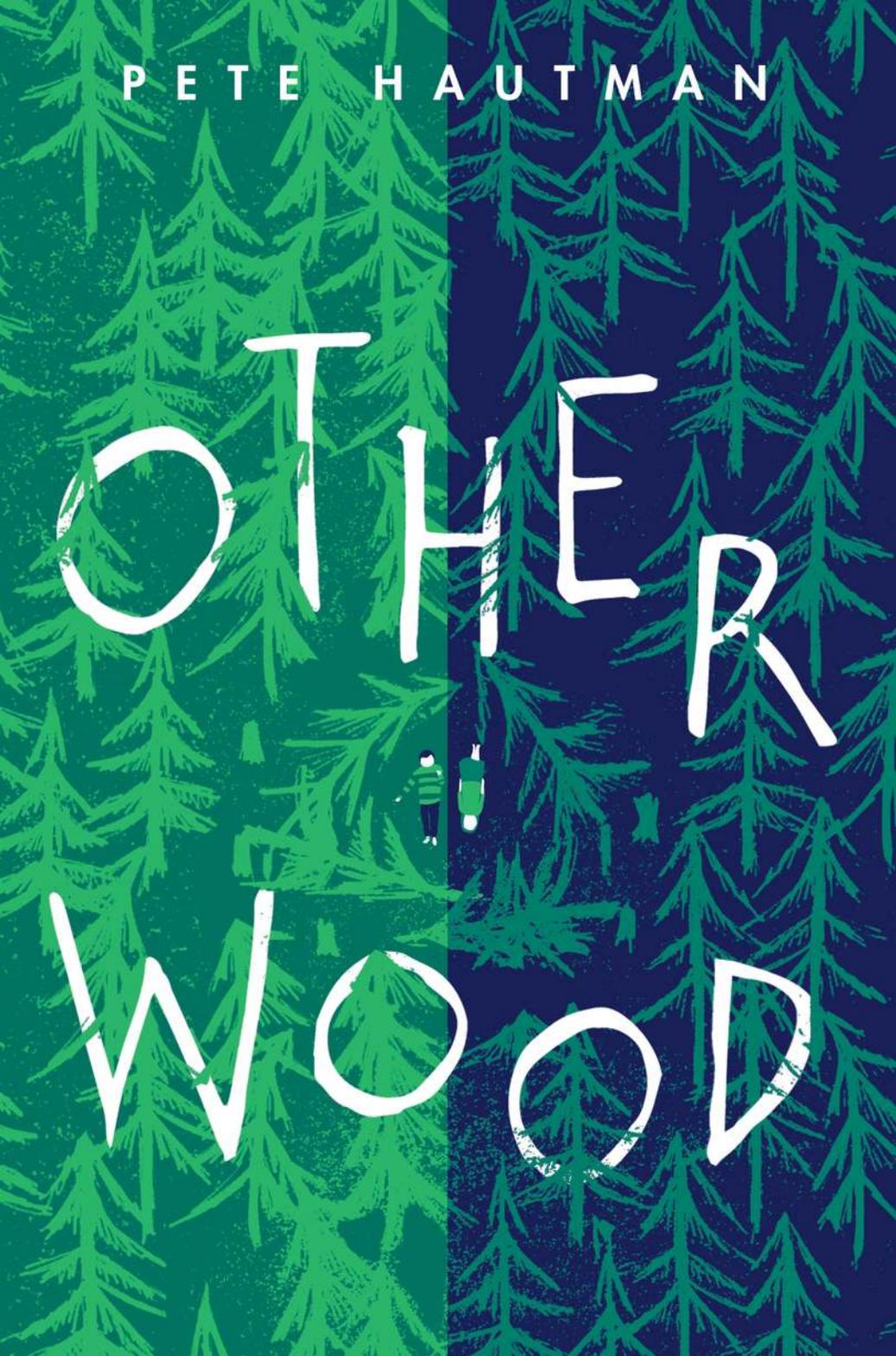


PETE HAUTMAN

OTHER
WOOD



otherwood





OTHERWOOD

PETE HAUTMAN



CANDLEWICK PRESS

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and incidents are either products of the author's
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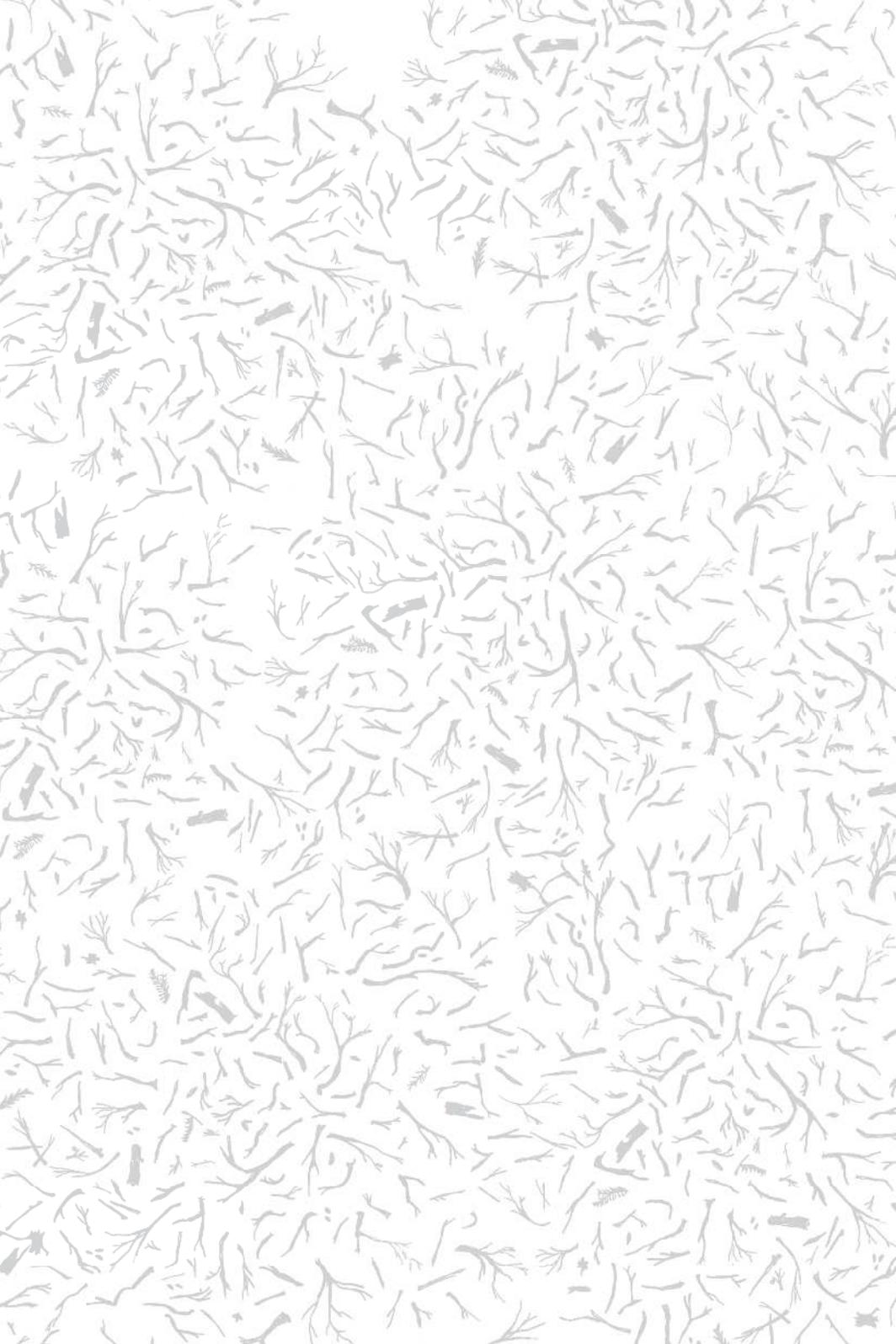
