

JOHN VAN KIRK

## LANDSCAPE WITH BOYS

### 1. Earth and Water

They came down through the sloping backyards, Henry, his brothers Jack and little Frankie, and his best friend Joey, climbing the cyclone fence at the Tylers', slipping through the slot where a plank had fallen from the Grutzmachers' board fence, and then cutting through the vacant lot behind the Eckleses' house, where they saw two blue jays and a cardinal, and where Joey knocked a squirrel off a telephone wire with a rock in only four throws. Reddish and silvery, the furred body lay still on the mossy ground, its head disturbingly ratlike up close; then abruptly it quivered, shook itself, and bounced away. The boys crossed Delaware, cautiously took the path through the woods next to the Weird Sisters' house, descended the embankment, crossed the brook, and climbed to a narrow stand of peeling birch trees and low mulberry bushes. There they huddled in back of a huge white marble platform and carved marble open book they called the Bible Stone. They had come here almost every day of the summer; now, on a Saturday two weeks after school had started, the air minty with the first cool of autumn, the cemetery lay before them once again, the spreading lawns glistening in the morning light, and a fine white mist floating on the black water of the duck pond.

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Henry and Jack each carried half of an old, two-parter Army backpack of heavy canvas their father had given them; Joey had a newer, lighter pack from a surplus store; Frankie wore a tooled leather gun belt with a chrome-plated cap pistol in the holster. The pistol had white plastic handgrips made to look like horn or bone.

Henry gave the orders.

"We go one at a time, first to the ring, then to the three crosses, then to the brook. Meet under the wooden bridge. Me first, then Joey, then Jack. Frankie, you cover us and bring up the rear. You see any J.P.s, fire three shots..."

J.P.s were the Junior Police, a gang of deputized high school seniors who patrolled the cemetery and some of the town parks.

"Why do I always have to be last?" Frankie asked.

“Because you have the pistol. You have to cover us and give the signal,” Henry said.

“Oh, yeah. Okay.”

Henry broke cover and lit out across the smooth lawn, still wet with dew. It was the kind of cemetery where the graves were not marked with standing stones but with bronze plaques set flat into the ground, so save for a few upright monuments—like the Bible Stone and a couple of statues and crosses—it was a clear field for running. Henry stayed low, trying to keep his back parallel to the ground, and when he reached the ring of bushes around the statue of Mary, he dove headfirst into the foliage. Inside the brush there was enough headroom to sit up, and the ground was dry and dusty. He looked back toward the Bible Stone and saw Joey running toward him, hunched over like a clumsy bird. As soon as Joey was inside the bush, Henry turned to study the next leg of the journey. It was clear, and there was no one in sight, but the road had to be crossed. He and Jack had been caught here once, walking home from downtown. They had started running as soon as they’d seen the car, but the J.P.s had shouted for them to stop, and they did. The J.P.s took down their names and where they lived and told them that if they were caught again, they’d be in real trouble. Joey had been along, too, but he had kept running and had gotten away.

Henry heard Jack scabble into the bush behind him. Frankie would be next. “You guys ready?” he asked Joey and Jack.

“Ready,” they both said.

“Frankie?”

“Coming,” Jack said.

As soon as he heard Frankie come crashing breathless into the bush, Henry took off. He felt the cool air against his face as he ran, his sneakers and pant legs getting wet with dew, his elongated shadow rippling across the green field before him. Gravel crunched under his feet as he crossed the road. Off to his right, he saw that the mist was already burning off the duck pond, rising in faint white swirls like smoke. When he got to the three crosses, he dove over the hedge like a TV infantryman and stretched out in the shade along its roots. Here there was no real cover, but he thought he could blend in with the shadow and dirt if he stayed down. He looked under the tangle of low stems and branches and saw Joey already on his way.

The third leg of the crossing was the longest, and when Henry slid down the dirt bank into the creekbed, he was gasping for breath. Here the winding

road crossed the stream, and Henry climbed up onto a shelf of earth under the wooden bridge. Kneeling there, he watched Joey make the last stretch and slide down the bank. Now Henry saw Jack's body unfold itself from the brown streak where the hedge met the lawn. Jack started his run. When he was about halfway to the bridge, his gait changed. Henry heard three faint snaps and saw Jack turn his head to look both ways. Then he saw Frankie break out of the shadow of the hedge and start running. In the distance, a big white car moved slowly along the gravel road. Jack reached the bank and slid down, arms and legs spread out and flapping like a duck slowing down for a water landing. It was doubtful that he had been seen. But now, Frankie, who had done well in giving the signal, was risking all their necks by not staying put. He would lead the J.P.s right to them. He was almost there. Joey climbed up onto the shelf with Henry, and they called out to Frankie in shouted whispers:

"C'mon, move, move, move. Get in here."

