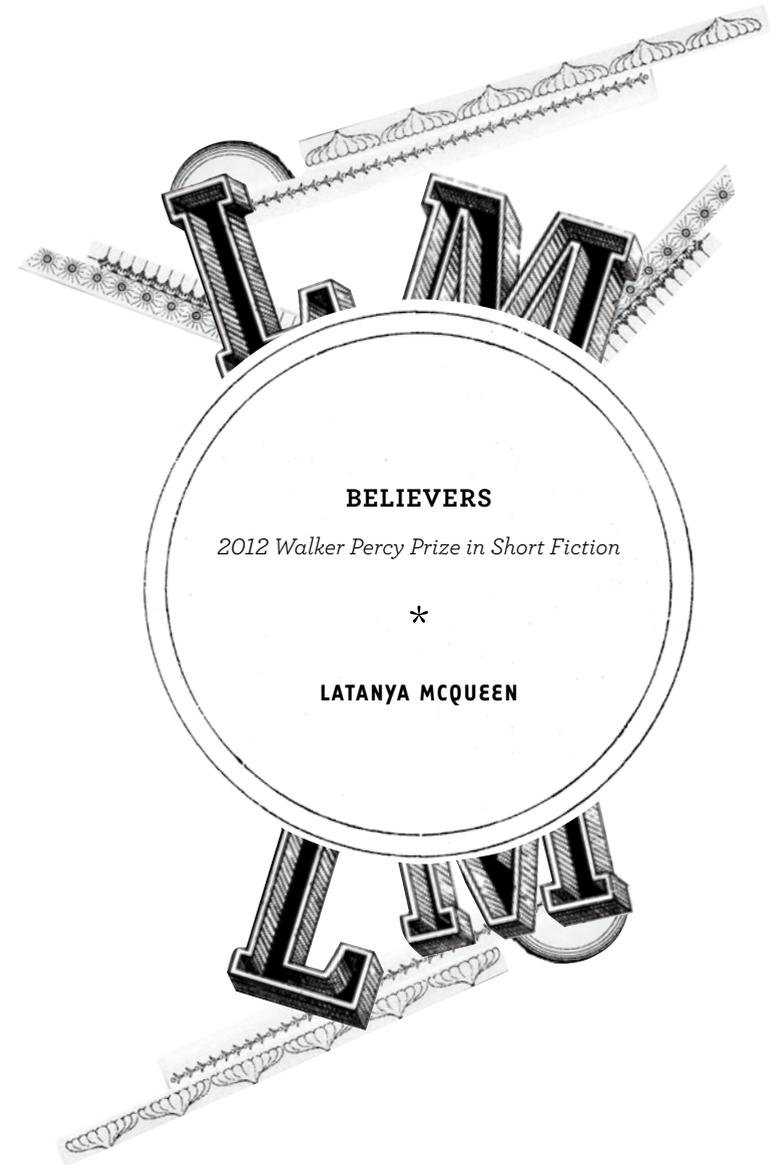


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The hole appeared overnight, at least three feet deep, two feet wide, and two feet long. It was as if someone had taken a shovel and dug a grave in the backyard. That's what it looked like, Marty thought. A shallow grave for a child or a dog.

Marty noticed it early one morning. He looked up from the kitchen table, paused at his son Cory in the living room watching *Looney Tunes*, and glanced out at the front yard. His eyes first went to the vegetable garden his wife had started. Weeds trampled over the few cherry tomatoes beginning to grow. The summer heat was causing his grass to die. He sighed as he looked out at his wilting straw-colored lawn, and then he noticed the hole.

Outside, one of his neighbors trimmed his rose bushes, a habitual chore he did in the mornings when the dew still grazed the petals. Unlike Marty's, his lawn was perfect—the grass evenly cut and a deeply rich, forest green.

Two stone gnomes sat in a flowerbed near the front steps. Marty thought them chintzy. *What is his name?* he pondered briefly, but then his eyes focused on the hole again. He continued staring blankly out the window, blinking a couple of times, thinking maybe he was imagining things. He glanced again. The hole was still there. "Damn," he mumbled, then took another gulp from his coffee.