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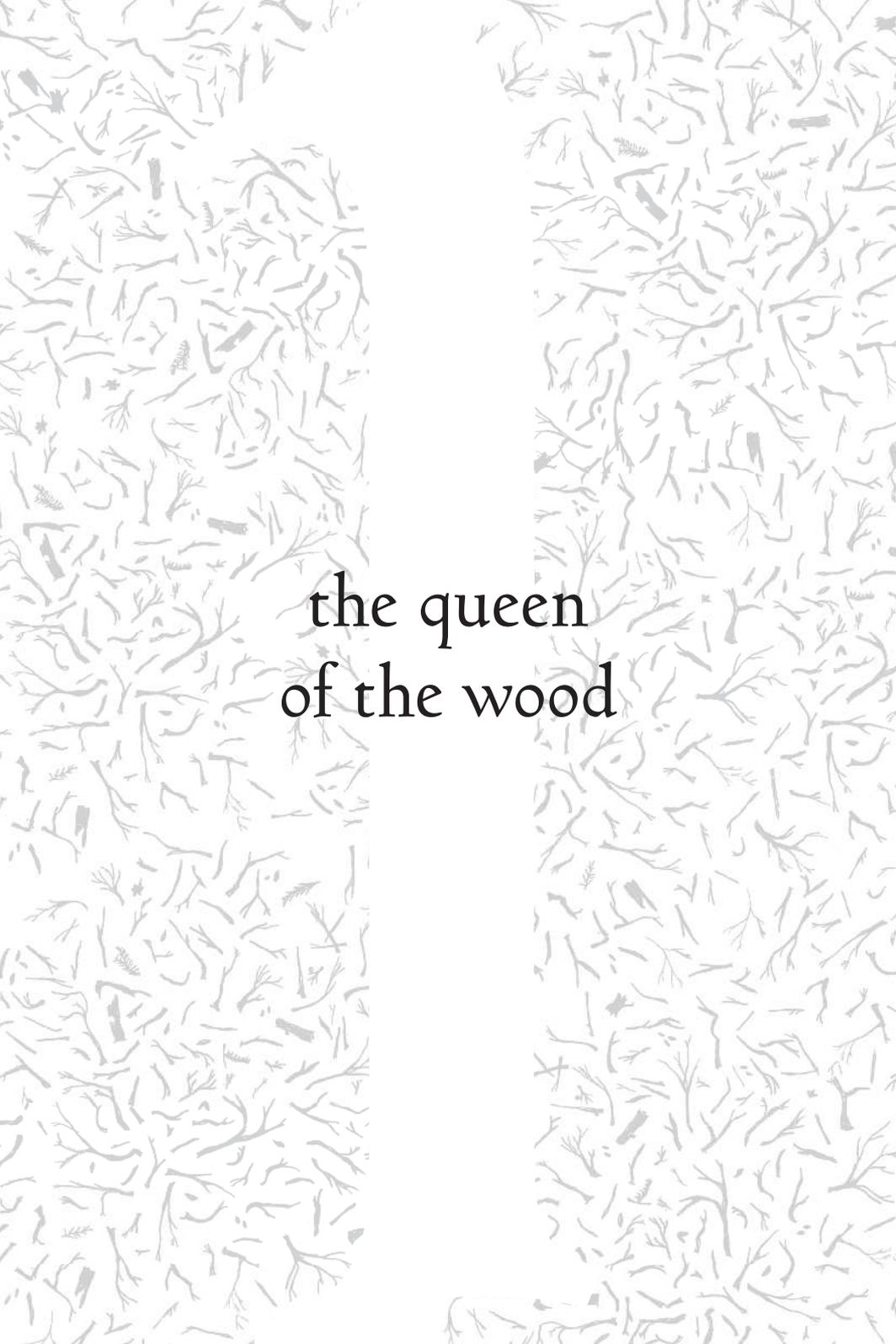


*For the children and the foxes
of Bone Woods*

Is reality simply a dream we share?
Will sharing my story change what is real?
Alas, I will never know.

