

One

Dad began to dig the dam behind the house the summer I was nine, the summer my sister Adrian died, the summer Uncle Oliver came to live in the attic. Dad planned to fill the gully with a twenty-foot-deep pond, but he was waiting until Oliver arrived to really get started on the excavation, but because no one had seen Oliver, and because Dad often started endlessly complicated schemes, Mom didn't believe that any quantity of water, a mud puddle, much less a pond, could collect behind the intermittent trickle seeping down the gully. Even though it rained all winter, the water didn't hang around on our hill. By the summer, our well went dry and the moss growing on the roof of the house turned as stiff as an old brush.

Dad constantly had something going on. He planned to hike for three months along the old Pacific Crest Trail from Canada to Mexico, packing his supplies on a llama.

A floppy wool Inca hat hung from a nail in the closet. Dad drew diagrams on diner napkins for a flying machine constructed with the 1940s Schwinn that hung upside down from the rafters in the storage shed and some plastic gallon water-bags he planned on inflating with hydrogen. When the well ran dry during the dry summers, we filled the gallon bags with drinking water at the trailer park spigot. Dad interviewed the farmers at the Busy Bee Diner while waiting for Mom to finish her shift. The farmers wore overalls and rain jackets. They drank coffee and talked with a drawl about feet of rainfall. They listened to Dad describe his final goal of turning the five acres of second-growth fir and feral pasture where we lived above Snoqualmie into a working farm. "Hell, son, what you have there is a stretch of timber. That hill up there is all clay and pine needles. Ain't going to grow nothing up there, except maybe radishes." But Dad didn't listen to them, because he wanted to be free of city life and people interested in his business. On Empire Way, where we had lived before in Seattle, Dad said he'd felt cramped with the police in the streets and the neighbors watching us.

Dad constantly researched a dozen schemes. Intricate diagrams covered the kitchen table. When he cleared the table, he just bunched the papers in his hand and threw them in the trash. An hour after dinner, a new layer of fresh plans spread over the tabletop, as constant as dust. The test of one of his ideas, Dad said, was if he still

thought about the thing a couple of weeks after it had first occurred to him. His attempted plots almost always failed, which in the long run only allowed his fittest ideas to survive. He once attempted to harvest hydrogen from the creek to heat the house and fill three hundred gallon water-bags with lighter-than-air gas to make his flying Schwinn-blimp. After a summer of running a current through the stream, he had collected enough hydrogen to fill a single red birthday balloon. With a flick of his match, the balloon exploded.

Dad never sat idle. He didn't stop until he'd smoked enough dope to put himself into a twitching coma. He vibrated with the energy he spent washing the dishes, shining the Dodge Dart with turtle wax, rubbing his hands together until the noise made Mom tell him, "Paul, go outside and do something." He converted the old root cellar into a profitable hothouse. It had seemed impossible that anything could be done with the damp, cracked cement basement of the farm's old hop shed. The cold space once reeked of the molding heap of fossilized potatoes, but Dad outfitted the subterranean room with halide lights, a forest of lush marijuana plants, a six-foot tank of water, algae, lilies, and orange carp. They brushed the pale roots of the water plants with their long mustaches. Slick tree frogs clung to the trunks of jade trees. In the damp paradise of warm vegetation, Dad smoked and his normally quick speech slowed to a drawl. He smiled with

half-lidded eyes. "Hey, children." He looked around until he found us. "Can you go in the house, get me a glass of wine?"

With Mom working mornings, Dad relied on me. It was my duty to keep Adrian and Jake safe. I was responsible, because if no one looked after them they would end up as dead children, Mom said. Children were bitten by strange animals in the forest and the bites turned sour and festered and then the child died in bed. Children were washed away in overflowing creeks. I knew all of the things that could kill a child.

