



Whisper

Chris Struyk-Bonn

Whisper

Chris Struyk-Bonn

ORCA BOOK PUBLISHERS

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording or by any information storage and retrieval system now known or to be invented, without permission in writing from the publisher.

Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Struyk-Bonn, Christina, author
Whisper / Chris Struyk-Bonn.

Issued in print and electronic formats.
ISBN 978-1-4598-0475-3 (pbk.).--ISBN 978-1-4598-0476-0 (pdf).-
ISBN 978-1-4598-0477-7 (epub)

	I. Title.	
PZ7.S9135wh 2014	j813'.6	c2013-906683-7
	C2013-906684-5	

First published in the United States, 2014
Library of Congress Control Number: 2013954148

Summary: Whisper, a teen girl with a cleft palate, is forced to survive in a world that is hostile to those with disfigurements or disabilities.

Orca Book Publishers gratefully acknowledges the support for its publishing programs provided by the following agencies: the Government of Canada through the Canada Book Fund and the Canada Council for the Arts, and the Province of British Columbia through the BC Arts Council and the Book Publishing Tax Credit.

Design by Chantal Gabriell
Cover image by Juliana Kolesova

In Canada:
Orca Book Publishers
PO Box 5626, Station B
Victoria, BC Canada
V8R 6S4

In the United States:
Orca Book Publishers
PO Box 468
Custer, WA USA
98240-0468

www.orcabook.com

17 16 15 14 • 4 3 2 1

For Eric, Quinten and Eli.

*On the very first day of my existence, hands
pushed me into the cold water and held me
down, waiting for me to drown, but even then
I was quiet and knew how to hold my breath.*

Contents

Part One

One

Two

Three

Four

Five

Six

Seven

Eight

Nine

Ten

Eleven

Twelve

Part Two

Thirteen

Fourteen

Fifteen

Sixteen

Seventeen

Eighteen

Nineteen

Twenty

Twenty-One

Twenty-Two

Twenty-Three

Twenty-Four

Twenty-Five

Twenty-Six

Acknowledgments

Part One

It was my job to catch the crayfish for dinner. I didn't mind. I tried not to let Jeremia and Eva know that I actually liked it. They saw it as punishment, standing in the cold water, waiting and watching for the pinchers to appear from beneath the slippery rocks. Jeremia thought that he should catch them as a man would—leap high, pounce, grab anything he could get hold of. He emerged from the stream wetter than the crayfish, frustrated with work that produced so little and took so long.

Eva quickly lost interest in the task. She gazed up into the branches of the trees and then hummed to herself, distracted by zooming dragonflies or the light fractured by the leaves. She would swim with the fish, paddle with the ducks and become part of nature rather than try to capture it. We would starve if we had to depend on her ability to gather food.

I was quiet and still, like a leaf floating in the stream. The crayfish became accustomed to my clammy feet occupying space beside their favorite rock, and they started to trust me. I could almost hear them, even beneath the water, as they crept across the bottom of the creek. Everything else became background noise—the screech of the crickets, the gurgle of the water, the rustle of rubbing leaves. Then I eased my hand through the water and grabbed them just behind the pinchers, swift and sure.

But that day, just as I was about to grab a crayfish with only one pincher, the warning call interrupted me, and I missed.

The warning call meant a visitor. I crouched, twisting my head in a frantic search for a hiding place that would protect not me from them, but them from me. My breath came in short bursts, and the pounding of my heart drowned out all other sounds. I'd dropped too low and the seat of my shorts had soaked up the water, clinging to my skin. The silence of the woods felt unnerving, like the heavy air before a storm.

We only ever received two visitors at our secret forest hideaway where the leaves of the oak strangler figs and skyreaching pines shaded us from sight. The nearest village, a tiny place with fewer huts than ours, was a day's walk through the trees, and the villagers didn't like to come upon our camp of outcast children by surprise. The messenger came once a month, and we prepared for his appearance by hiding. The only other visitor was my mother, who always came on my birthday, but my birthday was still four weeks away.

I hid low in the bushes and inched forward, pushing aside branches, crushing the forest debris, silent as breath. The sudden buzz of a cicada vibrated the air around me. I approached the back of my log-and-mud hut and crept around it until I was huddled between Jeremia's dwelling and mine. Our camp, so tiny and cloistered, consisted of four huts: mine, Jeremia and Eva's, Nathanael's and the storage hut. They squatted in a rough circle, with our fire pit and sitting logs creating the hub. Trees darkened the sky around our camp, leaving only a small round opening above us where we could see the stars at night, the sun during the heat of the day and the silver flash of an airplane as it drew lines across the sky. We knew about airplanes, refrigerators, trucks, toilets—Nathanael had educated us about the world beyond our camp—but knowledge and experience are two different things.

Jeremia crouched in the shadow of his hut, five-year-old Eva beside him. Both stared at me with wide eyes. Jeremia had his good arm around Eva, stilling her motions and calming them both. They had less than I did—they didn't even have mothers who visited them—but they also didn't have fathers who had tried to drown them. Nathanael had told them of my history so their jealousy wouldn't consume them when my mother came to visit.

I flattened myself against the rough log wall of my hut and peeked around the side. Nathanael stood by the fire pit in the middle of our camp. The sun behind the trees cast dappled shadows over his face. He waited, and while he waited he seemed to shrink. His clothes, which used to fit him, now flapped loose and baggy, about his body. Even his shoes looked long and awkward. We didn't know what would happen to us when Nathanael, now sixty-nine, became too old to care for the unwanted. Where would we go? What would we do?

“Who are you?” Nathanael said, his voice wavering with age and perhaps fear. “What do you want?”

