

# Hansel and Gretel

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From *Grain*, 2002

Finalist for the 2004 Journey Prize

Reprinted in *The Journey Prize Anthology 15* (McClelland & Stewart, 2003)

**A** poor woodcutter lived with his wife and his two children on the edge of a large forest. Whoever would remember that it starts like that?

Rollo must have remembered, because that's the first thing he said when he came in last night—"What's this, Hansel and Gretel?" It was another of Mom's potlucks—but this time just Ezra, Viktor and Galina, because my father got hurt and can't cope, and because it was winter and where we live no one ventures, only squirrels and deer and the occasional skunk, coyotes at night. Rollo came too, for the first time ever; he doesn't like visiting. Viktor and Galina will always come, though, winter or summer. They have that drive over Folly Mountain and in winter they appreciate an early start home, so yesterday everyone came at four, when there was still lots of light. Dad sent me out in broad daylight anyway, saying that a welcoming committee showed some Grace. His little joke. Us living here, that's his joke, that's what I think—though no one wants to know what I think.

Most of the winter I've done all the ferrying and hauling and welcoming between the road and the house. Dad used to carry things here, but since he got hurt it's fallen to me. Out I went yesterday and brought Rollo down the icy garden path, and later the others, too, past the old shed and the woodpile and the sled that we use to tow things between the road and the house. In the morning I'd gone out early and strewn the path with new pine cones and pine needles. It looked better than ashes from the woodstove, and for traction worked just as well. It almost looked romantic, like birds had scattered winter buds.

It was pretty, but a guy like Rollo, he'd never say.

Rollo just picked his way over the ice on his ground-down heels, muttering, clanking the wine bottles in his knapsack. What a surprise that he came at all. Mom and Dad have talked about him my whole life, but seldom are we actually subjected to him. Mom and Dad like him, though. He's for contemplating—that's what Mom says. He edits an art magazine; he's rude and stuck-up and so tall and above it all, but worn down at the heels so badly that he seems to tip even when he doesn't drink too much. Most of the afternoon I had the opportunity to compare his shoes to Viktor's, since they sat on the couch side by side and stretched their legs out, ready to spring up and box each other to a pulp at the slightest provocation. Maybe Viktor and Galina should have seen it coming, should have gulped their after-dinner tea and left before any of it started. Galina, that is. Viktor couldn't have seen anything. Maybe he should have smelled it.

Viktor is almost as tall as Rollo, but filled out. He's solid, steady, as if he's been walking a long time, walking and watching in the falling light, and now he's found his way and stopped. He looks like Sean Connery and talks like him too, although he's from Krakow. He has perfect shoes. A guy like that who can't see his own teeth to

brush them anymore, and he has perfect shoes. Leather shoes with laces, in a place like ours. I hardly bother to tie up my hair any more, even now that it's got so long, and I can't imagine when I last saw any of my barrettes. But no old running shoes for Viktor, no lined galoshes. Over their shoes he and Galina wore their strap-on ice cleats. "Gives a blind man a little poise," Viktor said, and everyone said "yes, yes" too quickly, as if Viktor's blindness was as common as the shoes on all our feet.

Rollo's feet are flippers. Like everything about him from his crazy hair to his Coke bottle glasses, they make him look like the Creature from the Deep. I guided Rollo and his flippers through the mudroom, past all the stacked firewood.

"Bring your boots in, Rollo," I said to him, like we say to everybody, but he's the only one who's ever said this back: "Why, Grace? Will they go somewhere if I leave them out?"

I don't know, maybe people like Rollo like having cold feet.

And then he came in and saw how everything was jammed together into our two little rooms downstairs, the walls finished with Dad's rough, hand-planed boards and Mom's storybook paint job, lavender with Wedgwood blue trim. Maybe it didn't say *sweet* at all. Maybe it said *poor*.

Maybe that's what Rollo saw, how poor and precious we were. "What's this?" he said, waving his cigarette. "Hansel and Gretel?"

Everyone hates Rollo's smoking. I was glad of it, though, the way it disguised my own nips into the woods with Amanda. She'd skated over from her house down the road and waited for me just inside our stand of spruce. She had her papers and her pouch of Drum, even a big box of Redbird matches in case we got a lot of wind. Between guests arriving we'd grab a smoke. While we waited for Ezra to rock his Toyota out of the snowbank we had two each, hiding there in the trees, watching. Then I went to help push, Ezra's wheels spinning, my head spinning from the nicotine.