—*Book of Secrets*





the queen
of the wood



the storm

Years later, people still talked about it.

It came out of nowhere, they said.

Middle of the day.

Black as night.

Sideways rain.

Trees bent and twisted like blades of grass.

Stuey had been just eight years old, but he remembered the storm as if it were yesterday.

Thunder you could feel in your belly.

“Everybody in the basement! Now!” his mom shouted.

Grandpa Zach rushed outside to close the windows on his writing cottage.

“Daddy!” Stuey’s mom called after him.

“I’ll be fine,” Grandpa Zach yelled back. He ducked into the cottage just as the first hailstones came hammering down. A clap of thunder left Stuey’s ears ringing. His mom slammed the door and hustled him downstairs to the basement.

“Grandpa will wait out the storm in his cottage, Stuey,” she told him shakily. “He’ll be okay.”

When the thunder finally stopped, Stuey and his mom came up from the basement. Outside, it looked like another world. Trees stripped bare. Grass littered with leaves, twigs, and shingles. Melting hailstones big as fists. Hundreds of sheets of yellow paper scattered everywhere.

The roof of the guest cottage was gone, torn off by the wind.

They found Grandpa Zach on the floor behind his desk, curled up, arms wrapped around his belly as if he was hugging himself. Around him were scattered yellow pages covered with his handwriting, his crabbed and spidery script bleeding from the rain.

Gramps’s eyes were open, staring sightlessly at the sodden pages. Wet gray hair straggled across his cheek.

“Stuey, go back to the house,” his mother said.

“Why?”

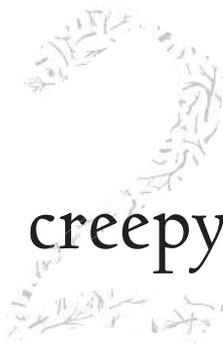
“Just go.”

Stuey remembered that day the way he remembered nightmares—a sort of horrific slide show, one awful image piled on top of another. He went back to the house, carrying with him the knowledge that Gramps, his best friend, was gone. The shock was so sudden and complete that he couldn't even cry. He didn't cry then, nor at Grandpa Zach's funeral three days later.

He couldn't bear to touch the emptiness.

According to the news, it hadn't been a tornado but straight-line winds with multiple downbursts—angry clouds firing air cannons at the ground. The cottage had taken a direct hit.

Half a mile away, in the middle of Westdale Wood, a second downburst had toppled five tall cottonwoods to create an enormous deadfall, but no one had been there to see it.



creepy bent

The day before the storm, Stuey had discovered the fairy circle.

Stuey lived with his mom and Gramps at the end of Ford Lane, in the largest and oldest home in Westdale, a three-story house so big they used only half the rooms. The house was gray. Battleship gray, Gramps called it. Stuey's bedroom was on the third floor overlooking their small apple orchard.

Their house had been built by Stuey's great-grandfather. Stuey's mom had grown up there. Grandpa Zach had lived there his whole life.

The other six houses on Ford Lane were newer, normal-size homes on smaller lots. There were no kids

his age. Stuey's best friend, Jack Kopishke, had moved away last summer.

With nobody in the neighborhood to play with, Stuey mostly hung around with his mom and Gramps, or went off by himself to explore.

On the far side of the orchard was a meadow, and beyond the meadow was Westdale Wood—one square mile of towering oaks, wildflower-carpeted glades, glossy waist-high stands of poison ivy and mayapple, prickly tangles of gooseberry, nettles, burdock, blackcaps, raspberries, and wild grape. There were deer and rabbits and wild turkeys, raccoons and foxes and mink. Butterflies and hornet nests. Cicadas and mosquitoes. Boggy places that would suck the shoes off your feet. Mossy, boulder-strewn ravines. Impenetrable thickets of buckthorn. Stuey had explored only a small part of it. He had never been to the other side.

That morning, while Gramps was in his cottage writing and his mom was in her studio painting, Stuey wandered off through the apple orchard. The apples were tiny green nubbins. Most of them would be wormy when they got bigger. Gramps didn't believe in spraying the trees. "Bugs have to eat too," he liked to say. When autumn arrived they would salvage enough good apples for the three of them.

Stuey crossed the orchard and waded through the tall grasses of the meadow. On the far side of the meadow stood a grove of white-barked poplar trees. Stuey usually avoided the poplar grove—the trees grew too close together, and the gaps between them were choked with underbrush. But on that day he noticed a narrow deer path leading into the grove, so he followed it. He had gone only a few yards when he came upon a treeless circle of grass.

The circle was about thirty feet across and brilliant green. The grass hugged the ground, as if someone had been mowing it. Stuey dropped to his knees and ran his hands over the velvety surface.

He stood up and walked across the circle. His faint footprints lasted only a few seconds before the tiny blades of grass sprang back to erase them. He looked around at the ring of tall, slender poplars pressing in as if they were spectators.

It felt magical.

Stuey left the grove and ran back to Gramps's writing cottage. The old man was hunched over his desk, puffing on his pipe and filling another yellow page with his memories. Even though it was a warm summer day he was wearing the ratty wool cardigan he called his "smoking sweater."

“Gramps, come see! I found a fairy circle!”