"Say Dora," he yelled. "Come out and take a look at this."

She came out of the bathroom with half her hair wrapped in

foam magenta rollers. Still in last night's negligee, the silk shimmered as she moved.

"Did you make that mess out there?"

"What are you talking about?" Dora pulled out another roller and placed it on the table. She fluffed out her dark curls.

Marty leaned backwards in his chair and placed both his hands behind his head, flexing his arms in the process.

"Quit that now," he said, losing patience, and as if on cue Dora stopped and glanced at her husband. Nothing about him had changed, not even the teasing expression on his face, but the tone in his voice was different, and it was enough to make her pay attention. "You don't see that big hole?" Marty nodded toward the yard.

Dora bit her lip. "Oh, well. Now I suppose I do."

"Is that your doing?"

"Why would I dig a hole in our yard?"

"Well, how'd the hell it get there?"

"Maybe you should ask your son."

They both looked at Cory who sat cross-legged on the carpet, a bowl of Cheerios tucked snugly in his lap. At the sound of his name his eyes darted up to his parents. "I didn't do anything," he flinched.

Marty eyed his son. "You weren't digging out there?"

"No," he said. "Yesterday I had school and I came home and was inside all day. I didn't dig a hole."

"You sure?"

"Oh, leave him alone," Dora interrupted. "I was just kidding. Don't you think I'd have noticed him out there digging something like that?"

"Well, it still doesn't explain it," Marty said. "How can a hole like that appear overnight?"

"Maybe it's been there awhile and we just never noticed it before," Dora offered.

"I would have noticed," Marty mumbled.

Around the same time, neighborhood children began disappearing. It started with the Perkins' boy. He was prone to mischief and he looked the part—red hair, sparkling green eyes, a slinky, cat-like frame. He enjoyed pranks, and maybe that was why no one thought to notice when his mother couldn't find him. A few weeks before he'd gotten a suspension for applying rubber cement to the teacher's chair so that when she stood her dress ripped from hip to knee, revealing to the class her underwear. "He's probably still playing hooky," neighbors consoled Mrs. Perkins. "He's probably trying to fool all of us."

Then two others went missing. The Peterson's daughter left the house to get the mail and never returned. The Anderson's son disappeared during the night. When he didn't come down for breakfast, Mrs. Anderson opened his door to find his bed empty, the sheets untouched. None of his belongings were missing. "He was just gone," she told reporters.

People panicked. Children don't go missing, they believed, not in this town and certainly not without someone noticing, but in reality, no one saw the children when they were there. The Anderson's boy grew up with a stutter, one bad enough to cause him to get made fun of when he was younger. He'd spent years in speech therapy and even though it was barely noticeable now, he'd grown accustomed to not talking or saying very little in conversations. People often forgot about his presence in a room. His whole life he was considered an afterthought, until he went missing. The Peterson's girl was heavysset. Her fair skin turned bright red in sunlight, and when she was outside she looked like a bright red bustling tomato. That's what other kids called her at the pool when she stripped down to her swimsuit. Flustering, her face turned redder, and the shame of her size caused her to stay indoors most of the summer. She hadn't even wanted to go outside but her mother insisted she at least get the mail, and so she went. The Perkins' son was flunking school. He knew he'd have to make all A's the rest of the year in order to pass, so he didn't bother trying. His teacher hated him because of it, and because

instead of making an effort in his studies he spent his time making her classroom a hellish existence. Had she asked him why he did it, why he chose not to care, she'd learn that every evening when he got home from school his father would drive him to the grocery store he owned and the boy would help his father stock shelves. It was late in the night when he'd get home, and by then he was too tired to do much else.

A few weeks before a new neighbor had moved into the brick house at the end of the cul-de-sac. He was middle-aged, unmarried, no kids of his own. He wasn't very attractive, but to the rest of the married housewives who'd spent the last decade of their lives sleeping with their potbellied and balding husbands, this stranger was the savior to their doldrum fantasies. They'd peel back their window panels ever so slightly to watch as he walked to his mailbox to get the morning paper. Because of the hour he'd be dressed solely in his boxer shorts, exposing his bare chest and his pale thighs. Had he noticed the neighborhood women watching him he would have covered up, but as it stood he was unaware of their admirations. He was often the subject of conversations when the women gathered together for afternoon picnics in the park. As their children played together on the swings, they gossiped about the color of his boxer shorts, or the thick tufts of hair on his legs. "Is he single?" one of them wondered, and then another piped up that he lived alone. Had anyone seen any women come to his house? "No," another answered. Not that it would

have mattered anyway, but for the fantasy to exist they needed to believe that he was available, even if none of them were.