It's just one of the rotten jobs I've been stuck with since Carson left on her scholarship, leading guests down the garden path to the house from the road where they leave their cars. And then taking them back in the pitch dark. That's the part I really hate, because I'm afraid of the dark. Not the coyotes so much, just the dark itself. You look and look and what was there is not. Will it ever come again? In the dark, that's when I lose my balance.

But I'm glad for Carson. Opportunity found her here in the woods, and it knocked. She was always good at school, but all the same it's not like so many opportunities come our way. It's like Rollo also said, panting down the trail behind me: "Bet you don't get a lot of door-to-door salesmen down here."

So no, I'd don't begrudge Carson. But now hear this—I'm not doing her job forever. She better be back here once spring term ends, not gallivanting over to Paris or the Alps or down to Tunis with the rest of them when there's a school break. She better not be escaping again.

Ezra finally got his car off the ice. He saw Rollo the minute he was through the door from the mudroom, his boots in his hand. "Oh," he said. "It's you."

Ezra and Rollo hate each other, but my mother is always hoping for the best, and so she invites them over together all the time. Rollo never comes, but Ezra is a regular. He served in Vietnam willingly, and that makes him something of a curiosity to my parents. My father had a low draft number and joined the Quakers, but he never got

proper CO clearance and on one of his many trips to Canada all those years ago he just didn't find his way back home.

Rollo, on the other hand, is a bona fide draft dodger. He and I share a birthday—because of that, my parents made him my godfather—and he's pointed out that if I'd been born a boy in the US with that birthday, between 1944 and 1950, like he was, I'd be one too.

"No, I would have served," I said again last night, as I always do when he starts in on me. Pick on someone your own size, I always want to say, but he doesn't need inviting.

"You would have died, you mean." Thirty-five years across the border in another sovereign state entirely and Rollo can still go on about this. He said if you got drafted you were more likely to die than if you'd just bit the bullet and enlisted. Draftees usually joined the ground forces where the heavy casualties were.

"That's the same with any war," I said. Like I knew. But to hear Rollo tell it, the whole of the navy, the air force and the marines sat on deck chairs on the beach at Nha Trang and waited the conflict out, now and then renewing their sunscreen. The officers especially.

"Any war's the same as any war," my mother said.

Rollo said if you had a number below 196, sooner or later it came up. Anybody with a higher number was safe. Rollo said Bill Clinton didn't have a low number. He didn't have a number at all because he was old enough to have had to register for the draft before the lottery started in 1969, and who knew what that boded. He went right out and got himself a 2-S deferment, a student deferment. The big deferments were 2-S and 4-F, the medical exemption, "for a pimple on your ass if you knew the right people."

But never mind Clinton, Rollo said. The draft lottery wasn't a lottery anyway, not for anyone. It wasn't random. All the days of the year—even February 29<sup>th</sup> for leap year—all three hundred and sixty-six dates written on three hundred and sixty-six cards went in sequence into the barrel. It wasn't spun enough to mix the cards up and make the dates truly random, and most of the later dates stayed on top, so that the numbers drawn out first—the low numbers—were likely to be for birthdays in the second half of the year.

Where was Bob Barker when you needed him, someone who could have done this right? Where were Janice and Holly and Anita? Vanna?

The birthday Rollo and I share is in late October, and our draft number would have been seven. *Seven*. When I think about it my throat gets dry. My number *would have been* seven, I should say. Rollo's number *was* seven. No wonder he ran. No wonder his shoes are all worn down, from running. No wonder he's thin.

*The woodcutter did not have much food around the house, it continues—it really does—and when a great famine devastated the entire country, he could no longer provide enough for his family's daily meals. "Early tomorrow morning," said his wife, "we'll take the children out to the forest where it's most dense. They won't find their way back home, and we'll be rid of them."*

Well, we've never been that hungry, what with all Mom knows about edible weeds, and how resourceful she is. Once she swerved to miss a rabbit in the road, but hit it anyway. Waste not, want not—the skin came off

like a glove pulled back, and she used herbs from her pots on the window sill, braising it a long time. With winter rabbits you have to do that, she said as if she were an authority. Rabbits are tough and gamey until they start feeding on roots and plants in the spring. There's a six-week period where they're patchy-looking, turning from their winter white back to brown. Right afterwards—that's the time to get them.