The messenger, who had never come mid-month, trampled the leaves and sticks of the wood, pushed through the hanging branches that shielded our huts from view and stepped out from the shadows. He wore the bill of his hat sideways, his pants so yellow they glowed, his shirt so red it flashed like a cardinal through the trees. His colors alerted all the creatures of the woods, including ourselves. I didn't understand why he had come; usually he carried the heavy load of our supplies. This time, all he had was his own food pack, a bundle under his shirt and something black strapped to his back. And then I heard the peep.

It sounded like a kitten—its high mewl made my hands flutter. I put my palm against my chest, afraid that my heart would respond to the cry and reveal my hiding spot. The messenger sat on the log and opened his shirt. Nathanael sat beside him. The messenger took out a small bundle wrapped in cloth and laid it on his knees. Both Nathanael and the messenger looked down at it. I stopped breathing. Nathanael grunted.

“They come so often now, one every three years. Before, it was one every ten or twenty,” Nathanael said.

I glanced toward the graveyard. Low-hanging limbs, vines and shrubs obscured the space between me and the four graves, but I knew they were there. One had died after I came, before Eva arrived, before I understood that some babies lived.

“How old?” Nathanael asked.

“Three days.”

“Eaten anything?”

The messenger shook his head and said, “Clemente and Maximo's fourth. They don't want it.”

Nathanael nodded. He reached down and picked up the tiny bundle. He placed it on his own knee, his broad brown hands stretching beyond the cloth.

“I'm too old for this,” he said. “Someday I may need to consider finding a replacement.” He didn't look at the messenger.

The messenger's laugh sounded like the bark of a coyote. “No one else wants this job,” he said. “Can't one of the rejects do it?” His hand waved outward. I crouched in the shadow of the hut, ten feet away from where they sat. I could see sweat trickle down the messenger's face.

“They won't want the job either,” Nathanael said. One of his hands pulled back the cloth around the

bundle, and a brown nose peeked through the blanket's opening.

"You want me to...you know"—the messenger leaned in toward Nathanael and spoke lower—"get rid of it?"

My body betrayed me then. My hands clutched at each other, gripping and wringing. Earlier I had been holding my breath; now it came fast, hard and shallow. I felt light-headed, and before I thought about revealing myself (and the possible consequences), I pushed off from the wall, heard my feet hitting the packed earth of the camp's meeting place and listened to the wind whistle past my ears. I grabbed the bundle off Nathanael's knees and leaped into the forest. I was jaguar, I was puma, I was hidden behind the nearest tree before they could react.

I peeked around the trunk. The messenger faced the forest, his eyes focused on the woods but not seeing me. He crouched low, next to the log where Nathanael still sat, and spread his hands out, as if warding off evil. The sun beamed down on him, his nose creating a shadow that stretched across his mouth, down his chin and onto his neck. The black oblong object on his back, attached with a strap across his chest, banged against him a couple of times. He was clearly braced for an attack, and he smiled. His head turned back and forth. I hid only ten feet away from where he stood, but he didn't see me, he couldn't hear my heart hammering, he couldn't hear the breath I sucked in through my nose. He had seen too much already.

"What was that?" he asked. His eyes were wide, the whites showing all around his dark irises.

Nathanael turned his head and glanced into the woods.

"That was Whisper. She doesn't want you to get rid of it."

"That was Belen's child? Belen and Teresa's? She's an animal—and her face is..." His hands touched his own face, his unsplit lips and undamaged nose. "Is she dangerous?" The messenger backed away from the woods and stood near the fire pit. From his pocket he pulled a cell phone, and he held it up in the air, turning it this way and that. He pushed some buttons and shook the object.

"What, will you call for help?" Nathanael asked. "Ask for a helicopter to lift you out of this dangerous place? You'll have to climb the tree to get even the weakest of signals."

I snuggled the bundle against my chest and rocked my body back and forth. No movement came from it, nothing but a faint touch of breath. I gently flipped up the edge of the blanket and examined the round face. How anyone could think her ugly was astonishing to me, but I'd seen my own face in the creek on a clear day, and someday she would look exactly like me. I touched the tip of her nose against mine and breathed in her freshness.

Nathanael brushed a fly away from his ear. "What do you have on your back?"

The messenger pulled the black strap over his head and handed the oblong object—I could see now that it was some kind of case—to Nathanael. His eyes continued to look into the trees, trying to find me. I moved through the underbrush a few steps closer so I could see better.

Nathanael unlatched the locks on the case and removed something made of wood, with strings stretched from the narrow end to the rounded end.

"It's from Whisper's mother. She won't be coming on her birthday."

The wind howled in my head, and I sat down hard on the forest floor. I didn't care that twigs snapped beneath me and leaves rustled. When I slumped to the ground, the smell of moss, earth and crushed scorpion flower wafted into the air, making my head feel insubstantial. I didn't care that the messenger might have seen me, could have come through the trees and found me crouched with the

baby in my arms.

My mother wasn't coming.

She was abandoning me too. I had known it would happen. I had known that eventually she'd want to avoid the inconvenient trek to our home, like the parents of the others in our camp. For fifteen years she had walked the three days to the camp, loved me, sung to me, talked to me like a normal human being, called me Lydia, the name I'd been born with, and then walked the three days back. And because she had come for so many years, I'd grown weak, hopeful, accepting that this was the pattern of my life. I believed that she still loved me and that maybe someday she would take me home.

I clutched the bundle close to my chest and felt the rhythm of the baby's breathing against my neck. I leaned against the rough bark of a pine tree and tilted my head back. I gazed up, taking in the branches that arched over my head, obscuring the blue of the sky. The comfort of loving arms was gone. My own arms would have to do now.