“A fairy circle, you say?” Grandpa Zach capped his fountain pen.

“In the poplar grove!”

“Fairies in the poplars?” He chuckled.

“Come see!”

Grandpa Zach tapped the ashes out of his pipe and set it on his pipe stand. He pressed both hands on his desk and stood up. He adjusted his sweater and his saggy gray pants.

“Fairies in the poplars,” he said again, shaking his head. “What’ll they think of next?”

Stuey led him out of the cottage and across the meadow to the poplars. He had to stop and wait a few times because Gramps was really slow. They followed the path into the grove and came to the circle of green.

Grandpa Zach laughed, and his laugh turned into a cough, as it often did. He cleared his throat and said, “It’s an old golf green, Stuey. The tenth hole, if I’m not mistaken. This whole woods used to be a golf course, you know.”

“I know, you’ve told me: ‘The biggest and best golf course in the state.’”

“That’s right. Built by your great-grandfather. My pop.”

Grandpa Zach's father, Stuart Ford, had built Westdale Country Club back in the 1930s. Rich people from Minneapolis and Saint Paul would drive their fancy cars to play Westdale's tree-lined fairways, its suede-smooth greens, its white-sand bunkers. Gramps had told that story often. But the golf course closed a few years after World War II.

"There were twenty-seven greens like this back in the day, but I imagine the rest have all been overgrown. Out in those woods you might still find a few patches here and there." Grandpa Zach bent down and ran his hand over the grass. "This is a special kind of grass called creeping bent."

"Creepy bent?"

"*Creeping* bent."

"I like *creepy* bent better," Stuey said.

"It is a little creepy." Gramps stood up, knees cracking, and regarded the white-barked trees surrounding them. "It's almost as if they're protecting the green. Poplars like sandy soil, and this green was once surrounded by sand traps—Pop always called them bunkers. You dig down under these trees and you'll find pure white sand trucked all the way from New Mexico."

He shook his head sadly and looked down at the soft green carpet beneath his feet. "Now the woods are

devouring the past. When I was not much older than you, I used to practice my putting here.”

Stuey pictured Gramps as a boy, standing on this very place. It was so far away, yet so close and real it sent a shiver up his spine.

“Times change, Stuey. Before it was a golf course, this was a marsh. You know Barnett Creek? Just north of the highway?”

Stuey nodded. He and Jack Kopishke had caught crayfish and tadpoles there.

“Well, there used to be a branch of the creek that flowed south. Where we’re standing now was all water, mud, and cattails. Pop dammed up the south fork back in the thirties and drained the land on this side of the highway. He built our house, and Westdale Country Club.” He looked around with a wistful expression. “I don’t believe there are any fairies here, Stuey. But there might be a ghost or two.”

“Ghosts?” Stuey’s voice quavered. He didn’t really believe in fairies, but he wasn’t so sure about ghosts.

Grandpa Zach grinned. “Got you!” he said.

Stuey grinned back, relieved and feeling kind of silly. Gramps liked to kid around. But suddenly the old man’s smile collapsed and he looked away.

“Do you know what ghosts are, Stuey? I’ll tell you.

They're secrets haunting the memories of the living. So long as we carry their secrets, they refuse to leave. They wait."

"Wait for what?"

"To be forgotten. My father has been gone sixty years, but"—he tapped the side of his head—"he's still here. He never left."



bootlegger

That night at dinner, Grandpa Zach drank a bottle of beer. He didn't drink beer often, but when he did, he always ended up talking about the old days.

"Back in the twenties," he said, "your great-grandfather was a bootlegger."

"Is that like a pirate?" Stuey asked.

"More like a smuggler," Grandpa Zach said. "Alcohol was illegal back then—this was during Prohibition. Pop was sneaking whiskey over the border from Canada. Everybody knew he was doing it, but the old man was smart. He never got caught."

Stuey's mom said, "Daddy, are you sure you want to drag out our family's dirty laundry?"

"It was a long time ago," Grandpa Zach said.

“Not long enough.” Stuey’s mom stood up and began clearing the table.

“So, my great-grandpa was a criminal?” Stuey said.

“Well . . . technically, yes. But when Prohibition ended he got out of the smuggling business and went legit. He used his money to build Westdale Country Club. Chances are the golf course would still be there, but one night, just before sunset, Pop was out on the course playing a few holes all by himself, and he disappeared into thin air.”

“Disappeared?” Stuey stared wide-eyed, looking for a sign that he was kidding.

“Daddy!” Stuey’s mom came back in from the kitchen. “You’ll give him nightmares!”

“No he won’t,” Stuey said.

Grandpa Zach chuckled, then coughed. He took a sip of water, cleared his throat, and waited for her to go back to the kitchen with another armload of dishes. As soon as she left he leaned closer to Stuey.

“He disappeared, Stuey. And he wasn’t the only one. A man named Robert Rosen disappeared that same night.”

“Was Robert Rosen a bootlegger too?”

“No. Robert Rosen was a lawyer.”

“My dad was a lawyer.”

“There are lots of different kinds of lawyers.” He glanced toward the kitchen. “Your father was a corporate lawyer. Robert Rosen was a district attorney. He

chased after criminals, and he'd been after your great-grandfather for years. Rosen claimed that Pop was still a crook, but he could never prove it.

"Their legal battle went on for years. Most everybody in Westdale loved your great-grandfather. He was a real charmer. He gave big donations to all the local causes. He turned a mosquito-ridden marsh into the most beautiful golf course in the state. But a few people resented him because of his past—they thought he was just a crook with money. That was what Robert Rosen thought. Then, that one night, both of them disappeared."

"What happened to them?"