Our yard was a long way from the city yards with their well-trained lawns. Ours was full of unruly grass clumps. Each root ball lay distinct in the hard-packed clay soil. Our attempt at a lawn was a long way from the baseball diamonds behind the chain link fences and the swings with rubber seats that squealed out over a padding of wood chips. We had a single baseball mitt between the three of us kids. Without a baseball, a bat, or another mitt, it lay wedged in a corner of the toy box, where it became slightly soggy and then filled with a gray slime. Dad built a swing one summer, a wooden plank hanging from the leaning trunk of our black walnut tree. The very next summer, a two-inch carpet of thick green moss grew on the seat. Instead of hiking to town, we played on the vine maples, climbing hand over hand up into the twisted canopy of tangled branches fifteen feet over the forest floor of sword ferns and old leaves. I made sure no one fell out

of those trees. I made sure that Adrian and Jake got down the road to the school bus stop, even when the road washed out.

The paved road ended over two miles away, a half hour walk down the hill. The bus stopped at the paved turnaround. The highway crew turned the orange paving tractor around at the dead end; only our road kept going beyond it. On the hill, heavy rain moved the clay down the cut bank. Trees and stones and even pieces of the road shifted and moved. When it was raining really hard, Dad wouldn't drive his car all of the way home. He left it on the other side of the big gully ten minutes down the hill. The creek bed passed under the road through a gigantic round cement tube the highway department had laid down when they first built the road. In the summer, the creek trickled under the stones and seeped from underground to pass through the cement tube and fell in a short waterfall on the other side. In the winter, the creek grew so big it would blow the road away. The gully filled with thick yellow runoff and the cement tube wasn't big enough. Water piled up behind the road embankment, leaving tidemarks of flood scum on the trunks of the trees. Leaves hung from the crooks of branches. Finally, the entire road bank melted and the road, the gravel, and water traveled downhill. The wind tore trees loose from the clay, peeling back the roots from the side of the hill, uncovering big pink stones buried like peanuts in fudge.

I kept poison berries out of Jake and Adrian's mouths. Mom showed me the berries we could eat. We could eat the tiny huckleberries that grew on the bushes that grew on rotting stumps and rotting tree trunks lying on the forest floor. We could eat the blueberries that grew in the heavy branches near the orchard. We could eat the plums and apricots and walnuts and acorns and apples and pears that grew in the orchard. I had to keep everything else away from Adrian and Jake. The forest was full of bright red berries that Adrian would always pile in heaps in her upturned skirt, and I would have to make her dump them out. If she ate one of these berries, Mom said, her insides would get cut up the same as if she'd eaten crushed glass; she would throw up blood and die. All the time I was watching her, she didn't eat a single poison thing.

Wild animals lived in the woods. Most of them were good animals. We saw an owl, once, sitting on a branch about fifteen feet above the forest floor, very still in the dark forest, and Jake and Adrian and I tiptoed past him. The cats found snakes and shrews and left their bodies on the porch. The shrews lay heaped on the planks, their mouths open, exposing their tiny white teeth. Their large, flattened hands covered their chests. The real, dangerous wild animals we never saw, except for their prints or their dung. Bears came into the orchard at night and left behind large piles of dung studded with cherry pits and apple seeds. At dusk, when even bigger animals, things we didn't

know about, badgers, wolverines, and cougars, might find us, I hurried Jake and Adrian home. We rushed through the blue patches of light where the canopy of second-growth forest broke open and then, in the dark forest, already sticky with the spiderwebs strung out for the night, we ran as quickly as we could, bursting out of the line of fir trees above the house and dancing under the porch light, thankful for having gotten away from whatever animals slinked out of the hollow trees at dusk.

On frosty mornings, I tracked down Adrian and Jake's mittens, digging them out from the bottom of the toy box. I found their scarves folded on the top shelf of the closet. I made them put on their jackets before they could go outside.