“I wonder why he’s single,” Dora had said, thinking more out loud than anything else, but it was a question that lingered in all of their minds. Why exactly did he live in this house alone? Why did he refuse invitations for the annual summer potluck held at Otter’s Creek? Why did he seem so aloof, so detached, so unwanting of their attention? Surely, there must be another reason, and behind closed doors and in gossiped whispers at the supermarket or the park, they pondered what that reason could be.

“Maybe he’s gay,” one of them said absentmindedly. The rest gave a chuckle, lightening the mood a bit, but that was how the first rumor started. He lived in a three-bedroom house alone. No children, no wife. Surely there was something wrong or otherwise he would have someone, wouldn’t he? Soon, everything he did became suspicious. Even simple things, things anyone would take for granted, became hallmarks for something unnatural, disordered, wrong. His morning walk to the mailbox became something vulgar. Unseemly was how the women put it, whispering it because they were too ashamed to hear the words out loud.

The truth was that over the years he had gotten used to being solitary. He worked from home fielding complaints for a food delivery service. His soft-spoken tone and apologizing nature made him good at his job, and being good made it tolerable. He was just shy, and lonely, and he didn’t know how to talk to women.

The thought of sharing a conversation with a group of neighborhood strangers terrified him, caused him enough anxiety so that even the suggestion was enough to give him ulcers. He was not good with people, never had been, and to cope with this he decided that the best thing to do was to keep to himself.

Weeks passed and the hole grew. Marty got creative at first. Each time he mowed the lawn he took the piles of dead grass and dumped it in the hole. “At least the damn thing’s useful,” he smiled as he came into the house all sweaty and tired, yet satisfied with his solution. His tanned skin glistened. He smelled of the earth, a smell he knew Dora liked, was turned on by, and when he saw her he pulled her into his arms and kissed her.

“Stop,” she said, but the room filled with her laughter.

“I’m not going to stop,” Marty said. “I’m not ever gonna stop.”

He was in a good mood. Cory loved his father best when he was like this and not like one of the times he remembered before, such as when Cory had been in charge of washing dishes. His mother had given him the task of wiping their deep fryer clean. Not understanding he’d taken the pot and placed it in the sink full of soapy water.

“You can’t put an appliance in water!” Dora scolded.

Marty had seen the whole thing. He told Cory to plug the fryer back up. Dora thought Marty was joking, even giving a hesitant

laugh at first, but Marty was serious. He went to his son, took the cord and put it in the boy's hand. "Put it in the socket," he told him. "If you get electrocuted it's your own damn fault."

Later he'd said that of course he'd never put his son in any danger.

Marty picked up his wife and led her to their bedroom. The door slammed shut. Cory used the opportunity to sneak outside.

Around the corner of the house Abby stood leaning against the siding. She lived a ten-minute bike ride away in a duplex with her foster parents. Both of her parents had died in a car accident when she was just a baby. Until recently, she'd lived mostly in group homes. To stay out of trouble she'd learned to keep quiet, to always seem unassuming. Cory called it her superpower-her ability to be invisible.

When Cory turned the corner he almost walked past her but she grabbed his arm and pulled him back. "What took you so long?" she said. "I've been waiting forever."

"Sorry," he shrugged. "Dad's been tense a lot lately. It's been hard to get out of the house."

"Is it because of what's happening?"

"No, something else," he said. "It's why I asked you at school today to come."

"Well, what is it? What'd you have to show me?" she asked.

"Come on," he waved and they walked to the front yard. He pointed but Abby didn't understand what she was supposed to be looking at. Flustered, Cory pointed again. "There, do you see it?" he shouted. "What do you think is down there? A tunnel maybe?"