"Nobody knows. Rosen's wife said he'd gone to the club to talk to my father. His car was parked at the clubhouse, and one of the groundskeepers said he saw Rosen walking out onto the course. Some said that Pop murdered Rosen, buried the body, and ran off to Mexico. Others said the opposite. All we know for sure is that neither of them was ever seen again."

"What do *you* think happened?"

He shook his head slowly. "I was only seventeen then, just a kid. I used to imagine he was out there someplace, looking for a way home. Sometimes even now I feel him looking over my shoulder."

"But why would he want to murder that guy?"

"I'm not saying he did, Stuey. But there was a lot of

bad feeling. Robert Rosen was an educated lawyer from a well-to-do Jewish family back East. Pop never finished high school. He fought his way up from nothing, and sometimes he cut corners. He resented educated people like Rosen, and Rosen had no respect for my dad or what he'd accomplished. It was like they came from different worlds, and neither one of them was willing to accept the other. I think those two men hated each other so bad they just hated themselves out of existence."

Stuey's mom came in and said, "Stuey, don't listen to him."

"Hatred is a powerful force, Annie," Grandpa Zach said. "Hatred combined with lies and secrets can break the world."

"I don't know *what* you're talking about! I think you've been spending too much time on your book. You're just picking at old scabs."

"It's *history*, Annie."

"*Your* history, maybe."

"That's right. And *my* history is *your* history, and your history is Stuey's history." He turned to Stuey, bristly eyebrows coming together over his long nose. "We're all connected. My father might be gone, but he left something of himself behind. You spend enough time out in those woods, you'll see him."

"Stop filling his head with rot, Daddy."

“Don’t *Daddy* me, Annie. The dead live on in our memories. I remember the last time I saw my father like it was yesterday. He’ll haunt those woods until the day I die. I watched those trees grow up on Pop’s grave.”

“You mean he’s buried in the woods?” Stuey asked.

“Who knows? It’s the last place he was ever seen. He might still be floating around out there.”

“Is that why the golf course closed? Because of ghosts?”

Grandpa Zach shrugged. “The past doesn’t go away just because we want it to. If there *are* ghosts we’d never know it because real ghosts look exactly like real people.”

“Have you seen them?” Stuey asked.

Grandpa Zach closed his eyes, and when he opened them he seemed to be staring at something far away. “I’ve seen people who are gone,” he said. “If they weren’t ghosts, then I don’t know what they were.”

“Your grandfather is being ridiculous,” said his mother. “There are no ghosts.”

The old man’s eyes snapped back into focus. He forced an unconvincing smile onto his face.

“Your mother’s right, Stuey. There are no ghosts. The golf course closed because Pop spent most of his money building it, and the rest on lawyers defending himself from Robert Rosen. We kept it open for a couple years after Pop disappeared. I think Mother expected Pop to walk in the door at any time with that big smile on his

face. Boy, would she have let him have it! But Pop never came back, and there were a lot of debts. In the end, the county took the golf course because we couldn't pay the property taxes. All they let us keep was this house and the ten acres it's sitting on.

"When I was younger I thought that one day I'd make a pile of money and buy the land back. That's what Pop would have wanted—to keep it in the family. Maybe you can do that, Stuey."

"I'll be a bootlegger!" That sounded like the coolest thing ever.

"No you won't," his mom said.

"A bootlegger and a murderer!" he said, just to bug her.

"Honey, we don't know that anybody killed anybody," his mom said. "All we have is a sixty-year-old rumor being kept alive by an eighty-year-old crank."

"I'm only seventy-nine," Grandpa Zach muttered.

"Well, you're *acting* like you're six." She picked up their water glasses and went back to the kitchen.

Gramps looked after her and sighed. "I'll always wonder what would have happened if Robert Rosen hadn't followed Pop out onto that golf course that night. Every time we make a decision there's a fork in reality, an infinity of possibilities. There are many worlds, but we can only know the one we live in. Maybe in one world

my father killed Rosen, and in another reality it was the opposite. Maybe there are worlds where people are still out there hitting golf balls.”

“So nothing is real?” Stuey asked.

“Everything is real. And not real,” Grandpa Zach said. “The weatherman says there’s a big storm coming tomorrow from the west. Chances are it’ll knock down some trees in the woods. If a tree falls and you don’t see it or hear it, did that tree really fall? In your reality, the tree still stands until one day you find it lying on the ground. In that moment the known and the unknown become one reality. The tree fell.” He chuckled. “That would be a good name for my book: *The Tree Fell*.”

Grandpa Zach had been working on his book ever since Stuey could remember, filling sheet after sheet of lined yellow pages.

“It’s our history,” he had once told Stuey. “Things nobody knows. Things nobody would believe. My *Book of Secrets*.”

Stuey and his mom recovered hundreds of those yellow pages after the storm, peeling them off the side of the house, pulling them from apple tree branches, picking them out of bushes and off the grass as far away as the meadow. They dried the pages, but the ink had run and smeared. Most of it was illegible.

“I don’t know why we bothered,” she said with a sigh. “Daddy always said nobody would want to read it anyway.”

“I’d read it,” Stuey said.

“Maybe someday.”

That meant never. She put the dried pages in a large cardboard box, taped it shut, and carried it upstairs, her clogs going *clunk-ka-clunk* on the steps. She always wore clogs around the house.

Stuey followed her up to Grandpa Zach’s bedroom. The room was crowded with mementos of a long life: a sword he had brought back from Morocco, a baseball trophy from high school, and an ancient leather bag of golf clubs that had belonged to his father. The tall bookcase held lots of travel books. Gramps had liked to read about northern Africa, where he’d spent time in the navy. There were also several books with *quantum* in the title. Gramps had been fascinated by quantum physics. He had tried to explain it to Stuey—something about atoms and time and space and how two opposite things could be true at the same time.