At our Sunday potlucks we see things we never see otherwise—shrimp in the salad, raisin bread tied into challah loaves, apricot chutney. Broccoli, sweet peppers in red, yellow, orange. On their own, my family believes only in winter vegetables—potatoes, sweet potatoes, turnips, squash. Cabbage too; always cabbage, always boiled. It's unecological to eat anything out of season. Think of the costs of shipping from California and Florida. Think of the labour costs, the energy costs, how unnatural it all is.

Yum.

I complain to my parents about what we eat. It's natural, they say. So what? I say. It could be worse, they say; think of this: Ymir, the four-mouthed giant of Norse mythology, had to drink directly from the four udders of Audhumia the cow—and she herself ate nothing but frost. For her roadkill rabbit my mother won the *Who's Got the Weirdest Mom?* contest I had on that year with Amanda. Her mom didn't even come close. All she did was wear a bathing cap in the shower, not a proper shower cap. We don't even have a shower, but Amanda thinks her mother's bathing cap makes her weird. We don't even have hot water in summer, only in winter when we heat it off our woodstove.

*Who's Got the Rudest Guests?* I wanted to run out last night and tell Amanda we'd won that one too. Rollo the draft dodger has celiac sprue—but not when it comes to pie. He may be bloated and gassy, but not around sweets. Mom passed around her eleven-inch apple and cranberry deepdish straight out of the warming oven, and taking the server in both hands while Galina, next to him, held the dish, he levered a huge hunk out onto his plate. He ran his fingers along the blade of the server, then his tongue. He didn't care if he cut himself; he didn't care who might have needed the knife after him. Rollo just doesn't care. He blames his celiac sprue on the war, too, saying you have to have the genetic predilection for it but also a triggering event. An event like *stress*, he says, a *precipitate*.

Rollo likes to sound scientific. I think he wishes he were in science journalism, not art, and hopes that people will forget it's *ArtSmart* he runs. He says celiac sprue is just more fallout from American imperialism, and that even from far away, here in Canada, he would have sued the US government for the loss of his health if he'd thought there was any point. But there's no point to anything. There's nothing you can change. When someone challenged the randomness of the draft lottery in court, for instance, a judge threw the case out.

Rollo talks numbers. He's precise; he's an editor. You can't change anything, it seems, but you can talk it to death. There was a statistically significant correlation between where your birthdate fell in the year and your likelihood of getting drawn, getting a low number. A correlation of  $-.28$ , when it should have been zero.

"It's, like, minus 28 outside right now," Galina said, pulling back the curtain, the one Mom constructed out of a stained old tablecloth from the remnants table at Goodwill. Galina's forever holding things for other people. Holding things back so that they can see, holding things up so that they can serve themselves. Outside, the light was just starting to fall. Galina let the curtain drop. Maybe she sensed it then—the heavy weather, the turbulence

climbing the air like an animal on a drape.

Last summer I followed the fragrance of roses into the garden. I bent and swept the fallen petals up in my fingers, and I stuck my hand right into the jellied, rotting eye of a dead skunk.

Maybe if Galina and Viktor could have set down their pie forks right then, gulped their tea and left before any of it started. Maybe they could have been well over Folly Mountain by the time Rollo got so drunk.

“I was born on February 2,” Viktor said. “What would my draft number have been?” Does he know he looks like Sean Connery? Even though he's blind, maybe he knows. He said it just like he was in a movie.

Rollo bristled. He took off his Coke bottle glasses, wiped them in his dirty sweatshirt and replaced them on his flat red nose. “It's not a parlour game,” he said.

“But you could figure it out if you wanted to.”

“Rollo can figure anything out. You know Rollo.” It was Ezra, tucking a last bite of cranberry and apple into his mouth. He brushed the front of his shirt carefully with one hand, collecting the crumbs in the other. He'd spoken for the first time in ages. With Rollo, how could anyone get a word in edgewise? Now Ezra had thrown a glove down, *smack*.

My mother was distraught. She's a bona fide Quaker, one my father found when he needed help filing his objector status. She came from a family of Quakers, and they from a family before her. My mother has Quaker papers that go back generations. She believes fences can be mended, that Ezras and Rollos can come together, that we can all get along. She cut across the table through the men's squabbling as deftly as if it had been a frozen pond and she'd donned Amanda's skates.