"That's it?" Abby said. "It's just a hole."

"It's not just a hole," Cory said. "It's where everyone's going."

"How do you know?"

Cory thought back to the other day when he'd found his father standing out here with a man he'd never seen. The man wore a tan shirt and navy suspenders. Tucked underneath one arm was a clipboard.

"Must be a sinkhole," the man nodded as he kneeled and peered down into the darkness. "There's all sorts of them in the area."

"Why didn't we notice it before?" his father had asked.

"With these things you never can tell. Who knows when they're ready to happen."

"What am I supposed to do about it?"

"Not much you can do," the man said. "You can keep trying to fill it but there's no telling how far this thing goes. For all I know this hole could go to China."

The man had laughed at his joke. His father only stared at him, his face stern.

“I don’t care what you say, this isn’t a sinkhole. It’s something else.”

“Can it really go to China?” Cory interrupted.

The two of them focused their attention on Cory. The man in the suspenders smiled. His eyes lit up with amusement. “Is that what you think?” he said.

When Cory didn’t answer, Marty laughed. “Children are such little believers,” he said, then changed the subject.

After dinner they both sat in the living room. Cory listened as his father watched a sitcom on the television while he played with a box of Legos. His father made casual glances toward Cory but mostly seemed unconcerned. When a commercial break came he suddenly turned to him. “Here, let me see your hands,” he said.

It was a game, Cory remembered. One they had played together often in waiting rooms or during long car trips. Cory held out both of his hands, palms down. Marty reached and put his own underneath.

“Ready?” Marty asked, but before Cory could answer he took one away and slapped it down hard on Cory’s. He slapped it so hard that Cory yelped in pain. He held back tears so as not to provoke his father further.

“You’re too trusting, that’s your problem. Believe no one and you’ll never be disappointed,” Marty told him. “Believe nothing and you’ll see the world for what it is.”

Cory didn’t care what his father told him. In his cartoons he’d seen characters disappear. There and then gone like magic, some unforeseen, unrecognizable force taking them into another dimension or an alternate life.

“How do you know?” Abby said again, bringing his attention back to the hole. “There could be anything down there.”

“Don’t you trust me?”

Abby hesitated, shuffling her feet in the dirt. “I guess I do, but where are they going, you think? The other kids?”

“I don’t know,” Cory pondered. “China.”

“China?”

“Yeah, a man came and that’s what he said.”

It wasn’t that Abby didn’t believe him. She’d often thought about what it’d be like to leave the reality of her life. She hated the family she lived with and she hated the group homes she’d lived in before. Her foster parents smoked so much that at night she left her windows open for clean air. They gave her baloney and saltines to eat for most of her meals, even breakfast. They had three other children, one of which was their own, a snot-nosed girl with dirty fingernails who always wanted to borrow Abby’s few possessions.

She should be grateful, the school counselor often told her. At least she had a home now, and a bed, and clean clothes and food

to eat. It had to be better than the home, where they all slept on ratty cots together in a huge drafty room. It might be better, but she hated it nonetheless.

Abby looked at the empty space in the grass. She saw the dirt and the rocks, but she couldn't make out what was beyond the first few feet below her. For a few seconds, she thought she saw roots twisting in the dirt. Squinting her eyes, she tried to focus harder. They were moving toward her, reaching, and she leaned closer to touch them, to be sure, but quickly thereafter lost her balance, almost falling in.

Cory grabbed her arm and she steadied herself. "Are you okay?"

"Let's go," Abby said, ignoring the question. "Let's disappear like the others."

Cory thought about what she meant. "Not today," he said. "We have to plan. We have to say our goodbyes."

"I don't have anyone to say goodbye to," Abby said.

When Cory thought about it, he realized that he had no one to say goodbye to either. Even his parents he was mostly ambivalent toward. Unlike Abby, he didn't hate them, but he didn't like them either. They were just people in his life he'd learned to grow accustomed to. He knew anyway that he couldn't say goodbye because then they'd ask him questions, and he'd have to tell

them what he thought about the hole. He knew that even if they didn't believe him they'd still keep him from trying to do what he wanted.