We live in different worlds, different realities, Gramps had said.

Was Gramps in a different world now? Was he someplace where he was not dead?

The thought made the back of Stuey’s neck prickle.

Next to the bookcase was a stand with Gramps's collection of briar pipes. Stuey could still smell the faint aroma of pipe tobacco. There were framed photos on the walls: Gramps's parents in front of the clubhouse, Gramps in his navy uniform, Gramps with his wife, Lois, the grandmother Stuey never knew. She had died when he was two. Everything in the room had a story. Stuey had heard a lot of them. He wished he could hear more.

When Grandpa Zach had been alive, the room had felt alive. Now it felt dead and brittle, as if an earth tremor or a sudden breeze might collapse it all into dust.

"I don't get why he had to die," Stuey said.

"He was old, Stuey," his mom said. "He had a bad heart, and I guess the storm was too much for it. It was his time."

She set the box of papers on the bed.

"Maybe I'll go through these sometime," she said. "Right now I just can't."

"Me neither," Stuey said as they left the room—but he thought one day he might.

His mom must have heard something in his voice. She gave him a sharp look and said, "I don't want you messing around with your grandfather's things, Stuey." She closed the door and added, "This room is off-limits."



the deadfall

The following summer, on the day before his ninth birthday, Stuey packed a peanut butter sandwich, a box of cranberry juice, and an apple into his backpack. He looked out his bedroom window at the orchard, where Grandpa Zach was buried. He could see the granite headstone poking up through the tall grass. None of the other houses in the neighborhood had a grave in the backyard, but his mom said it was what Gramps would have wanted.

Stuey had never hiked all the way to the other side of the woods. Today, he decided, he would do it. One last adventure before he turned nine. He wished he had someone to go with him, but after Jack had moved away,

he didn't have any friends in the neighborhood. He was on his own.

He shrugged on his backpack and went to check on his mom. She was in her painting studio lying on the tattered old sofa staring up at the ceiling. She'd been doing that a lot lately.

Stuey backed out of the room and went outside. The sun was shining above, but it was cloudy to the west.

He circled the crumbling stone foundation of Grandpa Zach's writing cottage. At the gravestone he stopped and remembered Gramps as he had been, smoking his pipe and telling stories about the distant past.

"I'm going all the way to the other side of the woods," Stuey said. He didn't really think Gramps could hear him, but it seemed like a good idea to tell some adult where he was going. His mom would say it was too far, but Gramps would understand.

He headed through the orchard and across the meadow to the poplar grove. He hadn't visited the fairy circle since the time he was there with Gramps.

The circle of green felt smaller. The poplars were moving in. *The woods are devouring the past*, as Gramps had said. Stuey imagined his grandfather as a young man with a putter, trying to knock a ball into a hole. What had happened to the hole? He got down on his hands and knees and crawled around, searching. The grass, still

slightly moist with morning dew, felt nice and cool. He soon found a hand-size dimple near the center of the circle. Had this been the hole? If so, it had filled in and the grass had grown over it.

He sat back on his heels and looked around. *If there were such things as ghosts or fairies, he thought, this is where they would come.*

It was easy to imagine fairies dancing on this circle of green. Of course there were no such things as fairies. He still hadn't made his mind up about ghosts.

A chipmunk appeared from the hollow of a fallen tree at the edge of the green.

Stuey said, "Hello."

The chipmunk darted back into its hollow.

There were no such things as talking animals either.

"See you later," Stuey said.

From far above came the scolding chatter of a red squirrel. Stuey smiled. He liked animals. He had seen deer, raccoons, foxes, and skunks in the woods. Nothing to be afraid of, although he knew to be careful around skunks.

A cloud crossed the sun. He looked up at the sky. It was still mostly blue, but the clouds were moving in from the west. It looked like rain. He thought about going home, but he'd only just started.

He left the grove and headed deeper into the woods,

up a low ridge and onto the oak knoll that marked the eastern edge of their ten acres.

By the time he came down the far side of the knoll, the clouds had completely covered the sky. He heard the faint patter of raindrops hitting the leaves and branches above. He pushed through a chest-high snarl of gooseberry. The prickly stems tugged at his jeans and T-shirt and scratched his arms. He ran to a grove of larger trees and huddled against the trunk of a basswood.

Raindrops struck the dry leaves and soil with a barely audible hiss, the sort of fine, gentle rain that could last for hours. A faint fog, barely visible, gathered in the low areas. He would be soaked no matter what, so he decided to keep going.

Once he gave himself up to the rain, walking was a pleasure. The wet leaves were silent beneath his feet. Rich, earthy smells rose up from the forest floor.

He came to a large fallen tree and turned right to go around it, but ran into a thick copse of buckthorn and had to go around that too. It was as if the woods was directing him, turning him right and left. He followed a winding deer trail up a rise, then down into a low area where the fog had gathered in a chest-high layer.

Cool mist beaded on his face and arms; it was like walking through a cloud. Tall grasses tugged at his sodden jeans. He had gone only a short distance when a

massive, dark shape appeared before him. He stopped, not sure what he was seeing.

He took a few more steps and saw that it was an enormous deadfall. Five trees had fallen against one another to form a teepee shape more than thirty feet high, crowned with a tangle of dead limbs and branches. Their twisted, snarly root-balls were packed with earth and chunks of rock. Ranks of mushrooms sprouted from the trunks.

Stuey circled the deadfall. Something must have happened to make all those trees fall at the same time. He thought about the big storm last summer. The downburst that had ripped the roof off the cottage and killed his grandfather—had the same thing happened here?

He remembered what Gramps had told him:

If a tree falls and you don't see it or hear it, did that tree really fall? In your reality, the tree still stands until one day you find it lying on the ground. In that moment the known and the unknown become one reality. The tree fell.

