Wump! ba-bumba! Wump! ba-bumba! Wump! ba-bumba!

Incredulous, Nick crept forward. He had to go sideways again, that is, he had to lean his head sideways and then turn his body onto his left side and lead with one shoulder and push with his quaking legs to squeeze his chest through the slit. This was the tightest hole he had yet tried to squirt himself through. After many minutes of this maneuver the horizontal hole expanded just enough that Nick could roll any way he wished, and his hands began to slip in some gravelly sand, like the new dirt-road kind of sand that had been laid over the old railroad roadbed. The crack in the earth that he was squeezing through didn't change any more than that, though. It just ended abruptly, inexplicably plugged with more of the same gravelly sand, piled too deeply for Nick to find any further opening.

Nick scraped mechanically, hopelessly, at the coarse sand with his leading hand, pulling handfuls of the pile down underneath himself. If he could push enough of it beneath him and behind him, he might get further. If there was too much of it – if it was plugging the crevice completely, then he would have made himself a softer bed on which to lower himself and go to sleep forever. At least this gravelly sand was dry, which almost made it seem warm.

He dug and scooted a little further and dug and liked the feeling of the dry sand beneath him. When he reached again to scoop more from the pile his palm met a flat wall angling sharply away to the left that, for the first time, absolutely blocked his further progress. A mile back in the opposite direction, uphill most of the way, lay the stone across his tomb. Here was the other end of the tunnel, he realized: a concrete wall – a concrete wall that reverberated with the rhythm of bad music.

Nick squirmed around and lay flat on his back, so that sand poured into his face and made him gasp and hack and choke. Then the dust settled, and he could hear it again. A concrete wall next to his head with music on the other side! A tunnel of finite length stretching beyond his feet. Two walls of flat cold slate like incredibly thick blackboards leaning together at the top and barely a foot and a half apart at the bottom where a little boy lay on a bed of sand. Nick screamed. Yes, real sound came out, and he did it again. Then he twisted

his body and lay on his belly, his forehead nearly touching the smooth, perfectly vertical concrete. The beat went on.

When it paused, Nick screamed again. He brought his arms forward and scraped in the sand for something – a larger-than-fist-sized rock. Presently he found one and began socking the wall with it. Within seconds, Nick fell asleep. But when the dust from his gravelly bed made him sneeze he awoke and resumed pounding with the rock and screaming hoarsely.

If I really wanted to be heard I ought to back out of this little triangular-shaped tunnel and find some water for my throat, Nick thought, when his mind, bent on survival, was able to think at all. He realized that he was going to lose his voice. But while he had the will to tap on the concrete wall, he lacked the strength and resolve to move. Besides, he was probably wedged in so tightly that he'd never be able to drag himself feet-first into the opening he had last left.

Will's house was awfully quiet. Shane and all his brothers and sisters went away. The whole neighborhood was strangely still. The forest had no life in it either, just as it had been silent after the screeching and roaring sounds made by the railroad salvage work that had gone on for days and days.

Kristen had the eerie sensation of being snapped fully awake, her eyes wide in the gloom, but being unable to move a muscle. She tried to yell, but her mouth wouldn't open, and the sound she intended to make drowned before it ever came up. She fought the feeling, not sure whether it was real or part of a dream. Her ears were alert, though, and they knew what they'd heard – a faraway, muffled scream, repeated after long intervals, and a tapping sound that went with it.

As soon as her body was willing to obey her head's commands – a hesitation that irritated her to the extreme – she sat straight up and listened. The sound had passed. It was as if two people in another house were having a fight, at three in the morning, and for the first time it was audible in her basement room. She sat and listened, but it was all over.

Kristen didn't allow herself to go back to sleep, though. She tried to remind herself of the good things and the funny things that Nick said and did. Nothing came quickly to mind, and she gradually let herself well up with tears to think that she could have found so little to love in such an innocent wisp of a boy. Then the tapping and the yelling returned. Petrified by the suggestion that knocked at her mind's door, unwilling to admit it, and loathe to acknowledge any of the possibilities it urged on her, Kristen nevertheless jumped up and felt along the paneling that was her wall. Then she screamed. She screamed again and again and beat the paneling with her fists and then raced for the stairs. In the darkness her father crashed into her right on the stairway and together they stumbled and cracked heads and landed on their butts on the thinly carpeted concrete floor. But Kristen didn't stay. She leaped to her feet and charged up the steps again, mowing her mother down in the ascent. Jack went after her and found her stomping her feet in the kitchen and pulling on her hair, like a lunatic in need of sedation.

I heard him I heard him I heard him! she sobbed until her parents could understand what she was saying. Her mother shook her and Kristen fell silent, staring wild-eyed in the over-glow of the ceiling light. Come! she said in a pixie voice, and led them back to her room. I heard him, she repeated in the crazed, sweet, small voice when there was no other sound but their breathing. Her forced calmness sounded insane enough that her parents knew she believed what she said. She had been dreaming. Maybe she'd even experienced a paranormal, extra-sensory contact with Nick. (They each decided to develop this idea later on if Kristen were to continue with these illusions.)