The only person he wanted to go away with was Abby, and somehow that made him both happy and sad at the same time.

He thought about this as he walked home from school the next afternoon. There should be someone else he could tell, at least one other person for him to share his secret, but when he stumbled over the names of possibilities he knew that, like Abby, there was no one else. Cory was so absorbed in his thoughts that he didn't notice Mr. Fields yelling. It wasn't until he had almost run into him on the sidewalk before he noticed his presence.

"Whoa there," Mr. Fields laughed.

"Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to," Cory fumbled.

"I was calling you. I shouted a couple of times."

"I didn't hear."

"It's no problem," Mr. Fields laughed again. Cory appeared to be staring at Mr. Fields' hands. Mr. Fields looked down and realized that he was still holding a pair of shears in his hand. "Oh," he said, and then placed them softly on the grass. "I was tending to the roses." Mr. Fields pointed back to the shrubs in front of his house.

He was covered in dirt. The brown stains darkened the front of

his khaki pants. He smacked his hands together a few times, and the ant-size flecks crumbled off and fell to the ground. “So you didn’t hear me, huh? Lost in thought? I get like that too sometimes. It’s easier to do when you live alone.”

“I want to live alone.”

“Oh?” Mr. Fields raised his eyebrows. “I should tell you it can get kind of lonely. You might end up missing people.”

“No, I don’t think so,” Cory said.

Mr. Fields smiled. He liked Cory. It felt easier somehow to talk to him. “I heard you say you were leaving. Where are you going?” he asked. He was curious and amused at the boy’s imagination. He thought maybe the kid was talking about a game he played, a make-believe game as he’d played too often when he was younger. He prodded him further. “You mentioned something about a hole? Where do you think it’ll take you?”

“China,” Cory said solemnly.

“What’s in China?”

“Does there have to be something?”

“No, I don’t think so,” Mr. Fields pondered. Cory couldn’t help but look up at him expectantly. He had thought Mr. Fields would dismiss his answer, tell him that he was just a boy and a boy couldn’t go to China. He thought he’d call him names like the other kids at school, but instead he had taken what Cory said

seriously, and in turn it was enough to make Cory want to do the same. “I do think though that if you’re going to leave your family and friends behind for another place then it should be special. You should know why you want to go.”

Cory thought about what Mr. Fields said. “Where would you go if you could?”

He watched as Mr. Fields thought about his answer. He furrowed his brows. He took one hand and rubbed it against his chin. “Come to think of it, I don’t suppose I know where I’d go either.” Then he gave a warm smile and patted Cory’s shoulder.

Cory jerked back. “Oh, I’m sorry,” Mr. Fields said. “I shouldn’t have.”

“No, it’s okay,” Cory told him, but Mr. Fields was clearly embarrassed. Cory wanted to tell him that he wasn’t the reason he’d reacted the way he did. Cory had been afraid he’d notice the faded marks on his arms, but he couldn’t tell him that. Instead, he tensed up, hoping that Mr. Fields would forget about what just happened.

“Well,” Mr. Fields sighed.

“I better be going,” Cory said, and he began walking in the direction of his house. When he got to his front yard, he turned around, hoping to see Mr. Fields still there. He wanted to wave back, give him a signal that everything was okay, but when he looked he Mr. Fields was already gone.

Across the way Mrs. Perkins watched. Since the disappearance of her son she'd grown accustomed to staring out her front window. Unlike the others who did it mainly to watch Mr. Fields, she was more concerned with the goings-on in her neighborhood.

No one believed her at first when she said her son had vanished. In fact, they laughed in her face when she told her neighbors. They gave her excuses she knew didn't make sense—told her that he'd run away, or had taken up with a girl or drugs and couldn't be bothered to come home. She knew her son, knew what he was and wasn't capable of, and of course knew that none of the things people said had happened. He was far too young for any of that, so he had to have been taken, that was the only logical explanation. Someone took him.

She watched and hoped that the goings-on of the neighborhood would clue her in to what may have happened. She looked for peculiarities, habits out of the ordinary. The lack of support she'd been given when her son first went missing made her bitter but it also gave her purpose. She would find out what was happening with the children, she told herself each afternoon as she plopped down on her sofa. She would learn what happened to her son.