Jack pulled himself up onto the shelf, and the three boys crouched in the narrow space.

Frankie skidded to a stop and stood at the rim of the bank. "Somebody's coming," he said between deep breaths, "did you guys see? I gave the signal."

"Get down here," Henry said.

Frankie took a long time to lower himself out of sight; then Joey and Jack pulled him up with them under the roadbed. Now, all four boys were huddled in the cool shade of the little channel under the bridge. Only Henry could see out, and he watched the car glide silently along the road. He pulled his head in and turned around.

"I don't think it's them. But they're coming this way. We'll have to wait until they pass."

"They gonna cross the bridge?" Joey asked.

"Probably," Henry said and turned around and stretched out to see.

"Tough!" Jack said.

"Where we gonna go?" Frankie asked.

"We're gonna stay right here," Joey said.

"What if the bridge breaks?" Frankie asked.

Henry's head spun back around. "Yep, they're coming this way."

"I'm scared," Frankie said.

"Shhh," Henry said. "Now we wait. I'm going to take one more look. Wish we had a periscope."

Henry shifted on his knees, stretched his head out again, then ducked it in almost immediately. "They're still coming. Sit tight, men."

At first, the boys could hear only the percolation of the brook below them. Then they heard the soft crush of gravel as the big quiet car rolled slowly closer. The gravel sound grew louder until it blocked out the gurgle of the waterflow; for a moment they could hear the throb of the engine; then came the first deep thud as the front wheels hit the bridge itself. The car moved slowly towards them like building thunder, the railroad ties that made up the roadbed bouncing and shaking and raining dirt, a curtain of sifting cinders and dust that moved toward the boys. Frankie yelled, but the other boys barely heard him. Tears were running down his face. The gray, beaded veil of falling dirt moved across the creek's satiny surface in railroad tie-wide increments. When it reached the boys, they closed their eyes and covered their heads with their arms. The bridge roared with thunder, and even the ground seemed to shake. Then it was suddenly quiet, and they could hear the gravel sound again; then that faded, too, and the water sounds came up, along with the cramped wheeze of Frankie's sobs.

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"Shhh," Henry said.

"Crybaby," Jack said.

"I was... scared," Frankie said, his breath coming in spasms.

"What do you mean? That was tough," Joey said.

"Yeah, tough," Jack said, "cept for a crybaby."

"Knock it off," Henry said. He took another look out of their hiding place. The white car was still moving slowly down the road.

"Okay, we're in the clear. From here we go by the brook."

The boys crawled down off the ledge and into the creekbed. They walked along a path by the edge of the water, crossing and recrossing the stream by jumping from rock to rock at the places where the path ended on one side and picked up on the other. Gray dirt dusted the tops of their packs and their heads and clung to their shoulders, forearms, and the fronts of their legs like moss to the sides of tree trunks. White streaks with black edges cut through the dust on Frankie's cheeks.

"You better wash your face in the brook," Henry said to him. "You don't want Mr. Savona to see you been crying."

When they passed under the long concrete bridge where Stuyvesant Avenue crossed the stream, Frankie knelt down and splashed water on his face. Then all four boys stood in a line and urinated into the water. They

climbed the soft dirt bank at a footpath, emerged from thick bushes, and marched up the sidewalk in formation, Henry, tallest, leanest, and most serious, at the head, and Joey, grinning mischievously, with lights in his dark eyes, at Henry's side. Behind them walked Jack, shorter than his older brother, but more sturdily built, and little Frankie, struggling to keep up. They stopped first in front of the sporting goods store to admire the hunting knives and bows and arrows in the window. Inside, the blue-black barrels of rifles and shotguns shone dully in the rack behind the counter. A miniature wall tent was pitched not far from the door, and in front of it lay the folding camp shovel, or entrenching tool, that Henry was hoping to get for his birthday in a couple of months. Their next stop was the toy and hobby shop, whose windows displayed the winners and honorable mentions in a car model contest held on Labor Day. Henry thought that the prize-winning entries had too much paint and polish on them, so that they didn't look like scale models at all but like brightly decorated toys. One of the honorable mentions, though, a dented car up on jacks, with a figure bent over the hood and a pair of legs coming out from under it, was a fine job. Joey and Jack favored the winning entry, a candy-apple-red T-Bird convertible with the seats done in white corduroy. Frankie liked a shiny hot-rod hearse.