Lose a mother, gain a sister.



"They won't attack me when I'm in the woods, will they?" asked the messenger as he slung his food pack over his shoulder and adjusted the brim of his cap. He looked around as if the woods were full of rejects, huffing and grunting, waiting to consume him. Nathanael said nothing.

He went to his hut and returned with one of Jeremia's sculptures, about the size of Eva, wrapped in palm leaves. He held it up while the messenger turned, bent over and held out his hands behind his back while Nathanael leaned the object into his hands. The messenger supported the weight, and Nathanael wrapped a thick cord around and under the sculpture, securing it to the man's back. That was how we paid our expenses. The messenger sold Jeremia's sculptures in the village or in the city and bought our supplies with the profits. Nathanael believed the messenger was pocketing any extra money. We had no idea how much Jeremia's sculptures sold for, but he carved more than enough to sustain our modest lifestyle.

The messenger grunted and began his plodding retreat from our forest home. His eyes shifted from side to side, as if waiting for us, the rejects, to ambush him.

When we were alone again, Nathanael sat on one of the logs by the fire pit and waited. I crept out from behind the tree. Jeremia and Eva tiptoed out from beside their hut. We stole forward on silent feet to Nathanael. I gently lowered the bundle to Nathanael's knees and then sat on the very edge of the log. Jeremia and Eva crouched at Nathanael's feet and touched the baby's head.

Nathanael told Eva to get a bowl of water and she ran nimbly to our creek, returning with a cup sloshing liquid over the edge. Nathanael dipped his pinky into the water. He slipped droplets onto the baby's mouth until the lips parted and she squeaked. Nathanael placed more water into her throat where it was sure to go down. If the water touched the slices in the skin between her nose and mouth, nothing would go down her throat and into her stomach. The baby swallowed again and again and then opened her eyes.

We looked at each other. She was beautiful, with her brown eyes and fresh smell. I didn't understand why her parents didn't want her, why Jeremia's didn't want him, why Eva's didn't want her, why my father had tried to kill me.

Nathanael held the baby with one hand and slid my birthday present onto my knees with the other. ~~The case was cold, hard, unfeeling, so different from a mother's touch. I unlatched the clasps and opened the case.~~

"A violin," Nathanael said. He had grown up in the village, traveled to the city and then chosen to come to our camp—on purpose, not because he had to. "What use is that to us? Maybe we can start the fire with it," he said.

The instrument was warm to the touch, chestnut brown with streaks like golden sunlight radiating through it. I plucked each string with my first finger and listened to the sound. Twangy. High-pitched. Nasal. Like my voice.

"Here," Nathanael said. He slid the baby into my lap and then pulled the violin out of my hand. He set the cup of water by my foot, and I began dipping my finger into it and dropping the water into her mouth. She swallowed, blinked, swallowed again. Jeremia slid his finger into her pink tightfisted palm, and her tiny hand hugged his narrow finger. Eva laughed.

Nathanael shuffled to his hut and threw aside the deerskin door. After a minute I heard the voice from the radio, one of two stations we could hear clearly. Usually, to save the batteries, we only listened to the news station and tried to understand what was happening in a world we'd never seen and would never be accepted into. But now Nathanael adjusted the knobs and I heard static, more static, and then—music. Nathanael turned up the volume and shuffled back out of his hut.

The music fit with the sounds around us—the wind, the birds, the crickets. Jeremia put his chin on my knee. He was in an affectionate mood, but his moods changed with the wind, and I'd learned to be cautious.

I'd never heard music like this before. It was the sound of the blue-black grosbeak, only sweeter and more painful. It was the sound of my loneliness, clear and nerve-tingling. As I listened to the music, my heart squeezed itself small, flattened into a straight line and compressed into nothingness: a tick, a flea, the point of a pencil.

"That's the sound a violin can make," Nathanael said.

I looked down at the instrument in Nathanael's hand. He lifted it up, fit it beneath his chin and drew the long stick with hairs across the strings. His fingers pushed against the strings in various places and different notes emerged. His hands were stretched out long, the muscles taut, and when I looked at his face, I saw a tear make a snail's trail down his cheek. He abruptly placed the violin in the case and walked to his hut. The goat, Naya, bleated and followed him.

I understood why my mother had given it to me. The violin *was* me, nasal and foreign, but somewhere within its depths something beautiful resided. I looked at Jeremia. He looked at me. And on my lap, the new reject, the beautiful baby, closed her eyes, smiled and passed gas.

"You two must be related," Jeremia said, squeezing my calf muscle.

In the morning, Jeremia was gone. His time had been approaching. He disappeared in cycles, like the moon, and then reappeared. I knew that in two years, when he turned nineteen, he wouldn't come back. He would vanish like the four rejects before him, not one of them returning to our little camp in the woods. They went to more civilized places where the trees grew crooked in their search for sun and where the crickets couldn't be heard. They journeyed through the forest, traversed the creeks and joined hundreds, thousands, of people gathered in places with no birds. Nathanael said the city was an unforgiving concrete slab, full of so much noise that it was hard to hear yourself. He said the air was toxic and a smell—dark and evil—caused sickness like the tendrils of ivy, touching and choking everything.

I didn't understand what, in that cold world of square buildings, unnatural light and illness, was so wonderful and so precious that the other rejects would abandon the only home they'd ever known. I couldn't imagine that I would ever make that choice. It wasn't bad, living in our camp, just isolated.



That first morning after the baby arrived, Nathanael and Eva were sitting together on the log when I stumbled from my hut, the sun already above my head. The baby, strapped to my chest, had woken me every time I fell asleep, and during the night when I had looked through my window, the moon had seemed not to move at all. Old cloth diapers, yellowed and worn with age—saved from when I first came to the camp, from when Jeremia first came to the camp and even from those before Jeremia—had been tossed haphazardly in front of my hut and required washing. The baby needed something more substantial than water. She slept and woke, slept and woke.

