

CHILDREN WILL DROWN IN WATER LIKE THIS

RC
LURIA

The girl watches the boy from the kitchen window. He's fishing in the canal, which is little more than a drainage ditch, but it does have fish and maybe a gator. The boy knows she is watching, so he casts his line with extra precision, sending it flying with that satisfying whirr, which he knows she can't hear but gives him confidence anyway. He knows, also, that her mother is watching and so he reels it in slowly, as if he has all the time in the world, isn't anxious at all, isn't waiting for the girl. The girl is anxious. She is dying to run out and meet the boy, to embark on the monster hunt, which he has promised is safe and authorized by the proper authorities. She is only waiting for her mother's go ahead. She's waiting for her mother to say, "Go on. There's a kid your age," as if it's that easy.

The girl knows it isn't that easy. So does the boy, which is why they are already friends. They spotted each other across the soccer field dividing the middle school from the high school: she having just proven to be the only sixth grader in the entire county to fail to do a single pull-up in the Presidential Fitness Test, he stealing away from algebra for an early lunch. They met in the middle and two negatives became a positive. Now, they meet before school, after school, leave notes for each other hidden beneath the bleachers. Until today, they have met in secret. The boy can't invite her over, he says, because his father is in the CIA and he can't reveal the location of their safe house. The girl knows her mother would not approve of a boy-girl friendship, no matter how many times the girl has said she is ready, especially not with one three grades ahead. But the girl also knows that her mother wouldn't question a friendship that began at her own suggestion.

Then it would be sacred, an act of good mothering, helping her lonely daughter keep her head above water in a town called Sea Level—a joke her mother has made seven times since moving here six months ago. So the girl made this plan and the boy stands outside, waiting.

The girl watches the boy cast his line with that careful rhythm. She thinks he does look like he could be a sixth grader, younger even. But that's what makes him beautiful. He is like the blue heron picking its way along the bank, thin and grey and shrug-shouldered. He wishes he were bigger. He wishes he were big enough to drape his arm across the girl's shoulder, to tuck her into his side, to protect her. He told the girl he would be bigger except that he's been genetically engineered so that all his growth hormones went straight to his brain. He hopes that she believes him. She doesn't care if he ever gets bigger. When their shoulders bump when they walk, when their hands almost brush, she likes it. She stares and stares out the kitchen window, willing her mother to look, to see, to have the idea. At last her mother does, says the magic words and the girl is out the door: no shoes, no stopping, no problem. Her mother calls a warning that disappears behind the slamming door.

When she gets to him, she waves her arm in a grand, absurd hello, like she's welcoming him to her planet. It's a show in case her mother is still watching. It's a "Look, Ma. Look at the first-ness of this meeting." If the boy finds the gesture odd, he doesn't show it. He just waves his arm right back.

"Hello," he says. "Are you ready?"

"Yes," she says. A fish leaps into the air and flops gracelessly back into the water. The girl knows it's a mullet, so does the boy. They've discussed the magic of it, how it always seems like they have reversed gravity. Really, though, it means there is a predator in the water.

"Let's go," says the boy. He's hidden his gear in the yard of a notorious criminal. There it will be safe from other thieves and cowards. The boy has told her many things like this. He has told her that there are marlin in the canal, that they'd swum in through an underground tunnel that goes from the canal right to the ocean and the fish have grown too big to swim home again. He has said that the girl probably won't see any marlin herself, because he's caught them all and eaten half and mounted the other on the

wall of his beach house, which maybe he'll show her one day, if she doesn't mind heights. He told her his beach house is on stilts so high you can't build a staircase, you have to be flown up by helicopter, which isn't as fun as it sounds, so he doesn't go there often. He prefers to stay here, where he's from, because it is easier and it keeps him real. The girl has embraced it all. She has packed a bag and stashed it in her closet for the day the helicopter arrives, which she imagines will come as a surprise. Maybe on her birthday. She imagines the monster and has laid in bed picturing it, dangled her legs over the side and felt its breath against her ankles. It's fun to imagine the boy's world. It's fun to create it with him. When he tells her they will catch the monster and nothing bad will happen, she imagines that it's true.