Were these the trees he had been talking about?

Stuey spotted a gap between two of the trunks. He took off his backpack and, dragging it behind him, wriggled through.

Inside the deadfall was an open space, quiet and dry, about twelve feet across. Above his head the dead branches formed a crude lattice, letting in just enough light to see. In the center of the space was a rectangular

slab of rock the size of a mattress, partially buried in the earth. Stuey stepped onto the slab and turned slowly in a circle. He raised his arms over his head and touched the tangled branches above him.

It felt like a church shrunk down to kid size. The stone slab was like an altar, but there were no pews and no people. His own private domain. He sat down on the slab and stretched out on his back. The stone was deliciously cool. Slivers and speckles of gray sky showed through gaps in the branches. The sound of rain felt distant and unreal. He closed his eyes.

The stone beneath him felt alive. He imagined he was in a vessel, a ship made of trees, rising and falling on a gentle sea, driven by wind and magic. He heard distant music playing over faint voices. What were they saying? He listened closely. It sounded like men arguing, but the words were muffled and blurry:

Abblesableabblegabblesabbada . . .

Gramps had said that there were ghosts in the woods. Was that what he was hearing?

Abblesablegabblesa . . .

For a moment he thought he heard Gramps's voice among them.

He opened his eyes and sat up. The voices became the hiss of rain on leaves.

“Grandpa?” he said. There was no echo; the dead

branches swallowed his voice. He turned his head to the side. Wisps of mist had gathered around the stone.

“Grandpa?” He said it louder.

Nothing. Stuey could feel his heart beating. He looked out the opening at the wet, gray woods, then back at the dry stone slab. The mist was gone. He laughed at himself.

“Fairy tales,” he said. “You got me again, Gramps.”



5 elly rose

Stuey stayed in the deadfall and waited out the rain. There were three small nooks that looked like places to sit. Two fit him perfectly, one was too tight. He sat in the largest nook and ate his apple and drank his cranberry juice, imagining he was a bootlegger being shipped to Alcatraz. He stood on the stone slab and rode it like a surfboard. One of the branches moved up and down like a lever: up for forward, down for reverse. Eventually the rain stopped. Shards of sunlight sprinkled the stone slab, and the birds began to sing.



It took a while to find his way home. He finally came out of the woods behind the Charlestons', their nearest neighbor. His mom was calling from the orchard. He ran toward her voice.

"I'm here," he yelled back.

She spun and clapped a hand to her heart. "Stuey! Where have you been! Look at you! You're drenched!"

"I was in the woods," Stuey told her.

"I've been calling you!"

"I got kind of lost."

"You've been gone for hours!"

"I'm sorry," Stuey said, even though he wasn't sorry at all.

She looked at him and sighed. "Come on. Let's get you a bath and into some dry clothes. The Frankels have invited us to a barbecue."

"Who are they?"

"Hiram and Maddy Frankel. They moved to Westdale last May. Mr. Frankel is on the preservation society with me."

Stuey's mom had joined the Westdale Preservation Society a few months earlier when the county announced that they were considering selling Westdale Wood to a shopping mall developer.

"The Frankels live on the other side of the woods in the Westdale Hills neighborhood."

“Will there be any other kids there?”

“They have a girl about your age. Her name is Elly Rose.”

The Frankels’ house backed right up against the opposite side of Westdale Wood, only a mile from Stuey’s house, but two miles away by car. There were about twenty people gathered in the fenced backyard, mostly adults: the Charlestons, the Dunphies, the Kimballs, and some people he didn’t know. The only kids he saw were the Kimballs’ teenage daughter, Teresa, the five-year-old Charleston twins, and a couple of babies.

Mr. Frankel, tending the grill, had incredibly hairy legs. He was wearing an apron with pictures of hot dogs printed on it. Mrs. Frankel wore bright-red lipstick and a black-and-white dress that made her look like a zebra. She talked really loud. Stuey hung back during the greetings, but Mrs. Frankel caught sight of him and let out a squeal.

“This must be Stuart!” She loomed over him, streaming waves of perfume. “Look at that hair! It looks like he’s got a haystack on his head.”

She reached for him; Stuey ducked back behind his mother. Mrs. Frankel emitted a braying laugh.

“Elly Rose, come meet the Becker boy!”

A girl with curly black hair came over to examine

Stuey, peering into his face with enormous eyes so dark brown they appeared to be all pupil. She was the opposite of his husky, pale, haystack-haired self. Her thin body was all angles and points, and she moved in quick jerks. Stuey thought she looked like an elf.

“Elly Rose, this is Stuart Becker.”

“It’s just Stuey,” Stuey said in a near whisper.

“You can call me Elly,” the girl said, “unless it’s a formal occasion.”

Mrs. Frankel moved on to her next victim. Elly Rose’s eyes bored into him. She stepped closer. He felt as if she was looking right through his skin. He looked away.

“You’re shy,” she said. “But I like your nose.”

Stuey had never thought about his nose before. “My nose?”

“It’s a button,” Elly Rose said. She reached out and touched the tip of his nose. Her mouth twitched to the side in a half smile. “There. Now you’re frozen.”

“No I’m not,” Stuey said, waving his arms to prove it.

“You’re boring,” Elly said, sticking out her bottom lip.

Stuey saw that he had disappointed her, so he pretended to be frozen. “Can’t . . . move,” he said in a strangled voice.

“That’s better.” Elly grinned and touched his nose again. “I have unfrozen you. You are free.”

“Thank you,” said Stuey.

“My birthday is tomorrow,” Elly said. “If you promise not to be boring you can come to my party. I’m going to be nine.”

Stuey stared at her in shock.

“My birthday is tomorrow,” Stuey said.