Eva hiccupped and sniffled through tears. At first I thought it was because Jeremia was gone, but then I saw her hand. Porcupine barbs were thrust deep into her palm. Nathanael shakily twisted them out with his thumb and first finger. When he saw me, he moved over, and I sat next to Eva. She was trying so hard to be brave, her chubby cheeks red and mottled from tears and held breath. She bit down on her lower lip and looked at me through watery eyes. Her webbed hands were red and swollen.

I twisted each barb and then removed it with a quick yank. She jerked every time I pulled one out, but she didn't run away nor did she hide her hand.

"Jeremia left because of me," she said.

"No."

"Yes. He told me only stupid people touch porcupines, and I'm the stupidest person he's ever met." Eva was a creature of the forest. She sang with the birds, jumped with the grasshoppers, fed squirrels from her hands. It made sense that she would try to touch a porcupine. Nathanael sat on the other side of Eva and put his arm around her shoulders.

I pulled the last barb from her hand and then poured water over the wounds. The blood and water mingled, dripping from the webbing between her fingers in dark-red rivulets.

“Jeremia is like a cat, Eva,” Nathanael said. “He is moody and angry. He needs to be alone for while.”

“Why is he so angry?” Eva asked.

“Jeremia is the only boy ever rejected. Even disfigured boys aren’t rejected, but his parents already had four sons, and when he was born with only one arm and couldn’t do the same amount of farmwork as his brothers, they decided they didn’t need him.”

“My parents didn’t want me either,” Eva said, her sore hand held in her good one. “And Whisper’s dad tried to drown her. We’re all the same...aren’t we? That’s what you always told us.”

“Yes,” Nathanael said, “and no. You two are girls. Jeremia is the only boy. He feels it more—this abandonment. Boys are precious and respected—to be rejected means—”

“That the boy is like a girl,” Eva said, smearing the water around on her face, leaving smudges of mud. “I don’t see what’s so special about being a boy. They smell worse than girls. They fart and burp.”

Nathanael looked to the sky and laughed. It was a good sound, but he woke the baby, who wailed that nasal, throaty cry that made my throat tighten. I wondered if a mixture of goat’s milk and water would help her sleep.

I fed the baby a bit of water, strapped her to my chest with the cloth and walked around the fire pit. Her eyes drooped, her mouth opened, her breath slowed. Nathanael took her from me, laid her in the camping chair and handed me the violin. I held it to my shoulder and Nathanael’s fingers pushed against my own, showing me how to create a different note by applying pressure to the strings. I moved the bow with my right hand and changed the positioning of my left-hand fingers. I could do this. It was tricky, but I could do it.

My fingers fluttered over the strings, pushed here, pushed there. At first a nasal twang screeched from the instrument, but if I pulled the bow just so and held it down, a sweetness rolled from the strings, and I could feel the music pouring out of me. I smiled at Nathanael.

“Yes,” he said and looked at me with eyes narrowed, weighing and assessing. I put down the violin, picked up the baby and sang her a simple lullaby, one my mother had sung to me. Soon I would play for her on the violin.



The goat’s milk didn’t work. When I first gave it to her, she gulped it greedily, swallowed and demanded more, but when it settled into her stomach, she started to cry and then cried for hours. I burped her against my shoulder, walked her back and forth, felt my own tears joining hers, and then remembered my mother’s lullaby.

Nathanael was asleep in our only camping chair. His head rested against the flimsy fabric; his mouth was wide open, and he emitted a loud, rumbling snore every few seconds.

Mornings in our camp were for lessons. Nathanael, who had lived in the village until he was twenty, taught us how to read, how to do math, how to utilize the plants around us. He had lived in the city for three years. When we asked him why, he told us he had been “searching.”

I set the baby on a bed of layered blankets in my hut and propped her up like a warm sack of flour so that she could still burp if she needed to. Then I opened the violin case. Her crying came in hiccup

and shivers, her face a deep, bruised red. I fit the instrument against my shoulder and under my chin. ~~Nathanael had shown me. I held the bow in my right hand and eased it over the strings. I listened for~~ the notes Nathanael had taught me. The sound was so harsh and creaky, the baby hiccupped her crying to a stop and opened her eyes. I tried again.

The noise the violin made was no better than my own voice, but I had heard the music from the radio. I knew what the violin was capable of creating. I slowed down, took a deep breath, tried not to let the baby's renewed cries make me so shaky. I whispered the lyrics in my mind and fumbled my way through the tune, pressing my left fingers to the strings and drawing the bow with my right. After a few minutes of fumbling, the song became recognizable.

Corinna, Corinna

time for the baby to eat.

Milk in the morning

at noon ripened wheat

at night soft dates,

acorns from the trees,

dandelion fluff

on the quiet evening breeze.

I listened to the notes and pictured my mother holding me, rocking me, caressing my head with her hand. She would tuck my black hair behind my ears and smooth the strands over my head. I remembered the feel of her palms, rough and calloused but also beautiful and loving. I remembered the sound of her voice, so deep, full and true. The violin began to take on those tones as I played the simple tune over and over. When I felt the warm notes winging around the hut, I opened my eyes.

The baby was asleep. So was Eva. She had crept in while I was playing and now lay in front of the door, her left hand under her cheek, her swollen right hand wrapped in a white cloth and clutched against her chest.

I played the lullaby again.