Come to our room, her mother said, crying too. Nick's mom had stayed awake for two nights and three days up to this night, and only an hour or two earlier had finally allowed herself to nod off, in her bed, in the darkness. No, Kristen said faintly, I can't leave him. They stood there, the three of them, no one knowing what to say. Then her parents went back to bed, hugging one another and crying as they went up the stairs.

Nick lay still after he thought he heard someone return the scream and the tapping from beyond. It had

taken all his strength to do as much as he had. He rested for a long time and then screwed up his strength to pound the wall yet again with the rock in his fist. Several times when he had hit it his fingers had absorbed the blow, wrapped too far around the stone. This only helped him scream. When he had done it once more he paused to get the effect.

Kristen raced up the stairs hitting every light switch on the way. In the doorway to her parents' room, still in her high-pitched childish voice, she said Come! Her eyebrows were raised in absolute expectation. Still wide awake, her parents followed her back down.

Kristen banged on the wall with both fists, and her father rushed to restrain her. She was making serious dents in the cheap paneling. There! Kristen said, and they all paused. Kristen heard the scream again, because she knew what to listen for, but there must have been too much breathing and rustling of nightclothes for her parents to hear. I'm not crazy! Kristen shouted. Nick pounded back. Kristen's mom thought she heard something, but nothing distinct. It could have been a car door two blocks away, she said. Jack turned back toward the stairs, but then decided to wait and listen with his daughter – to humor her if nothing else. So they all ended up lying on Kristen's bed, listening. They wouldn't let Kristen pound on the wall again, though. She screamed once more in defiance, but there was no reply.

Nick had heard and had been heard. He had done his best. Wherever he was, someone knew it now. He could rest. He fell asleep and knew he wouldn't wake up again unless someone lifted him out of this grave.

When Kristen's parents were both asleep again across her bed she slipped out and up the stairs and into the garage. The morning sky was the blue of a glass Noxzema jar. She found a spade on the garage wall and took it around the house with her to the corner of the foundation outside her basement bedroom.

Kristen began digging, or trying to. She had seen men such as her father do it, and, although they didn't make it look easy, they made it look possible. This was impossible, but still she chipped at the surface. There was a rosebush a little out from the foundation and it kept snagging her orange satin pajamas. She put the

spade under the stem of the bush and pried it out of the ground, then cast it aside. It left a nice hole, so she shifted to enlarge it.

There was profound satisfaction in the digging. Nicky, I'm coming, she sing-songed under her frosted breath. Tears stung her eyes, and she worked with the resolve of someone utterly possessed. But the easy digging didn't last. Within minutes she hit a round granite grapefruit and had to enlarge the hole's diameter many times before she could get the shovel under this rock. Once it was loose she had to kneel and lift with all her might to get it onto the grass. There were more pieces like it, one after the other, and by the time the sun cast a sleepy orange glow over the treetops to the east Kristen was knee-deep in the side yard, prying with the spade tip, sniffing from the chilly air and from the aches in her back and arms and side and from the frustration in not being able to reach him quickly enough. Her pajama bottoms kept slipping down a few inches so her bare heels would catch the hems and yank them further. She knew they were going to be ruined from having the edges walked on and from her crawling in this coarse dirt.

Kristen reckoned that, with her pajamas slipping she was probably showing some crack as she worked, but she didn't care. No one on earth was paying attention to her. She could have been digging in the nude and no one would take any notice whatsoever, least of all her parents. But the orange pants were scant protection from the hard chill in the air, so she just kept tugged at the waist from time to time to sort of keep them on.

Kristen snapped her head up suddenly when she heard a car door slam. Her father was moving toward her across the lawn and an older man was walking toward him from the street. Over here, Pete? asked Jack. Pete stopped on the lawn and looked about as if getting the wind direction, but there was no wind. Then Jack stared at Kristen, stupefied. He hadn't known until this moment that she had been out here working like this. Still, he didn't speak.

It came in like this, said Pete, making a cutting motion with his hand, his fingertips sweeping from the direction of distant treetops right down to where Kristen's torso was fixed in a half turn as she stood nearly

waist-deep in her hole. Pete stopped still when his eyes apprehended the girl in the hole, and he stared at Kristen for a long second. His expression said: What's she doing? Suddenly her father was snatching the spade from her grip and he yelled at Pete: How quick can you get me a backhoe? Or a jackhammer? Pete stammered something and Jack yelled: Now! Kristen, get shovels! Get people and shovels! Kristen stumbled free of the hole when her father jumped in and stood in shock. The spade in Jack's hands tore into the earth, a staccato machine spraying foundation fill straight at the sky. Jack had become a badger, but his human face was running freely with tears.

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