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They crossed over to the barbershop, admiring for a moment the giant red and white candy cane of a barber pole turning like a brace-and-bit in its curved glass casing.

"Well, well, well," Mr. Savona said as they walked in, "if it in't de Bowman boyce. How are you, boyce?"

"Fine," they said, nearly in unison.

There was only one customer in the shop, a burly man almost bald but with a fine gray bristle horseshoeing his head from temple to temple. Mr. Savona took his time with the man, scissors snapping in the air with the locomotive rhythm of an electric train engine. The man in the chair was smoking a cigar.

"I be wit you boyce inna coupla minutes."

Henry, Joey, and Jack took off their packs and sat down in the vinyl chairs. Frankie kept his holster on. Curled and wrinkled magazines lay spread out on a Formica table with chrome legs that matched the chairs. Henry paged through a *Popular Science*: "Wheelless Lawn Mower Floats on a Cushion of Air"; "Build Your Own Automatic Garage Door Opener"; "Home Fallout Shelter: Part 3."

"You know, Gene," the man in the chair was saying to the barber, "I was in Italy. And I don't care what anybody says—I got nothin' but admiration for your Italian people. They was in a tight spot, and they come through as best they could. I was proud to be part of the force 'at helped 'em. Now your Frenchies, they're an ungrateful lot, if you ask me. They never 'preciated what we done for 'em..."

When Mr. Savona finished with the man, the boys took their turns in the big red leather and cast steel barber chair. None of their feet reached the ornate footrest, its surface burnished silver by the shoes of grown men. Frankie, who went first, had to use a special seat that straddled the chair's arms and held him high enough for his neck to clear the chairback.

"Cheese and crackers, you got rocks in your hairs," Mr. Savona said.

Jack went second, and while he was in the chair, the other barber came in. He took off his suit coat, put on his white barber jacket, and arranged his clippers and scissors on the counter in front of the second chair. Then he climbed into the chair himself, lit a cigarette, and opened up the newspaper, taking no notice at all of the boys.

174 Henry took his turn in Mr. Savona's chair. The barber first combed and brushed the dirt out of Henry's hair, then sprayed it with water, combed it again, and started at it with the scissors. Henry watched in the mirror as dark parentheses of wet hair fell onto the white bib and the floor. Mr. Savona combed long hanks of hair and hacked at them with the toothed thinning scissors. Then he combed Henry's hair once again and started up the electric clippers. While the clippers buzzed against his neck and around his ears, Henry examined the equipment on the counter. Long, tapered black combs were slotted into a cardboard placard hanging from the mirror. More combs of various sizes and shapes were soaking in green liquid in a glass jar marked Barbicide. There were blue and green bottles of Vitalis and Mennen, white tubes of Brylcreem, and little clear wedge-shaped bottles of Odell Hair Trainer. Three different sized barber scissors lay on the counter, and half a dozen clipper heads were arranged next to them. And over to the side, Henry saw the yellowish plastic grate used to cut flattops.

Mr. Savona smelled like the stuff he splashed on his customers when he finished cutting their hair. He seemed to need a shave, but his pencil moustache was well-trimmed. Henry had heard that barbers cut each other's hair, and he wondered whether they shaved each other, too. Mr. Savona was now lathering the back of Henry's neck with hot soapy foam. He stropped the

straight razor against the smooth leather strap with four strikes and smacks and began to scrape lightly around the sidewalls of Henry's head and neck. When this was done, he wiped Henry with a towel, slapped some aftershave on him, dusted him off with a soft brush and some sweet-smelling talc, broke the bib and shook it out with a crack, combed Henry's hair once again, and patted him on the shoulder to tell him he was finished.

"How 'bout you, sonny?" Mr. Savona said to Joey. "You looka like you could use trim."

"No, sir, my momma cuts my hair."

Henry paid, and the boys slipped their packs back on.

"Try not to wash you hair inna dirt 'fore you come next time, huh, boyce?" Mr. Savona said as they left.

## 2. Earth and Air

They headed for a diner constructed like a castle of royal blue building blocks. When the boys went in, the counterman was alone, sitting on a high swivel chair behind the counter. He looked up from the newspaper spread out in front of him.

"Hello, fellas," he said. "What can I do you for?"