The baby's sharp, desperate cries startled me awake four times in the night, my hands trembling from lack of sleep. I dripped more water into her mouth; I held her against my shoulder and patted the ground from her stomach. This child would not be another mound in the graveyard, not if I could find something to fill her, something that could replace mother's milk.

The third time she woke me up, when the moon had already crossed the opening between the trees above our huts, I heard a keening so sad and mournful I wanted to cry along with the baby. I wrapped her tightly against my chest and walked silently through the woods, down the path to the creek, the song pushing against my nose, making it drip.

He didn't hear me when I padded up behind him. The baby was quiet now, satisfied with the sound of my heart, and I squatted on my heels where I could see him, a shadow on the branch over the swimming hole. Nathanael was like a grasshopper, his arms bent at the elbows, his knees angled out

his feet hooked around each other under the branch.

He played a song as lonely and sad as an owl at night. My throat tightened, and I sat in the mud on the path. This was the song of a broken heart, and I suddenly understood Nathanael a little better. I always thought that he hated the village we were from, hated the city, and chose to live with me because it was his best option. But Nathanael had had other options, and they must have vanished.

When he pulled the bow over the strings one last time, the lingering notes floating across the water like the dragonflies, I opened my eyes, stood and slipped back down the path. I knew now that Nathanael had known love and it had disappeared like dew on the grass. Nathanael had told us so little about himself that I'd always thought of him as our father, single, satisfied.

I heard him creep into my hut, replace the violin in its case and drop the deerskin door back in its place. I slept after that, for a few hours anyway, until the baby's piercing cries woke me again. I slept with an ache now, an ache that food could not fill.



In the morning, Eva climbed up the great pine by our camp. There was a large macaw's nest in an open cavity halfway up the trunk. Eva believed there were babies in that opening. Jeremia refused to let her climb the tree because he remembered me at seven, when I'd climbed up for no reason other than because I could and had become stuck. I'd stayed up in that tree all day long. Rosa, my mentor at the time, had stood below the pine, her arms across her chest, refusing to let anyone help me down.

"You got up there, you get down. You won't always have someone to rescue you, you know."

She'd gone to bed at dark, and Jeremia had climbed the tree, showing me the best places to put my feet and how to slide down the trunk when branches were scarce.

But Eva was not me. She was loud, courageous, willing to touch porcupines with her bare hands. She acted while I preferred to listen. When I woke up in the morning, tired from a broken night of shuddering cries, Eva already held tightly to the trunk of the tree, her webbed feet clutched against either side, a towel in one of her hands. The opening with the nest was inches above her head.

Nathanael had explained to Eva that baby birds weren't born in late summer; they're born in the spring and should be out of the nest, flying on their own, by this time, but Eva, hands clenched in stubborn fists, didn't believe him.

"What about the fox?" she said. "Look at her puppies."

We didn't know what to say to that. We didn't understand why the puppies were still running about half the size of their mother, and why they followed her, not daring to hunt on their own.

"There is a baby bird in that nest that can't get out. I'm going to rescue it."

I stood below the tree, my thoughts muddled from lack of sleep, the baby quiet against my chest, smudges of black beneath her eyes where healthy brown skin should have been. Nathanael milked the goat by his hut and turned the radio on. Sometimes the stations came through clearly, and sometimes they came through garbled. Today was a mix; I caught much of what was said but didn't understand the words. "Due to high interest rates, high unemployment and a low economic report, both the Dow Jones Industrial Average and the NASDAQ dropped last night. A recovery is hoped..." Nathanael hummed along as though it were music, but I focused on Eva up in the branches.

She was cautious and inched her way up the trunk with the ease and confidence of a sloth. She

reached her hand into the hole, the towel draped over her shoulder. When she began to remove her hand from the opening, peeps and squawks filtered down from the nest, and I saw the mother macaw hovering above Eva, shrieking and nervously flapping her wings.

Eva began to sing, a sweet, light call. She crept forward again, the mother bird squawking and fluttering near her head. Eva ignored the mother, ignored the wings that flapped in panic, and pulled a green splash of color from the nest, wrapping it quickly in the towel. She tucked the towel into her shirt and began her retreat. The mother macaw, green and red against the sky, a flower in motion, screamed and cried. Her shrill call reminded me of the baby's, so desperate and scared. Mothers should protect their babies, threaten those who would take them away and cry in desperation. Why had all of our mothers surrendered us, given us away to this forest home instead of flapping their wings and calling for help?

The sun was high in the sky by the time Eva reached the ground. Her short black hair clung in sweaty clumps to the back of her neck, and her limbs trembled. She set the towel down and shook out her arms and legs, wiping the sweat from her eyes. Huddled in the brown cloth was a macaw, hardly a baby anymore, green and pink with a red tuft above its beak. The bird looked perfect, its beak thick and gray and pointed, its eyes pink and wary.

Eva placed both hands around the bird so it could not flutter or peck. The macaw squawked, and the mother answered in shrill fear from a branch near our heads.

"Look," Eva said. She held the bird with only one hand and slid a finger under the bird's wing. The feathers opened, puffed, ready for flight, but the wing was miniature, a tiny, perfect replica that had failed to grow along with the bird. Eva lifted the wing on the other side, also miniature.

"I'm keeping her."

Eva carried the baby against her chest and walked with jutting chin to her hut, closed the deerskin door and shut the mother out. The terrified mother perched on the roof of Eva's hut and called to her baby all day. I watched that mother and wondered what she would have done when her new babies came the next year. Would she have kept the older baby or pushed it out of the nest to make room for the perfectly formed new ones?

Jeremia returned after a few days. He went to the city sometimes, to crouch in alleyways, understand what people did who lived outside our little camp and were an accepted part of the world. Sometimes he watched the people in our old village. He saw his father, observed his family. He loved and hated them with a fierceness that scared me. He never spoke to them or revealed himself, but I referred to them by name.