Strange men kidnapped children. I kept an eye out for them, even though Mom remained vague about what they looked like. I figured that any adult man that noticed us kids fit the category of "Strange Man." Most men didn't even slow their trucks as they sped by us on the highway to town. We never ran into strange men in the forest, although sometimes a truck with hunters would pass while we walked down the road in the morning to school. The men, wearing their bright orange hats and carrying Styrofoam coffee cups, saw us but didn't smile or wave. On the way home from school, we could hear the distant crack of gunfire. Sometimes, strange men came down from the railroad tracks while we waited for the school bus. They asked me for cigarettes or an apple. These men had stubble

on their faces and wore loose blue jeans with dirt stains worn into the knees and butts. They had backpacks with bedrolls and baseball caps. When I said, "I don't smoke," they always said something like, "Good for you," and then wandered down the road.

Knowing these things about wild animals and about bad weather and strange men didn't make any difference when the danger finally came. I was responsible for Adrian; still she died.

Each morning, I woke as soon as the light came over the rim of the hill, down through the cottonwoods and into my room. I had to get my chores done before I went to school, and I tried to reach the chicken coop before the rooster crowed. First, I peeled the old filter out of the coffee machine, tapping the grounds into an empty tin under the sink. Dad used the black soil as fertilizer. I took out a fresh filter and pressed the damp lintel against the bottom of the tray, careful it wouldn't come loose and fill the pot with grounds. Dad had shown me how to do it. "Wet the filter, but don't get the filter too damp because then it'll fold up and the grounds will get into the pot. You don't want that to happen again." I filled the pot with water. I poured the water into the machine and turned it on. Second, I put on my rubber boots and grabbed the chickens' water pitcher. I climbed up the muddy trail behind the house. During the night, spiders hung webs across the path, down from the gnarled rhododendrons

over the moss-crusted apple trees. If I could find a loose branch at the bottom of the hill, I used that to sweep the cobwebs down. If not, I rushed up the trail with one hand thrust forward to catch the webs, but that never worked very well and I ended up at the top of the hill jumping around and just about losing my footing in the slick grass and mud, convinced a spider clung to my hair. After I brushed myself down, I walked across the pasture. The grass grew in thick patches, and the heavy blades held globules of condensed fog. By the time I had reached the chicken coop, the soggy lawn soaked my jean cuffs. If I moved quickly enough, the rooster would sit up, blinking and scratching at his head from his perch directly under the heat lamp. I closed the door behind me, to step into the murmuring and clucking of the hens and the sharp odor of the hay.

Adrian had adopted the albino hen, the only hen anyone could separate from the others. When the chicks were still just the size of my palm, after Dad had picked them up at the feed store, the albino chick lay like a discarded glove in the damp corner. The others jostled for the ring closest to the heat lamp. As the chicks pushed up to the bulb, they grew dopey and lost their place to the more desperate chicks. The weaker chicks were pushed back and couldn't get all the way up to the lamp. Smaller, and with a pink beak and red pupils, the albino chick never made it close to the lamp. I took her inside and Dad told me I'd

have to throw it out. “Do you mean throw it away?” Adrian had asked. “You can’t throw away a little chickie.” She held the sickly bird in the palm of her hand, scratching its head and rocking back and forth. She kept it alive in a shoebox with a lamp and shredded newspaper and named it Francine. She named all of the other chicks, but as they grew up to become chickens, they all looked the same. Francine was the only hen’s name anyone could recall.

“Hello, Francine,” I said to the clucking hens. I took the feed down from the shelf and tossed it through the hexagonal chicken wire. I opened the latch and the hens brushed around my ankles. The rooster eyed me while I grabbed the brown eggs, still warm, from the floor. Most mornings, I gathered about a dozen and a half eggs, which amounted to more eggs than we could eat in a week. The hens didn’t have nests. They laid their eggs wherever they happened to be. The eggs lay where they dropped. It was important to feed the hens, or they would begin to peck their own eggs and then we wouldn’t get any. When I had the plastic pitcher stuffed with eggs, I closed the door and turned around, and I didn’t feel as though I had earned two dollars in eggs, but that I had gone out and picked up a week’s worth of food. Life could go on and on this way. The garden yielded more lettuce, radishes, and potatoes than we could eat. The orchard dropped more apples, pears, plums, and apricots on the ground in one season than we could eat in ten years. A carpet of heavy moss

lived on the heaps of rotting fruit. The land more than provided for us even if the majority of the acreage sat under second-growth Douglas fir. There wasn't enough land for a working farm. It would never grow enough crops to sell for enough money to operate in the world. Mom and Dad still needed cash, and so they had jobs even though it was very easy to grow enough to eat. Although we didn't have enough money to buy new school shoes in October, the orchard filled with the excess of rotting pears.