“I just said that.”

“No, I mean *my* birthday is tomorrow!”



the preservation society

Since they had the same birthday, Elly declared that they should be best friends.

Stuey was startled by the offer.

“Unless you already have a best friend,” she said after a moment.

“I used to,” he said.

Jack Kopishke had moved away to Des Moines two summers ago. Stuey had friends at school, but they were just school friends, and school was out for the summer. Grandpa Zach had been his best friend after Jack left. Now Gramps was gone.

“But not anymore,” he added.

“Then you need a new one,” she said.

“Okay.” He didn’t exactly feel like they were best friends yet, but he was willing to give it a try.

“Maybe we were born at the exact same minute.” Elly’s eyes widened. “We could be twins! I always wanted to be a twin.”

“Where were you born?” he asked.

“In New York.”

“We’re probably not twins then, because I was born here. Besides, we look really different.”

Elly frowned, then brightened. “We could be soul mates!”

“What’s a soul mate?” he asked.

“It means we have a special connection and we can’t have any secrets from each other,” Elly said.

Stuey thought about the deadfall. “I only have one secret,” he said.

“What is it?”

“I can’t tell you. It’s secret. A secret place.”

“Where is it?”

Stuey felt himself getting stubborn. “If I told you, it wouldn’t be a secret,” he said.

Elly stared at him fiercely. “Okay,” she said after a moment. “We can still be best friends. But we only get one secret each.”

“What’s your secret?” he asked.

“I can’t tell you.”

“If I ever tell you my secret you have to tell me yours.”

“Okay, deal. So . . . do you have a dad?”

“I did, but he died in a car accident when I was a baby. Mom and me moved in with my grandpa, but Gramps died too. Just last year. Now it’s just me and my mom.”

“That’s tragic,” Elly said.

“It’s okay. I never really knew my dad. And Gramps was really old. My mom says it was his time.”

Elly was silent for a few seconds, then she said, “I have a cat. His name is Grimpus. He only has one eye.”

Stuey looked around. “Where is he?”

“Hiding. He doesn’t like people. Except me.”

“What color is he?”

“Mostly invisible, but he’s gray sometimes too.”

Stuey and Elly ate their hamburgers and potato salad at the kids’ table, a smaller version of the long picnic table where the adults were gathered. Stuey’s mom was talking about how the Westdale Preservation Society was trying to save the woods from developers.

“We don’t need another gigantic shopping mall full of trashy gift shops and fast-food joints,” his mom was saying.

Stan Kimball spoke up. “Anne, I agree with you that nature is important. That’s why Forest Hills Development is promising to preserve part of Westdale Wood as a public park.”

“I’ve seen their proposal,” Elly’s dad said. He was on the preservation society too. “They’re promising to turn ten acres into a glorified picnic area. That means they’ll flatten the other five hundred ninety acres! Do you really want to look out your window and see the back end of a megamall?”

Mr. Kimball shrugged. “People have to shop somewhere. I’m sure Forest Hills can come up with a plan that will make everybody happy.”

“Or nobody happy,” Stuey’s mom said.

“What are they talking about?” Elly asked.

“The preservation society,” Stuey said.

“Borrrrrring!”

“I guess they don’t want the woods to turn into a shopping center.”

“That won’t happen,” Elly said.

“How do you know?”

“Because I am the Queen of the Wood, and I won’t let them.” She leaned closer to Stuey and whispered, “I have magical powers.”

Elly’s intensity was irresistible. He liked that she was the magical Queen of the Wood, and that she said things out loud that he only let himself imagine.

“I know where there’s a fairy circle in the woods,” he said.

“What’s that?”

“I’ll show you sometime.”

“I found a turkey nest with eighteen eggs in it.”

“Do you go in the woods a lot?”

“All the time,” Elly said.

“Me too. I saw a fox once.”

“Foxes are my loyal subjects.”

“What about raccoons?”

“I don’t like them. They tip over our garbage.”

The adults were getting louder—especially Stan Kimball.

“I think it’s great that you want to save the trees and stuff, but this development could lower property taxes for every one of us, not to mention all the jobs it’ll create.”

“Doesn’t your firm handle real estate and property law, Stan?” said Mr. Frankel.

“What are you suggesting?”

“Your firm *would* pick up a lot of clients, right, Stan?” Mr. Frankel said.

“*Everyone* would benefit! You have to look at the big picture—you can’t stop progress!”

“You call tearing down a six-hundred-acre forest *progress*? I call it a travesty.”

“Look, Hiram, you can hug all the trees you want, but you have to face reality. What you call a forest I call an overgrown derelict golf course full of mosquitoes and ticks and poison ivy and Lord knows what else. Would

you let *your* kid play out there?” He gestured toward the gate leading into the woods.

“As a matter of fact, Stan, I do,” said Elly’s dad.

“He lets me go in the woods,” Elly whispered to Stuey, “but my mom doesn’t like it.”

“My son plays out there all the time,” Stuey’s mom said. “Better than having him staring at a screen all day long like some kids.” She looked pointedly at Teresa Kimball, who was texting on her cell phone.

Stan Kimball’s face and neck had turned red.

“I suppose you’d as soon forage for berries and roots to feed your family, but most people want more. Civilization is happening whether you like it or not!”

“I think his eyeballs might explode,” Elly whispered.

Stuey didn’t laugh. Stan Kimball scared him, and he didn’t like him yelling at his mom.

“Calm down, Stan,” said Mr. Frankel. “We’re trying to have a meaningful conversation here!”

“Why are they all talking so loud?” Elly said. Stan Kimball was going on about taxes and jobs again.

“I think whoever yells the loudest wins,” Stuey said.

Elly Rose said, “Do you want to see my magic swing?”