He ran into my hut while I played the violin, shimmied over the dirt floor, leaped across the blankets that made up my bed and danced in front of the stack of books on my rock and wood shelf, all the while wagging his butt and waving his one hand in the air. He opened his mouth and pretended to sing. He grabbed me around the waist and twirled me around. Then he was out the door. No one asked him where he went or why, and no one accused him of abandoning us and shirking his chores. Abandonment was nothing new and we all knew that it was better for Jeremia to understand himself—than for him to stay and torment us with his moodiness.

Nathanael cooked rice for supper. He mashed some of the rice until it was mush and then added water. He stirred the pale substance, and when I looked at it, I could almost believe it was milk. I sat on a log by the fire and dripped bits of rice milk into the baby's throat. She gulped eagerly.

I waited for the gas to start, her stomach to clench, her crying to begin. Already I was prepared for a sleepless night of shrieks, shuddering and fussiness. Even though we'd fed her goat's milk for days, she'd never become accustomed to it.

Instead, she watched me, her eyes round and dark, her face solemn, as if examining my distorted features was the key to understanding herself. She was content and calm, not squirming and crying. I unwrapped her from her cotton clothing and cleaned her with warm water.

Jeremia and Eva laughed. They laughed until tears dripped muddy streaks down their cheeks because the baby's tummy was so full and round, her limbs so thin and small, that she looked like a frog, a *rana*, and that is how she got her name. Ranita. Little Frog. I liked it. It fit her.



We gathered on the logs around the fire, the baby calm and still, Eva's head resting on Jeremia's knee. Jeremia's eyes bloodshot from lack of sleep, his face smudged with dirt from the trip. He was always so happy when he returned that I wondered why he did it, why he tortured himself by watching a bruised world he couldn't heal.

There were others from our camp who had never returned. Rosa, my roommate, camp sister and mentor, left when she was fourteen and never came back. Jeremia's mentor, Telise, never returned either. Every time Jeremia disappeared, Eva fidgeted, worried and slept in the hut with me. She was always sure Jeremia wouldn't come back.

"It's worse now," Jeremia said. "Many, many of us."

Ranita's eyelids began to close. Her tiny hands relaxed and she breathed softly through her open

mouth. I lifted her from my legs and held her beneath my nose, breathing her in, sweet and fresh.

“Tell us,” Nathanael said. He leaned forward in the camping chair, his knobby hands on his knees. He looked into the fire.

“It was the same as before. I came through the oaks, through the stunted bushes, over the reeking creek to the place with roads. I followed the road back to the mountains, to the city, until I came to the hill of rocks and slept there, watching travelers on the road, coming and going.”

We’d heard this part of the story before. Jeremia often found a cave or a rock overhang for shelter and watched from his safe perch. Other people lived in these rocks, many like us, he said, and they sometimes lived together in camps like ours, where they shared a fire, food, company. But he also said they sometimes stole from each other or rolled among the rocks kicking and hitting or attacking the weakest.

This time he had slept near a camp with four boys in it, beside a train track, over which trains roared every few hours. Two of the boys looked a bit like me, he said, with openings in their faces that shouldn’t have been there, but the other two boys were different. One had no arms or legs and had to be carried from place to place. The other had no nose or ears, only openings where the cartilage should have been. I tried to imagine this, having a face with no nose. Even though my face is open in other places, I have cartilage. I wondered if he could smell—what life would be like if you never knew the aroma of honeysuckle in the spring.

“They were a tribe,” Jeremia said. “They’d built a platform on wheels for the boy, a rolling platform with a strap that held him in place. In the morning, they rolled to the city, and they came back at dusk, when the sweeping lights search the sky. They would have food, money, bottles of drinks. They sat around their fire and talked to each other, their voices growing louder and louder as the moon moved across the sky, until one boy became very sick and the other three fell asleep. They did not hear the other tribe coming.”

I held Ranita tightly against my chest and listened to her breathing. Jeremia had stopped speaking, his hand curled into a fist. A pulse appeared in his left cheek, as though his jaw was clamped so tight he begged for release.

“The other tribe was normal, without blemish, like Nathanael.”

We all looked at Nathanael as though we had forgotten his face. He had little hair now—a few thin strands that grew against the sides of his head—and his face had grooves in it like a walnut shell, but he did not have extra openings in his face where water sometimes trickled out, he did not have webbed feet like the ducks, and he was not missing an arm.

“While the first tribe slept, the other tribe took everything. They took the food, the money, the drinks. They took the radio and headphones, they took the rolling platform for the boy with no legs, they took the plastic covering that sheltered the first tribe from the rain. And then they woke up the first tribe.”

Eva covered her eyes with her hands. Jeremia watched Nathanael now, the muscles in his arms tensed. Jeremia looked like an adult with his black eyes, the fire dancing shadows across his face. He was almost eighteen, much older than the other rejects had been when they left, but he still returned home, I hoped it was because of me.

“Why are they like that, Nathanael?” Jeremia said.

I thought Nathanael had not heard. He didn’t move or blink. He stared into the fire while I listened.

to the sounds of the wolf on the hill, the crickets in the grasses, the bats in the sky. Slowly he turned his head. His eyes were old, creased below, above, to the sides.

“People are cruel,” Nathanael said. “Here we are unnoticed, isolated, maybe even a bit lonely, but it is better to be unnoticed than to be in civilization where cruelty will find you.”

Jeremia nodded as though he understood Nathanael’s comments.