After I fed the hens, I woke my brother and sister. I brushed Jake's face with a sheet of paper. He was seven and usually awake by then, waiting for me. I stepped back when he swatted my hand. He brushed Adrian's. She was five and lay extremely still in the morning and Jake almost had to shake the life back into her. I dressed them in hopefully clean clothes, but sometimes that was difficult, so I dressed them in practically clean clothes. Shirts passed if a stain could be explained by dropping something on yourself at breakfast. Clothing could not noticeably smell. Pants could have stains at the cuffs or knees and could smell from a distance of no more than three inches.

Finally, with everyone dressed, the chickens fed, and the coffee brewed, I would wake Dad. He lay slumbering in bed, alone, because Mom worked the graveyard shift at the Busy Bee Diner and left the house in the middle of the night and didn't get home until eleven. Dad worked the night shift and left the house at five o'clock. In the morning,

it was just Dad. His arm usually stuck out of the sheets, his hand curled into a claw. The only thing that woke Dad up was when I said, “Dad, your coffee will burn.” As soon as I said that, he grumbled and climbed out of the bed, pulling the sheets off and brushing his long hair out of his face and rubber-banding it back into a ponytail. He’d be so cranky without his coffee that he might tell me to go sit in the time-out chair just for following orders and waking him up. He’d sit down at the kitchen table and, after he drank his first cup of coffee and if it was a good morning, he’d make breakfast. Scrambled eggs with melted cheddar, bread coated with gobs of butter toasted in the skillet, and bacon fried into shriveled brown strips.

Dad had begun to dig into the hill above our house. A seasonal creek had eroded a muddy cleft into the clay. Dad called streams like these *quickets*, or his favorite word, a *freshet*. He loved small streams and would drink from them, holding the entire flow of the freshet in the scoop of his hands. This freshet started in a boulder field way above our house under the summit of the hill. The entire circumference of my known world was bound by that trickling creek, from its source, to the gravel bar where the creek dumped into the Snoqualmie River. The creek started where a collection of boulders had come to rest thousands of years ago. When the glaciers retreated away from the moraines that became the foothills of the Cascade Mountains, they left behind gigantic smooth stones. “Why

did the glaciers leave?" Jake asked. "They don't like the heat," Dad said. "They could come back someday. They operate on geological time, though, which is no concern of ours." Dad was obsessed with the opinions of other people even though he desired for himself the same inhuman, creeping, fuck-all reassurance of a glacier, as if his own actions were inevitable. He spent most of his time hiding where he could do what he wanted without scrutiny.

Dad wanted to heap soil across the gully and dam his freshet and fill the ravine behind our house with water and trout and, in the summer, water for our garden and, in the winter, a place to skate. He believed deeply in the cleansing power of labor. He declared that the dammed creek would provide us with water and that the water was wealth.

"How much is this project going to cost?" Mom asked. "Major earthwork building projects require a CAT and gasoline," she said, "and late fees when you don't return the CAT on time as your project just becomes a big hole in the ground."

"Nothing, Gayle," Dad said. "The goal of this project is to do it myself." He held up his hands, covered with fresh blisters and dirty Band-Aids. "With these two hands."