“That was wonderful phyllo, Gally,” she said. “You're such a talent.” Gally and Viktor had brought bean salad, spinach and feta phyllo, cheesecake from the Harrowsmith cookbook. Viktor made that. He's quite a cook. It had a whole wheat crust, but living in the woods with the woodcutter and his wife who freezes lamb's quarter and purslane from the weed fields for winter greens, I'm used to that sort of thing.

Only Rollo hadn't brought something. Cooking, that's the sort of thing he's above. Even stopping at the store in the village to get a few rolls—he's above that too. Except for the liquor store. He *had* stopped there.

“Carson,” I said out of the blue. “Carson would have had a high draft number, I bet. She's always escaping.”

Everyone looked up at me. Like Ezra, I hadn't been saying much. It was true, I thought. How do you escape a life? It was something Carson knew, something Rollo and Dad and Bill Clinton knew, even something Mom knew when she quilted on her lap late at night and hummed her hymns. She was in her greying years, and it was never clear how much a part of the world she was. She knew how to leave. It was something I had to find out.

“We weren't *escaping*,” Rollo sniffed. “We were *objecting*. We were drawing our line in the sand, taking our stand. Even Clinton—”

“Yes?” Ezra asked, but he and Viktor both waited. Viktor had been sitting quietly, listening. He hadn't eaten much.

"I was only going to say, even Clinton held anti-war protests where he was."

"And where was he?"

"Oxford, of course. Everybody knows he was at Oxford."

"He escaped there."

"He *went* there. Really, Ezra," Rollo said. "Give it up."

"Well. I just thought given all that noble escaping and line-drawing he was doing he might have gone somewhere charitable, somewhere he could be useful. How was it we used to say it? Somewhere he could *make a difference*. The slums of Calcutta, maybe. To empty slop pails for Mother Theresa."

"They didn't have them then."

"Slop pails?"

"Slums. For Westerners."

"They didn't have slums in Calcutta in the sixties? What, they're a modern invention?"

"I merely meant to suggest, Ezra, that Westerners didn't go to India then."

"The Beatles did. Mia Farrow."

"Mother Theresa wasn't well known. There wasn't anything there then."

"Any what? Cachet? There wasn't any celebrity in it?"

"Infrastructure, I meant."

"Infrastructure?" Ezra sounded bewildered.

"Carson just wants to get an education at Oxford," I said. "That's why she went as soon as the scholarship came along. She figures with a degree from Oxford the world is her oyster."

"Exactly," said Ezra, eyeing Rollo as if there'd been a struggle between them over some bone and he'd come away with it in his teeth. "Carson and Clinton."

"Grace," my mother said. "Help us clear away the dishes." She was angry with Ezra, of all people. She didn't think much of politicians. Rollo had opened the door on a throng of hangers-on with high numbers or no numbers at all and now Ezra had dragged them in, people she would never invite into her gingerbread house, not out of the coldest wind. How could our Carson be like Bill Clinton?

"Viktor was out shovelling roofs today," Galina said. She was a gentle woman, a good woman, we all said, for Viktor to go blind with. When I met her coming down the garden path I'd planned to tell her what a good thing it was they'd arrived so early, before the coyotes moved in for the night. City people are always afraid of the wrong things. But I couldn't bring myself to do it. She'd been reading something to Viktor and still had her glasses on, taking them off only when I hailed from below. She'd screwed her eyes up to see who it was—*You look so much like your mother, Grace. You're getting so tall. You're so pretty, just like your mom.* She always said that. When I reached her, the softness in her face, the heed about her eyes—my coyotes ran away.

"He wore his ice cleats going up the ladders," Galina said. She squeezed Viktor's hand. It was a feat.

"We have a few rental properties," Viktor explained to Ezra. "They've all got ice dams up the ying yang. Leaks everywhere. Tenants, you know. They want things fixed right away. Can't wait. We haven't fixed our own leaks yet, and I'm up on all their roofs. Blind as a bat yet, legally blind."

Rollo was swirling wine in his glass. Oblivious, he'd already spilled it on the tablecloth, the one that had once been an old bedsheet from Goodwill but had looked pretty enough till now.

"That's right, I'd forgotten," he said, pushing his chair back hard into our pine plank floor, scratching it. "Viktor's a property owner. A landlord." He drank his glass down and set it sharply on the table. "A slum landlord."

An hour later, Rollo and Ezra were still at it. "Yeah, surveillance, right?" Rollo spat at Ezra. They'd carried on yelling and shouting about the war in the living room, about who had the most virtue then and who was more evolved because of it now. Ezra might have done something *nefarious* during the war. It was one of those words I loved the sound of, and about which my mother said she really couldn't comment.