She'd suspected Mr. Fields from the beginning. The way he kept to himself. So aloof, so not caring. Then there were the rose bushes. He spent hours in that yard, sometimes going out during the heat of day. She couldn't understand why he cared so much

about some flowers. They were beautiful, yes, but even still, she felt they were not worth the effort.

One afternoon she took it upon herself to find out more about him. She went into the kitchen and opened a can of frozen lemon concentrate and dumped it in a pitcher. She filled the rest with water, found a glass and filled it with ice, and took both with her across the street.

"It's a hot one," she'd shouted.

"Yeah," he said, refusing to come out from behind the bushes.

"On the television they said it'll be like this all week," she continued, "but then there should be some rain. Thank goodness because I don't know how much longer I can stand it."

Mr. Fields appeared to not even be listening. He was pulling up some weeds, and seemed more intent on the grueling work than anything she had to say. "Well," she pattered out. "I brought you some lemonade."

At this he stopped what he was doing, turned and looked up at her. "Oh," he said, suddenly surprised. "You shouldn't have."

"Well, I just thought, you know, you should be drinking more liquids since you're out here working in the heat."

"Thank you," he shook his head once, and she quickly realized he wanted her to go. She held out the glass, making it clear that she wasn't leaving until he drank it. Mr. Fields took it and held

it to his lips. The glass reflected in the light as he gulped. He finished it in a few seconds and then gave it back to her. “Thanks again,” he said.

She tried to say a few more words but he turned back to the weeds. His distance and disregard annoyed her, and once she was settled back inside the comfort of her house and the air conditioning began cooling her off, she realized that she was more than just annoyed. She was angry.

Anger kept her watching. She made it a point to watch whenever Mr. Fields left his house. She watched when he went outside half-dressed to get the paper. She watched him during the few times he walked to his car to get groceries or do errands. Mostly, she watched him when he tended to his roses. The roses she also began to hate.

She had seen what happened between Mr. Perkins and Cory, but not hearing their voices and looking through her window gave her no context. She only saw Mr. Perkins reach out to touch the boy and him jerking back. He seemed afraid, and it was clear that his arm was hurt. She knew something important had happened between the two of them, but she wasn’t sure what.

No, she couldn’t be sure, but she convinced herself otherwise, and that was enough justification for heading over to Cory’s parents house a few hours later.

All it took was the sight of the bruise for Mrs. Perkins to be

convinced. “Now tell me, what happened to you?” she said, trying to keep her voice controlled, but when she looked at Cory she only thought of her son. She saw the ruffled, red curls of his hair and the faded freckles on his cheeks. “Who did this?”

“Nothing,” Cory said, pulling away. “No one did anything.”

“Was it the new neighbor? Was it Mr. Fields?”

“No one did it,” Cory said again.

“Cory,” she said, this time lowering her voice. “I know someone did that. You have to tell me who it was, do you understand? Was it Mr. Fields?”

Had his mother not been there maybe Cory would have told the truth. Dora stared at him with pleading, fearful eyes and waited for him to answer.

“It was Mr. Fields, wasn’t it?” Mrs. Perkins almost screamed.

Not knowing what else to do, Cory slowly nodded.

“Well,” she finally sighed. “I’m glad you told us the truth.”

The hole grew bigger, and with each passing day the absence filled their yard.

It no longer resembled a hole anymore. Instead it looked like a cave, or a tunnel to some deep underground world. All of the things Marty had poured into it—the grass and leaves and rocks,

he'd even paid for someone to pour cement down into it—all of it had disappeared.

Marty couldn't understand why his efforts weren't working, and the more effort he exerted, the more futile it became. Relinquishing control didn't come easy. He'd look out at the mess that was his yard and he'd grit his teeth so hard that hours later his jaw would ache.

"I don't understand," he told Dora. "It doesn't make any damn sense."

Dora's eyes were bloodshot. The last few nights she hadn't been sleeping, worrying over the incident with Mrs. Perkins. There'd already been a few calls from some of the other neighborhood mothers, all of them wondering what to do and all of them looking for answers.