He took a small pad of plain white paper and a pencil with a shiny metal clip on it from the pocket of his white shirt and wrote down their order. He added it up, took the money, gave the boys their change, and drew their sodas, which he covered with waxed cardboard lids that fit tightly in a groove in the tops of the paper cups and had U-shaped cutouts in the middle where a straw could be pushed through.

The boys took their sodas to the other end of the counter and sat on the four stools nearest the grill. As they watched, the man took about a dozen meatballs out of the small refrigerator behind him and tossed them onto the wide steel griddle, which sizzled and spit as the meatballs landed on it. He then reached for his stiff steel spatula and a can that looked like a flour sifter. It had a lid with big holes in it, and he turned it upside down and shook finely chopped onions out onto the meatballs as he rolled them with the spatula to where he wanted them and then smashed them flat with one hard slap. They steamed and hissed. He grabbed another can and shook salt every-

where. Next he tossed a couple of still-unbroken squares of rolls onto the back of the grill. He started turning the glistening and bubbly meat patties over, flipping and re-flattening them in one smooth slice and smack. Next he came up with a handful of pickle slices from somewhere and distributed them, one to each burger. Now he broke up the baked-together buns and quickly positioned them over the hamburgers. He turned the flat bottom half of each bun upside down and placed the white spongy middle part against the pickle; then he balanced the top half right-side up on top of that, so that each hamburger looked like a danger sign of three stones stacked up, the top one rounder than the other two. The spatula never left the man's right hand. Finally, he stabbed the spatula under each thin brown patty, scraped it off the grill, lifted it, steadying the bun with his other hand, spun around to a stack of waxed paper wrappers, raised the top bun, neatly flipped the burger and the bottom bun together into the center of the wrapper, lowered the top, and pulled back the spatula so that the now complete and upright sandwich was ready to be wrapped. He slid it off the stack of papers and got the next one. When he had cleared all of them from the griddle, he folded the wrappers and put the hamburgers into a white bag.

"Did you see that guy?" Joey asked as they were divvying up on a bench in the sun. "I mean he was quick with making this food."

"He sure was," Jack said.

"Did you see how he smashed them?" Frankie said.

After eating, the boys ducked back through the brush, slid down the dirt chute to the creek again, and crossed under the avenue bridge. Back in the cemetery, they inspected the rock garden alongside the duck pond, finding half a dozen salamanders and three thumb-sized beetles under flat white stones, but they hadn't brought a collecting jar along and had to leave them behind. They counted seven white ducks on the water and attempted to startle them into flight with an aerial bombardment. The ducks quacked an angry kazoo song and swam to the far end of the pond.

From the rock garden, the boys headed up a footpath that passed through the trees and bushes just beyond the mowed lawns of the cemetery's west hill, where the boys would go sledding in winter. There were no graves in this section yet, so the J.P.s were not as vigilant in their coverage here, and the boys marched happily through the narrow wood. The sun was directly overhead now, turning the clearings yellow and gold, paling the pine needles and birch leaves to emerald, and speckling the mulberry bushes and wild

hedge with churchy light. The sticky smell of pine sap hung in the air like incense.

They were heading for the tracks, where, with any luck, a train would come by. Henry was hoping to see whether the train would be heavy enough to flatten a zinc penny he had in his pocket. Henry and Joey both put their ears to the tracks. They were smooth and cold.

“I wanna hear,” said Frankie.

“Nothing to hear,” Henry said as he stood up. “Nothing coming.”

From the high trackbed, they could look out over the whole cemetery. Deep green cloud shadows moved like ships across the bright sunlit grass as brilliant clouds moved in slow procession across the sky. The white marble crosses, statues, and Bible Stone almost glowed in the midday light. Nearer the tracks, the unsodded work area of the cemetery flared orange, and the pile—a massive heap of dead greenery—stood out dark and shadowy. The sun glistened off the ever-converging, mirror-topped tracks, glinted off the brook in places. Beyond the brook, in the yard of the steel mill, a few new I-beams flashed blue in the sun amid the rows of old ones rusted the color of dead leaves. Pools of standing water on the mill’s flat roof reflected more patches of the cloudstrewn sky, and the roofs of the houses on Verrazano Street, where the boys lived, stuck up gray amid the soft crowns of oaks and maples.

The boys walked the tracks toward the Hudson Street bridge, trying out different techniques. Stepping on each tie was an uncomfortable pace for all but Frankie, but hitting every other tie was an ungainly stretch. Every third was an awkward lope, and hard to maintain. They stopped after passing over the tunnel where the creek went under the trackmound. Jack had seen a few other boys coming along behind them at a distance of about half a block. Henry, Joey, Jack, and Frankie slid down the black cinder slope, arriving at the edge of the brook where it passed behind the junkyard on the far side of the tracks. From there, it poured into the tunnel and came out below the steel mill’s back lot not far from where they had first crossed it a few hours before.