Now Mom sat with Galina out of the way, on the futon on the far side of the room, looking at the last batch of photos Carson had sent.

"Electronics and communications and feeds from the field my ass," Rollo hissed. "ITT stuff. You went down to Chile after that, did you, and helped overthrow Allende?"

"I went to the DEW Line after that," Ezra said icily. "To chill. You should try it sometime, Rollo."

"I hope this is a mistake," Mom said to Gally, passing her Carson's close-up of her Oxford boyfriend's crotch. "Sweetheart, do you think it's a mistake?"

She looked meaningfully at my father, then anxiously at Ezra and Rollo at the end of the room, but my father turned away. Resigned, my mother turned back to the pictures. Carson and her friends had made one trip to the Mediterranean already, during their Christmas break. These were pictures of a street party in Napoli on Christmas Day. Some of the boys had the girls' dresses on. That was how I knew Adrian was the boyfriend; he was the one wearing Carson's favourite summer dress. I'd worn that dress, the one time she'd let me. It had been the first Christmas ever that Carson hadn't been here with us—now it turns out her dress hadn't been there either but on some throwaway guy halfway around the world in the sun—and Mom looked pale for days, trying to get used to it. I slept in Carson's bed a couple times but gave it up. It just felt wrong to me, coarse and cold and with the soft spots all in the wrong places. There we were in our woodcutter's Christmas without her; there she was, off in the Mediterranean, shooting Adrian's crotch.

I looked over Galina's shoulder at the picture again. "It's a walking stick," I said. "Right there, running parallel to the fly."

"A *what*?"

"A walking stick. Those bug things, you know. Next to his zipper, I mean. That's why Carson took the picture. Adrian had an exotic bug on him."

"Well," said my mother. "She might have written something on the back. She's written things on the back of some of the other ones."

"Who's the other nation?" From across the room it was Ezra again, sourly, to Rollo.

"The First Nations," Rollo said. They were on to native rights now, since Ezra had been in the North on the

DEW Line. "All I'm saying is how'd you like to be the second nation the first is lording things over?"

"I thought you said they *were* the First."

"Shut up," Rollo said, pouring out more wine, splashing it on Mom's batik rug. "Just shut the fuck up."

"Rol. Hey, man. No need for that." It was my father, distantly, from across the room.

Rollo whirled around, his glass spraying again. "You shut the fuck up too."

My father blanched; I felt for him, as if I'd taken the blow, been hit in the chest.

"Here, hold this a moment, will you?" Viktor said. He'd been quiet since Rollo's slum landlord remark back at the table, but now he rose, put on his coat and gloves though he waved Galina back to her seat. He picked up the cast iron kettle from the top of the woodstove and handed it to Rollo, who was too drunk to know better.

"Son of a bitch!" Rollo screamed, flinging it across the room where it slammed into Dad's leg, the bad one. Dad screamed too. Everyone was screaming; screams lit up the house like a rocket and outside I heard Lucky, Amanda's collie, barking through the woods. Rollo was grappling on the floor with Viktor, and Ezra threw himself on both of them.

"Shut up, shut up, shut *up!*" Ezra cried, pounding down with his fists.

It was a small space for all that. Galina and my mother, on their futon at the perimeter, drew their feet in as if a drain had overflowed and grey water was coming straight at them. My father was gripping his leg where the kettle had hit him, and his face had gone very white. His head hung back so that his jaw paralleled the ceiling, but it yawned open as if a hinge had jammed. It was his way of screaming. I thought I should hold onto the lamps, the bookshelves with their knick knacks. It was what I'd do if an earthquake hit, if a plane flew too low. We didn't have enough, God knew, to lose any of it now.

Rollo, Ezra, Viktor writhed on the floor. Viktor pulled open Rollo's mouth in the kind of move you'd see on Wild World of Wrestling, and Rollo bit down hard on Viktor's thumb. Maybe that was a wrestling thing too. Viktor drew his other hand out from under the three of them and slapped Rollo in the face. It was womanish, silly in the midst of all the muscles. For a moment, they all stopped, surprised.

I sprang to the stove and pulled out a piece of burning wood with the tongs, waving it at them.

"Get out!" I screamed. We all choked with the smoke.

"Who?" It was Viktor, looking up at nothing. When he looked at you he didn't really find you anymore.