The girl and the boy march across the neighborhood. They sneak into the forest of Melaleuca trees that snakes around the neighborhood, the only border between their homes and the highway. If they cup their ears, the rush of cars sounds almost like the ocean.

It's nearly dusk and the sun is low on the horizon. In shadow, frilly, peeling bark looks like fingers creeping across the forest floor. Things scuttle beneath those shadows. The boy and the girl lift their feet high, careful to avoid hazards both hidden and plain, like the rusted, half-buried shopping cart and the trillion broken bottles and the human waste that sends up ammonia clouds that hover in the still, damp air. The girl cuts her bare foot on a shard of glass but she isn't worried. The boy has a plan. And it's a good one.

They arrive at their destination. They step out of the forest and into a yard nearly as littered. The boy navigates expertly, as if he's been here a million times. "Aren't you worried about the criminal?" asks the girl. "He's sleeping," says the boy, "He's always sleeping." The girl thinks this might be the boy's house because he really does seem to know his way around. But she doesn't want to ask because this is by far the worst house she has ever seen. The chaos, the thought of someone sleeping in this wreck, makes the girl nervous. She's not sure she wants to play this game anymore. This is not how she imagined the criminal's lair. Her foot throbs and she's getting tired. The boy notices her changed mood and he worries that he might lose her. He thinks if he moves quickly he might be able to keep them on course, keep

them together. The boy waves the girl over. "Here's the gear," he says with, he hopes, enthusiasm enough for the both of them.

The plan: inflate this kiddie pool and use it as a boat, row out to the middle of the canal, and spear the monster. The boy knows there are monsters because, look, right there, the remains of one of their brothers. The boy points to the other side of the chain link fence that divides this house from the neighbor's. Leering up from the dirt and overgrowth is a yellowed skull. "Isn't that just a gator skull?" she says. "No," says the boy. "Definitely monster." He hands her the gear but then looks around. "I forgot the rope," he says and then walks to the house, enters through a sliding-glass door. He hopes she will wait for him but he doesn't look back, in case she doesn't.

The girl looks at the skull. Across the fence, she sees a woman peering at her from a dimly lit window. The woman sees the girl watching and pulls her curtains shut. And now the girl is alone. She thinks about following the boy, but he didn't invite her, didn't even say if this is his house. Maybe he's trespassing. The house is smeared in greasy light and the girl stares hard inside. She can just make out the room. She thinks she sees the boy standing beside a sagging couch. He has his hands behind his back, like he is hiding something. She sees an arm reach up and grab the boy's wrist. She is scared for a second before she recognizes that it is a human arm. The boy seems to shrink, look even smaller, but then the girl thinks it is a trick of the light. At last, the boy is released and he walks out to the girl, slowly at first and then he runs. He closes the distance between them in only seconds. "Are you ready?" he asks. The girl looks past him for a moment, into the house, but the light is off. She can't see anything now. The girl looks back at the boy, at his face, which is caught somewhere between panic and hope. He holds up the rope, gives it a pleading little shake, and the girl is ready.

The girl is happy again, though it is darker now and the walk back takes forever. Her fear isn't gone, but she's adjusted to it, like the heat. She can feel it on her skin but she can wipe it away. The boy has bandaged her foot. He always carries some for emergencies. He noticed she was limping and he cared for her. Now she can carry on, grateful to be walking with

a friend, on a mission. She feels a sense of belonging here, something she hasn't felt since she was very little. Seven houses and six schools ago. Her mother says she gets restless, says change builds character, but the girl finds herself falling more and more out of sync with the other kids. As if each neighborhood, each school is a different dimension and she, the girl, is traveling through a black hole, crossing both time and space. She stays the same while everyone else gets older, smarter, more developed.