"That hole is going to take over our entire yard. Hell, it might even take over us at the rate it's going," Marty said.

"And rightly so," Dora said.

"What?" Marty asked, his voice perking up. "What did you mean by that?"

"Nothing," she said, but she couldn't help but hope he was right. For a moment her imagination wandered to the fantasy that the hole would swallow them in their sleep. She pictured herself falling down into the muddy earth, choking on the dirt

until the blackness surrounded her. She imagined herself too disappearing.

"There's a reasonable explanation," Marty said. "There's always a reasonable explanation."

"Well then what is the reason? How do you explain what is happening?"

Marty's silence was validation for Dora. She went to the kitchen and in a single swift motion pulled up the blinds. The sunlight beamed through the glass. "See?" she said, gesturing outside to the hole. "You can't explain it, because there isn't a reason. Some things just happen, and we don't know why and we might never know. Some things just are."

"I don't want you playing around out in the neighborhood street," Dora said.

"Why not?" Cory asked.

Dora was getting ready. In an hour the neighbors would be gathering together. A reckoning was brewing. They were going over to Mr. Fields' house.

She was afraid of what the afternoon held and she was ashamed of what had already been done. There was what had happened with his rose bushes. Not only had the flowers been pulled from the ground, but the petals themselves ripped to pieces. Someone

had dumped their trash in his yard.

An unsettling feeling lodged in her throat, and as the minutes ticked by it grew bigger, making her feel as if she were somehow choking, choking on air. She knew she'd have to tell everyone the truth before it got too out of control. The flowers were one thing, but she'd seen their angry faces and knew a violent storm was coming.

At least Marty was working until late tonight, she thought. At least there was that.

She swallowed hard. "It's not safe," she finally told her son.

"But I've played out there before. Why can't I now? It doesn't make sense."

"It doesn't have to make sense for you to have to do it."

"Well, what about the yard?"

She thought about it for a minute. "The backyard is fine," she said. "Just don't bother the hole."

Cory went out to the back porch where he knew Abby waited. She held a small knapsack in her arms. "What's in there?" Cory pointed.

"A bunch of things," Abby said. She pulled on the cord, loosening the bag's opening. Cory peered in—two sandwiches wrapped in tin foil and two juice boxes. "I brought some money too. Almost fifty dollars I've saved."

"You're prepared." Cory reached in his pockets and took out a sandwich bag of his own money he'd collected. He dropped it as well as a map and a compass into her bag. "Do you think we'll need anything else?"

"I think that's it," she said.

Abby closed her knapsack and slung it over her shoulder. They walked down the slight hill of the yard to the hole.

A few yards away some of the neighbors had already gathered at Mr. Fields' door. They stood in a group, each of them not wanting to be the first and so they waited for the other to make a decision. They knew that today the situation would get settled, their children found.

Mr. Fields sat in one of his bedrooms, a now makeshift office. A woman on the phone was complaining to him about a late order. He kept apologizing, saying that the delivery man had gotten lost.

"But he'll be there soon," Mr. Fields said. "There was a mistake but it's going to be fixed now. Yes, he's on his way. Yes, not much longer now. No, no, yes I said, soon."

Cory and Abby stood in front of the hole. He took her hand and she took his. Their fingers interlocked. She gripped his tight-

ly, enough so that her fingernails pierced into his skin, making tiny blood specks inside his hands, and he knew that despite what she'd told him before, she was scared.

"Maybe we shouldn't," she said. "What if we don't come back?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean what if this is it? What if once we go down that hole we never come back here? We never see our parents. We never see our home again?"

Cory thought about it for a few long moments, then he did something that surprised them both. He leaned over and kissed her. It was quick, and only on the cheek, but when he pulled away he saw her smile.

"It'll be okay," he told her. "No matter what happens. It will. I know it."

"Okay," she nodded. "So what happens now?"

"We close our eyes and on the count of three we jump."

"You ready?"

"Yes."

Abby began to count. Cory felt the tiny fluttering inside his chest as his heart quickened. As he closed his eyes he thought—if only he could open them and it all would be different, with the world being suddenly, beautifully changed.

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