"Whoever." I looked at my mother. "Mom? Who should go? Whose fault is this?"

But Mom only waved at her face with a hand, struggling to push herself up from the futon with the other. Beside her, Gally had shrunk down to nothing, Carson's photographs still fanned in her hand like magic cards.

"Dad?" I said. He'd hung his head down. His hands were still gripping his leg, as if in some marvellous sports feat, just for the style points, he might pick it up, cast and all, and heave it over his head. He didn't look at me. His leg was his world lately, and never moreso than now. Seeing him I felt a thickness in me, as if something had iced over and couldn't flow. If I went outside, I thought, I still might catch the 5.45 to Gatwick. Transatlantic flights went right over our heads every night, en route to Gander and then east. I liked to stand under the trees and look up through the boughs at the contrail of the 5.45, way up there in a high sky turning to pewter. I imagined travellers up there, looking down on the vast ocean. I'd feel something seeping out of me, something I didn't have a

word for, like an odour you might have trouble describing but would know in a second.

"Here," said Viktor, reaching up to me from the floor where he lay. "Grace. Give me a hand."

“**Y**ou know Dolly Parton, Viktor?" I was at his side now, out the door and down the steps, watching his breath fume white in the night air. We were walking fast, away from the house, panting together. "At the end of high school everyone was asked their plans for the future and Dolly Parton said she was going to Nashville to be a star. Everyone laughed at her and she couldn't understand why."

"I'm not laughing," he said. His breath fumed again. The fight had been a strain on him. How much of a strain could a blind man take?

"Well no. Not after that, I guess," I said. I wanted him to ask me what I was going to do after high school. I was nearly there, after all. I'd do something grand, something better than Carson. I'd have made something up if he'd asked, and later it would come to me, the real thing I'd do. But he didn't ask. We just walked in silence. We were going ahead on the trail up to the cars, to anywhere. Beside me on the path he was surefooted, stepping out of the range of my flashlight. I was gasping still from the scene in the house, and I had to huff to keep up. Carson had always ferried Viktor and Galina before. I'd never seen him on his feet like this, hadn't known his power. It was that getting on in life he'd been doing, that getting somewhere. He was fit, determined. What had I expected, a Stevie Wonder bobbing, an old man in Ray Charles glasses tapping his way through our ice forest with a cane?

"The food was good," I said.

Beside me, his shoulders shrugged.

"The cake," I tried again. "That was yours?"

"Right."

I was imagining Sean Connery saying it in a movie. *Right*. "You can read recipes? You can read cookbooks?"

He shrugged again.

"Viktor," I said. "You're so fast. It's the first time I've ferried you."

"Charon," he said. "Ha. Styx. Did you know, Gracie, that the river Styx flows nine times around the infernal regions?" There was something in his voice. I hadn't heard it in Sean Connery.

"Back in the house, you mean."

"It's not hell just back in the house. It's hell everywhere."

"What's wrong with Ezra and Rollo, then?"

"I don't know," he said, holding back a branch for me. How had he seen it? "What's wrong with your mother and your father? I might ask the same of them."

"My father broke his leg." Didn't Viktor know?

"Did he? Or did he just hang around too long at the scene of his resurrection? Did they all?"

"His resurrection?"

"Canada. Back to Canada, back to the land. Some fairytale." There, that thing in his voice again.

"Viktor," I said. "Do you think it's Hansel and Gretel here?"

"Hansel and who?"

"Gret—"

"Never mind. Which one are you? Carson's Hansel, is she, gone off ahead to leave the trail of breadcrumbs?"

"I just thought—"

"You know what, Grace? *The Great Gatsby*, you know that? It started out as the story about a boy who killed his mother."

"Right," I said. *The Great Gatsby* had Robert Redford in it, and Mia Farrow who had gone to India with the Beatles. Amanda's mother had a video collection.

"That's all you've got to say, 'Right'? You should watch what you're thinking, Grace. Everyone should. You should nurse it into something better, not something worse." He shrugged a shoulder back in the direction of the house. "You see what happens when you don't."

"Well," I said, trying to turn this over. Back at the house, a door banged, someone swore; the sound sprang up at us through the dark. It alarmed me again and I skidded on the path, on the trajectory of the trouble. My adrenaline flew up. What if I broke an ankle? I imagined myself blind like Viktor, trying not to break an ankle on this damn journey to my lousy friends in their lousy fairytale house. "Do you think we live in a gingerbread house?" I asked.