The girl hasn't even started her period. Her breasts are not yet developed, they aren't even buds yet, the technical term her doctor uses. Her mother assures her that she has breast seeds, the buds are coming, and then the full blooms and all the trouble that brings. Her mother says she should enjoy this time while it lasts. But the girl doesn't enjoy this time. She has feelings, new desires she can't name. She wants to understand the things other girls talk about at school: eating out. Fingering. She knows instinctively that they aren't talking about restaurants and piano lessons. But when she asks them what they mean, they just laugh at her. She finds books at the library but all prove useless in their own way. The science book is luridly appealing with its cover featuring a freshly husked human staring stoically into the distance, but it is too clinical. It names the parts but not how they fit together, not what makes them objects of such delight and secrecy. The romantic books entice with fleshy men and women spilling out of their blouses, their bodies pressed together against some strange and mild tornado. But they prove as cryptic as the talk at school—love buttons, love caves, love swords. There is no love in the locker room, only going down and feeling up, pussies and cocks, teases and sluts.

At night, the girl watches *The Incredible Hulk* on TV. When Dr. David Banner transforms, green muscles bulging through his tattered clothing, she feels a tightness in her groin and she whispers the foreign words like a prayer.

The boy could tell her what the words mean. He reads about them in the magazines his father buys, "men's magazines" his father calls them. There are stacks and stacks of them in his father's closet where he's saving them, he says, for when he has a son. A real son, man enough to appreciate them. The boy has taken them when his father is gone or asleep on the couch. He

hides them in his room where he reads them like homework. He's ready to impress his father or the other boys at school. He's thought up seven different scenarios and will, if necessary, describe them in detail. He will tell them about girls named Bunny and Honey and Candy. He will describe the reverse cowgirl and the banana split. He will say he's done the things that men do. He will not, he decides, ever tell them about the girl. He will not tell them that he has a friend who is a girl but who is not his girlfriend. He doesn't want to hear what they would say about that, doesn't even need to because he can imagine. And when the boy thinks about a future in which maybe she is his girlfriend, he knows what they'd say about that too: she's too pretty, too normal. They'd tell him to give it up.

At night, the boy lies in bed, which is really just a mattress on the floor, and thinks about the future. He thinks about girls. He thinks about the monster. When he's thought too much, he traces his fingers across his jaw, down his throat. He slides his palm over his shoulder and onto his bicep. He can almost circle his arm with his middle finger and thumb. The boy slips his hands over his belly, which sags a little over the waist of his shorts. He pretends the softness there isn't his own.

They are at the canal now, but the far end. The end where it slides under the highway and into their neighborhood. The kiddie pool won't inflate so the girl steals a float from the nearest patio—one of those giant tubes, big enough for two but their butts will hang in the water. The boy is impressed. They put the tube in the canal and fall backward into it. The water is warm and soaks through their shorts and over their laps. It smells earthy, like decaying plants. They wriggle around until they settle in side-by-side, each with one arm draped across the other's back. The boy reaches, nearly falls out, and grabs the paddle, the homemade spear. Together, they push away with their feet. They are off.

The sun is low on the horizon, bathing everything in a dim, pink gold. Porch lights are snapping on. The boy and the girl drift; their fingers and heels make lazy waves on the otherwise still surface. There is a monster to hunt, but for the moment neither of them are in a hurry to find it. The boy rests the spear against his shoulder, folds his arm across his lap to hold it in

place. The girl ties the paddle to the float handle. They don't really need the paddle; the water is slow and moves in one direction, but the boy likes it. He says you never know. There could be rapids. He doesn't seem to be worried about rapids now, though, so the girl starts a game. Alternating between knocking on his knee and drawing her fingers down his shin, she sings, "Crack an egg on your leg, let the yolk run down, let the yolk run down." The boy smiles faintly and shivers. The girl carries on, "Stab a knife in your leg, let the blood run down. Let the blood run down." Her fingers slide down his shin and then back up, up to his thigh. She lunges and squeezes his waist suddenly, trying to startle him. The float rocks wildly and she digs her fingers into his side. "Now you have the creeps," she yells. She starts to tickle and the boy laughs. He can't really stop her without dropping the spear, so she presses on. He wriggles and laughs and she laughs. She stops tickling and lets her hand fall on the boy's where he holds his side. The boy is very still but then he lifts his finger. He slides it between the girl's. He's never held hands before and he's not sure if this counts, only one finger. Her skin is soft. He ventures another and she doesn't move away. She spreads her fingers wider, now she and the boy are fully entwined. The insects are humming and starting to sting, but neither moves to swat them away. The boy looks at the girl, nearly tells her what he's thinking, but he can't. The girl moves their hands lower, but the boy startles. He pushes her hand away. "Sorry," he says. He shifts and is a silhouette against a porch light. She raises her hand to her eyes, squints to read his expression but sees only a shaggy outline. "I had a reaction," he says, the only explanation he can offer. He wants to hold her hand again, but he doesn't know how to ask. She feels a vague hurt that lingers in the heat of her cheeks. The girl senses she has asked for something, and been denied.