“It found that first tribe, cruelty. Those other boys used boards, they used rocks. I heard the first tribe screaming, running, trying to get away to hide in the hills or between the boulders. I’d never heard screams like that, so terrified, like animals in pain. I thought of the screaming rabbit that woke us one night with its head caught beneath the root. These boys screamed like that, like death would be welcome.”

I remembered the scream of the rabbit. I’d been about eight, still living in the hut with Rosa, and the scream cut through our dreams and woke us. She’d held me that time, held me close, covering my ears, adding her own screams to that of the rabbit until Nathanael had freed the creature and it had run unhurt, into the trees. We’d slept together then, her arm around me, her body warm and protective. The night of the screaming rabbit is my best memory of Rosa.

“They got away, the two who looked like Whisper, and the one without ears. The fourth rolled off the ground, twisted below their legs while they laughed and hit him with the board. He begged once, prayed that they would stop, but after they laughed and spit on him, he was silent. He waited for the board to come down again. I couldn’t watch anymore, so I ran at the cruel boy whose back was to me. I knocked him to the ground, grabbed the board from his hand and stood over the armless boy on the ground. There were three surrounding us, three whose bodies appeared perfect, but they backed away when their friend did not rise. I snarled, and they ran.”

I wasn’t breathing. I held Ranita tightly against my chest and thought of violent boys chasing me through the night. I thought of how my heart would have pounded, how I would have run like a pumpkin fear chasing me. I would never go to the city.

“I dragged the boy into the space between the rocks, went down the hill and filled a bottle with water from the creek. The water had a film over the top like the skin of dead leaves after winter, and he drank from the water. He drank for two days, but he could not speak. He never told me his name and the wound on his head would not stop bleeding even when I pressed a cloth against it. On the third day, he died. I covered the opening with rocks and walked through the forest, the wolf howling on the hill. I never saw his tribe again—they never returned to look for him.

“And then I went to see my family.” Jeremia was silent for a moment, his hand skillfully flipping a knife between his fingers. He had been working on a large maple sculpture, and in it I could see leaves from the trees, falling, falling, never touching the ground. We were Jeremia’s family.

“I watched my brother, my oldest one, Calen. He hunted the wolf.”

Jeremia’s wolf followed him everywhere, but always at a distance. Jeremia had never smoothed the coarse fur of the wolf’s mane and the wolf had never brushed his rough tongue along Jeremia’s hand and yet they watched each other, predicted each other’s moods, followed in each other’s footsteps.

Calen couldn’t catch the wolf, of course. He followed it up into the hills, tracked the footprints in the soft mud of the creek bank, but he was so loud and clumsy in his movements, the animals stayed miles away.

“My brother returned to the village with nothing and Jun, my father, hit him on the side of the head.”

with the gun Calen carried. My mother came out of their square house, pressed a cloth against Calen's head, but Calen pushed her away so roughly she fell to the ground."

Four boys his mother had raised, four rough boys who beat each other blue and purple for saying the wrong word, breathing too loudly, giving the wrong look. Only Calen, the oldest, lived at home anymore. Jeremia wasn't sure why his brother chose not to get married and have his own family. He was like Jeremia, though, taking aimless walks that were not intended for food gathering. Such walks produced ideas, claimed Jeremia, and understanding.

In our village, parents abandoned us, older sisters left for the city and we never heard from them again. Would I do the same when I got older? Would I someday leave Eva, Ranita and old Nathanael? I swore I would not do this. I would not abandon the people who had become my tribe.

All night I held Ranita against my chest. I heard the creek trickling its song through the night, heard the coyotes snuffling by the fire, I heard the soft barks of the fox puppies, I heard the distant whine of an airplane, and I heard Eva's macaw, Emerald, chirping in her hut, but I did not hear boys with boards running through the woods, even though I listened until the sun reached its fingers into the hut.



Since returning from his last excursion, Jeremia had changed. His actions seemed desperate now, more frantic and intense. While I warmed water on the fire, preparing to wash Ranita, he came up behind me, silent as a moth. I felt his nervousness, his fluttering hand, and when I looked at him, I saw his mouth moving, his lips whispering to himself. If I remained calm, gave him his space, maybe he would relax, stop fidgeting. Instead, he picked Ranita up from where I had laid her on the grasses and held her against his cheek. He closed his eyes and breathed deeply. He brought Ranita to Nathanael, who sat in the camping chair in front of the fire, and rested her on the old man's knees. Nathanael picked up the baby, rocked back and forth, hummed.

Jeremia grabbed me around the upper arm with his long, muscled fingers, pulling me away from the water and toward the creek. He let go and began to walk up the path. He didn't turn to watch me, didn't check to make sure my steps followed his—he knew I would come. We'd walked this path many times, day and night, sun and wind, but usually Eva was with us, running ahead, shrieking and hopping over the branches in our path. Often Nathanael came along with his fishing pole, wishing to catch the trout in the water hole.

It was early in the day to swim, but the water was always warm in late summer. The trees above the hole stretched their branches to the sun, leaving an opening above the water that sucked in heat. Jeremia sat on the branch of the pine that reached out over the water, took off his shirt and swung his feet. His body reminded me of the willow tree, limber and thin, his muscles moving beneath the skin, his ribs gently raised bumps. His second arm was a rounded limb that reached to where his elbow would have been. I was so accustomed to seeing his arm without fingers that it didn't seem strange to me.

I sat beside him and waited.

Our feet were almost the same color, darkened by the sun, but his toes were long and bumpy while mine were short and curled. I tilted my head back, felt the warmth of the sun and looked up into the sky. A solitary vulture, with its bald head and shaggy wings, flapped across the opening between the

trees, and I saw the smoky trail of an airplane as it cruised through the sky in its carefully plotted path. I heard the hum of the mosquitoes just awakening. I saw the stirring of the water bugs skimming the surface of the pool. A leaf lazily drifted to the opening where the stream trickled from the pool.