One night after Mom came home, we could hear Dad in the gully throwing dirt out of his pit—a scrape and grunt and then a scrape and a grunt again. Mom said to us, "Let's go spy on your father." We walked down to the county road and then up the hill and climbed into the

forest and made our way down the way-trail until we stood in the shadow of our rhododendrons. Adrian held my hand and Jake knelt down in the leaves. Years and years worth of leaves heaped under the boughs. The dry leaves crunched and Mom shushed us. We watched Dad working down in the gully. He didn't stop. His face held a slight smile and his eyes stared inward as he kept up a steady rhythm, a sharp thrust into the soil, planting his foot on the upper edge of the shovel blade and then levering his arm so that a tall square heap of clay split out of the earth. He cocked back under the weight of the clay and then flung it at the slope and started all over again. "What do you think you're doing?" Mom shouted. Dad stopped and looked around at the forest, not seeing us until Adrian ran down the hill.

She dropped herself down, both feet at a time, and caught herself with her hands. It seemed like she rapidly hopped down the hill, when really she was more or less tumbling. She wore her typical outfit of a pair of blue jeans and a dress. Mom followed after her, but Adrian moved as quickly as if she had really fallen. Adrian had never had her hair cut and it was still blond, the way my hair had been until I turned seven. She hardly ever washed her hair, so it bushed around her face wrapped with stray leaves, thin twigs, long strands of grass stalks, and the loose sprigs of pine needles. When she got to the bottom of the hill, she must have heard Mom about to catch up with her and lay

down and rolled on her side the rest of the way. When she stood, her dress was plastered to her skin, covered with mud, slugs, beetles, and leaves. She just brushed them off.

Dad stopped his shoveling to watch her and Mom climb down into the pond.

"You are completely changing the way this place looks," Mom said.

"This hill wouldn't even be here if it weren't for the glaciers."

"Glaciers are a natural process."

"I am a natural process," Dad said. "I'm working to make our dreams come true. Our dreams need water, just like a houseplant."

Mom had just killed yet another plant in the living room. The only plant in the house sat in the front window and was usually in the last stages of a desperate, short life. This plant had seemed to thrive and then, suddenly, aphids had infested it and, within a week, it had turned brown.

"You are defacing the natural beauty of the hillside. You're destroying our home."

"I'm going to cut some trees down, too," Dad said.
"We need light."

"I'm worried," Mom said, "because you don't know what you're doing. Do you think this dam will hold if it should actually fill with water? A dam that you built by hand? Even dams built by engineers don't always hold."

What if that dam breaks? It'll wash our house away. What kind of dream is that, honey?"

Dad dropped the shovel. "Can't you just believe in one thing I'm working on?"

"I know you'll finish what you start here. I'm not worried about whether or not you can accomplish what you want to accomplish. But it's a dam holding two tons of water in a gully above our house. This is dangerous, Paul."

"If a beaver can do it, I can do it."

"When is the last time you just sat down, or we played cards or whatever? I'm worried about you. When is the last time you played?"

"This is play for me," Dad said. If a man could physically dig a hole to China without hesitating to pierce the hard granite crust of the Earth, without incinerating himself in the liquid nickel core of the Earth, that would be Dad. She put her hand on his face, and he reached up to take it off but held his hand against her hand. He gently took her hand down. "I'll come inside and wash off in a minute."

"How long is a minute?"

"Sixty seconds."

"How long is a second?"

"One Mississippi. That long."

To hold back the dam, Dad built an intricate wall of fitted granite stones he had carted out of the mountains and mosaics of the colored gravel he had dug up from the hill-

side. They descended in patterns across the surface of the dam. When she saw the steady accumulation of granite and stone and his careful arrangement of bracken ferns, sword ferns, and bamboo, Mom stood in the muddy grass in front of the dam under the maple trees and looked up the gorge. “You know, Paul, I think you can do it. I think we can turn this place into the place we wanted.” Mom became excited by the dam. She repainted the outside of the house and cleaned out all of the accumulated junk and washed the floors with boiling water and made sure that Jake and I kept our toys in our toy box. At night, when Dad was working outside, the house filled with burning candles and we ate soufflé made from eggs our chickens had laid in our chicken coop and beans from our garden that I had planted, watered, and watched climb the string, then picked and thrown into freezer bags. Dad washed his hands at the sink and sat down and asked us to stop eating. “I’m not going to say grace,” he said, “because that is a crock of shit. But thank you, anyway.”