"I think you should honour your father and your mother." He was gruff now. "Your mother is an honourable woman. Nothing like the woman in the gingerbread house."

"Viktor," I said. "Has anyone told you that you look just like Sean Connery?"

He stopped beside me and sighed. He stared past me but I knew he meant to look at me, squarely in my face. His blindness couldn't tell him just where that was. Was he glaring at me? Was I imagining it? The whole evening, my life here in the woods, that Viktor could be so blind and yet save the day—it was getting to be too much. While I'd stood there brandishing my live split, raining its embers all over my mother's batik, he'd pulled himself to his feet at the end of my hand, stepping over Ezra and Rollo, and dusted off his knees. He'd taken the split in a glove and walked it to the door, into the mudroom past Rollo's flipper shoes and out the front, where he threw it in the snow. Together, we'd followed it, closing the front door on the heat of the house and stepping out into the cooling dusk.

"Viktor," I'd said on the path once we were out the door, "your glove's ruined."

He had shrugged. "Well, I'll never know, will I?"

We'd missed the jet. There was one star overhead. It looked ridiculous. Where were the rest? I asked him. He was the kind of man you could ask.

"Desultory," he said.

It wasn't a word I knew.

"You should," he said. "Unconnected. Aimless."

Why should I have known? Did he think those things of me?

"The stars only connect in constellations because we think we can see that they do. We connect the dots." It had gotten raw, and he pulled his gloves down tighter over his hands. I snugged my chin down into my sweater. We walked, and then I asked him those things about cooking and about looking like Sean Connery, and that was when he stopped and gave me that glare, or a blind approximation of it. Even glowering at someone properly depends on knowing how it's going over.

"You lead a charmed life, Grace," he said. "Don't you ever forget it. But you have, haven't you? I'm too late, telling you that."

"I don't know." The rabbit, the edible weeds. Christmas in Napoli. Now, fistfights in the house. My father. My father, nothing. I wanted to agree with Viktor, or disagree, if that was what he wanted. *It's not too late for me, it's not too late*—I could say that. Suddenly it was crucial that he like me, that I please him, that we be on the same side. It was the side of heroes.

"Grace." He took me by the shoulders. His glove was streaked with carbon. "You think you know things now. You get a bit older and you're going to find out that you knew nothing at all—that there was *nothing* you knew." He waved his hands wide as if to demonstrate nothingness. It was so black by then that he was waving into nothing, into everything the night had swallowed up. "You'll be staggered at how far off you were," he said. "Blindsided. But you never mind that. Okay, Gracie? Promise me that's not what you'll mind." I stared up into his eyes, into everything and nothing. "Promise me you'll remember that you *were* sure about everything, that it was possible. Remember how it made you feel. Like you could do anything, right? Tell me you won't forget."

"I won't forget." I had no idea what he was talking about. Was it a hero's talk? Lucky bounded out of the woods at us, as if she could bring a dog's view to bear, and she yipped and danced around Viktor as if she'd found an old friend. He looked around, as if he could, and finding nothing for her he stripped off his glove and threw it long and hard, like a flat stone over an ocean.

That was the wonderful thing—that's what I'm remembering this for. Not Rollo, not Ezra, not the firebrand in my hands. Not even my father. It was the way Viktor threw that ruined glove blind, so sweet and sure, a perfect pitch in the dark. Lucky ran off in the woods, happily charging after anything that belonged to a friend, and Viktor headed back down the path to get Galina.

Last summer, clouds hung above our house and brought in tremendous rain. I missed our hot water. It was an afternoon, I was alone, and I stripped off and ran out into the torrents, the white, cool sheets, up the path and into the garden through the heavy corn. That late in the season the corn was nearly as tall as I was. If anyone had come I could have hidden in it, but only Lucky came. She joined me that day too, bounding around me and springing up and yipping as I ran flying over the long grass, over the garden mounds, prancing, soaked, flinging water into the beans from the ends of my hair and my fingertips. I ran and ran, and every step brought me nearer the place where the rest of my days I'd stand and watch, shivering in the cold and turning blue, where never in my life would I do that again, or anything like it.

"Now we really must get on our way," Viktor had said. I stood on my little hill of ice and watched him go. My flashlight hung down, blooming a small glow around my toes, lighting my piece of the darkness.

"The light," I called after him, holding it out, but without looking around at me he waved me back. It seemed to me he might sashay, he might dance down the path blind, and then he disappeared into the night.