Jeremia's hand touched mine. I looked down at our hands, his fingers over mine, warm and dry against my skin. That small touch, so light and delicate, sent tingles through my wrist and up my arm. I had been touched by Jeremia many times, but lately his touch had changed. When we were younger we'd wrestled like kittens. We'd tumbled over each other, fought with each other, scratched, pinched, and hit, but now every contact meant something more. I wanted him to touch me all the time.

I looked at him. His eyes were pinched around the edges, as though he couldn't see me clearly without squinting. Something needed to be said, but I didn't know what. None of us talked much—except for Eva, who chattered like the squirrels. Nathanael was quiet, and Rosa had been moody and spoke almost always in caustic bites. Jeremia and I had never needed to speak; we understood each other. But sitting beside him wasn't enough right now because I didn't know what he saw when he visited the city, and I didn't have the words to speak to him about it.

A groan came from his lips. Then he dropped from the branch, his body straight, and slid like an otter into the water. I could see his legs frog-kick and move him just beneath the surface. His black hair spread behind him, straight and streaming. When his head surfaced, the sun glistened off the drops on his skin and made him beautiful. He pulled his arm back and dragged it along the surface of the water, sending a plume into the air that hit my legs. I pushed off from the branch and dropped without a splash, my legs straight. This was a language I understood. I dropped down, down, until my feet hit the muck of the bottom, and then I pushed up right below Jeremia. I found his ankle and pulled hard.

He came down too easily and put his hand on my shoulder, pushing me back into the mud. I flipped my body around and dug my fingers into the sludge of the bottom. I grasped a handful and rose to the surface. I waited for his head to come back up. The dappled shadow of his form moved away from me toward the bank where the otter's slide muddied the hill.

The ooze in my hand began to slip through my fingers and trickle down my arm. When Jeremia's head came to the surface, I threw the muck, but his hand came up, stopping the muddy assault. He smiled at me, a grin that darkened his eyes. He took a handful of muck from the otter slide and pelted me with it. I ducked below the surface, laughing as I went and choking on the water that flowed through the slits in my face and into my nose. He would come for me now, so I turned and swam to the opposite side of the hole, the side where the wild rose hung over the water. I surfaced beneath the branches, hoping they were thick enough to cover me, and waited.

I couldn't see him, didn't know where he would emerge. I held my breath. His head pushed the water up, a rising bubble, and he looked at me from only inches away. I could see the gold flecks in his brown eyes. Water dripped from his perfect nose and mouth. My feet dug into the ooze of the hole.

"This is the best life we'll ever have," he said, "here, with just our tribe."

I looked at the banks of the pool, trying to understand what he meant. This pool was good. We ate well, except for during the late winter when supplies ran low. But my mother was not returning and now had a baby to care for. Life could be better.

"Out there, no one cares. We have to stay together."

His hand gripped my arm, squeezed and tightened. His mouth was pulled straight and his eyes did not shift. Where had this Jeremia come from? What had happened to the playful Jeremia who swam

me about and danced against the light of the fire, who carved such beautiful sculptures that I wanted to crawl inside them and let their cascading waterfalls forever slide over my body? The Jeremia gripping my arm knew about a world I'd never seen and didn't care to understand. My heart pounded beneath his fingers.

“Only us, Whisper.”

He pulled me to him, our chests meeting. I could feel his heart beating, speaking to my own, and his mouth against mine was like the first bite of a fresh mango. My lips parted, the slit opening and spreading against the solid skin of his own lips. He didn't seem to mind. My hands slid across the skin of his back and tightened, pressing him against me so the length of his body met my own. He lifted my feet out of the mud and his arm held me close, so close, but not close enough.

And then he let go. I sank back into the mud and we looked at each other. I held my hand against my chest, trying to still my heart, to cover its almost visible pounding.

Jeremia swam to the bank where the pine tree hung over the pool and pulled himself out. He reached for his shirt, glanced at me one last time and then walked back down the path.

I wanted him back. We weren't children anymore, couldn't roll in the grasses, wrestle in the mud, rest our backs against each other for warmth in the night when the chill seeped through our blankets. Something had changed, and even though I was almost sixteen, my birthday only days away, I was not a woman. I had not yet grown breasts, and I had not yet had my period. I knew I was late—Rosa had gotten hers when she was fourteen. But I did know that my feelings were true, and my blood pounded when Jeremia touched me. I wanted that feeling again, his body pressed against mine as snug as bone.

- [download Criminal Minds: Sociopaths, Serial Killers, and Other Deviants](#)
- [Skinny Bitch Try Me Vegan Weekend here](#)
- [La République de Mek-Ouyes online](#)
- [click Episodes of Life](#)
- [read Antarctica](#)
- **[download online Frauds, Myths, and Mysteries: Science and Pseudoscience in Archaeology \(8th Edition\)](#)**

- <http://thewun.org/?library/Criminal-Minds--Sociopaths--Serial-Killers--and-Other-Deviants.pdf>
- <http://serazard.com/lib/Skinny-Bitch-Try-Me-Vegan-Weekend.pdf>
- <http://tuscalaural.com/library/La-R--publique-de-Mek-Ouyes.pdf>
- <http://aircon.servicessingaporecompany.com/?lib/Episodes-of-Life.pdf>
- <http://unpluggedtv.com/lib/The-Sexual-Paradox--Men--Women-and-the-Real-Gender-Gap.pdf>
- <http://www.shreesaiexport.com/library/Frauds--Myths--and-Mysteries--Science-and-Pseudoscience-in-Archaeology--8th-Edition-.pdf>