The girl suddenly wants to go home, to go to bed where she can look out her window and see the sky. She can imagine herself somewhere else, someone else. She can be someone who never needs anything from other people. Someone like her mother, though the girl would never admit it. Her mother is the kind of person who never gets lonely. Or so it seems to the girl. To be lonely, you have to need something from other people. Her mother doesn't seem to need anything from anyone. The girl found the proof of that

in her mother's nightstand. The girl knew just what it was as soon as she saw it. She recognized it from the anatomy book. It looked just like the picture except neon green. She imagines her mother stole it off her last boyfriend and it turned that color over time. She imagines her mother in the locker room with the other girls, bragging. She feels envious but also angry, betrayed. The girl thinks her mother keeps the best part of a man in her drawer so she can get even that all on her own. The girl thinks, now she'll never have a father. She doesn't know that what she found in the drawer is her mother's own prayer for company.

She doesn't know that her mother still thinks of herself as a girl sometimes. She sees her mother touching her face in the mirror and she thinks it's vanity. She doesn't know it's fear. The girl doesn't understand the forces that keep them moving. She doesn't understand how they course through their lives like a river, flowing to one, inevitable destination.

"There," says the boy. "The monster!" He points to a spot not far away. They have made their way nearly to the end of the canal. The girl can see her house. She follows the boy's pointing finger and sees something disappear beneath the water. A pair of glinting, evil eyes. She is sure of it. Ripples mark a bull's-eye and the boy paddles toward it. The girl feels a rush of excitement and dread. This is it. The showdown.

When they get to the spot, they peer into the water. It's brown and hard to see, but a shape moves below, just out of focus. It creeps closer to the surface. The girl can almost make it out. She sees an oval, maybe the head, maybe with fangs. And then it is rising, rising and the girl can see what it is. She can see that it is only a turtle, wobbly and moss covered. It takes a nip of air and then it dives again, swims away. The girl's heart is knocking and she finally exhales. She looks at the boy, thinking he will be relieved too or disappointed or offer a new game to play. But he still stares into the water. He is focused.

"Do you see it?" he asks. "It's there. The monster. We have to kill it or it will keep coming back. It's the kind of monster that creeps in at night, when you're alone. It leaves marks, but not where anyone can see them. And sometimes it just sits on your chest, pressing the air out of you little by

little until you have no life left in you at all.”

The boy can feel the monster reaching for him. Even now. Even here with his friend. It's getting stronger. He's tried to get help. The boy's guidance counselor has suggested a meeting with his father. He has called the house twice. Once the boy's father answered and then immediately hung up. Once, he slept through it, though the boy let it ring and ring and ring. The boy has been acting out at school. He's been missing classes. There was an incident in the bathroom. The boy wants help so badly but he can't say what he needs. It's the kind of help you can't describe and everyone around you maybe knows it, knows there is something you need but they can't give you, so they get angry with you instead. This is how it is with the guidance counselor. He gives up on the boy. Says he will have to sort it out on his own. He will have to grow up.

He thinks about leaving, escaping Sea Level, escaping Florida. He did run away once. He slept under an underpass. He even made it all the way to the county line, but then couldn't think where to go next. So he came back. He came back and stood by the canal and waited for the girl to come to him. And she did.

The girl watches the boy. She waits for him to laugh, explain the game. But then her mother comes out yelling loud enough for the whole neighborhood to hear, “Get out of that filthy canal. There's alligators and snapping turtles and Christ knows what else.” And there are. The water is dark and full of creatures.