They picked their way upstream to a hole they knew in the junkyard fence. Keeping a lookout for the other boys they had seen earlier, they went through one by one, Henry holding the mesh back for the others, and then Joey holding it for him. They passed a couple of antique washing machines with cranks and rollers, a row of old refrigerators with the doors removed

and lined up like dominoes, and a pair of rusting ovens before reaching the car parts and climbing up to the top of a springy heap of tires. From this height they saw what they were looking for.

It was an old De Soto with a rumble seat, the top car in a stack of three. The front windows were spiderwebbed with cracks, the back and side windows had been smashed out, and the seats, floorboards, and the flat panel behind the backseat were littered with glittering chips of glass: "diamonds."

"Frankie," Henry said, "you stay here and stand watch like before. We'll be right back."

"Aw, how come I never get to go?"

"Oh, bloody! Is he going to cry again?" said Joey.

"Yeah, don't be a crybaby," said Jack.

"I am not a crybaby," Frankie said.

"Are too," Jack said.

"Am not."

"Hey," Henry said, "listen up. We got a mission to accomplish. Lookout is important, Frankie. Besides, it's too dangerous for a little kid. Keep a sharp eye out for those other guys, and signal like before, only this time stay put! Give the signal, keep watching, and wait for orders. You got that?"

"Okay," Frankie said.

Henry, Joey, and Jack half climbed, half tumbled down the tires and started their ascent to the old car. Henry went first; the other two boys had to give him a boost up to the fender of the second car. From there he got through a side window and then pulled his brother and his friend up and in. The climb up to the top car was even more difficult. Henry at full stretch was only just able to reach the door handle. As he was pulling himself up, the door suddenly swung open with a loud *screewalk* and an awful crunching shift of the whole car, leaving him hanging by his fingers as if from a chinning bar and wondering if the car was going to come down on top of him. But he held on and managed to pull himself up and then swing a leg up through the window. Once he got his leg up, he knew he was all right and rested a moment before climbing off the door and onto the car's hood. From there he went over the roof on his hands and knees, through the smashed-out back window and into the car. With the door opened, Joey and Jack climbed easily into the car's interior. The seats were moldy and smelled like under a porch or in a dirt-floored cellar. There was glass everywhere. Hank slipped one arm out of its pack strap and swung his pack around under the other arm. He slid

one hand in under the flap and felt around. After a few moments of searching, he brought out an old gray sock with a leather thong threaded through the top. He handed it to Jack.

“Gather as many as you can,” he said. “Me and Joey will check out the rumble seat.”

Joey held Henry’s legs as Henry stretched out the back window and tried to get the rumble seat opened. The handle was stuck, and he thought it might be locked, but then it suddenly broke loose and unlatched. Henry lifted and pushed back the hatch that doubled as the seat back, and hot musty air came up like steam from under a pot lid. He felt the heat against his face, and his mouth went dry as if he had eaten dirt. He and Joey climbed out into the little outside cockpit. Jack was sweeping up chips of glass, and the sun and sky flashed in his hand, white, silver, gold, and blue.

### 3. Fire and Water

*Clack-ak-ak. Clack-ak-ak. Clack-ak-ak.*

They looked over to see Frankie waving at them and pointing toward the tracks where someone was standing.

“Let’s get out of here,” Henry said.

The boys jumped to the car alongside the stack they were on, jumped down to the ground from there, and threaded their way to the hole in the fence. All three were through and halfway to the brook when Jack said, “Hey, where’s Frankie?”

“You told him to stay put,” Joey said to Henry.

Henry told the other two boys to wait at the fence, and he went back through to get his little brother. Frankie was still at the top of the heap of tires.

“Ssst, Frankie,” Henry called in a shouted whisper. “Let’s go. C’mon down.”

Frankie clambered down, and the two of them headed for their escape route.

“I saw what they were doin’,” Frankie said.

“Who?”

“Those guys, didn’t you see?”

“We saw one guy on the tracks.”

"He was just the lookout. There were three other guys."

Henry and Frankie slipped through the fence and headed along the stream toward the tracks and the tunnel that went under them.

"Report," Henry said.

"What?"

"Report. Tell what you seen."

Frankie told them he had seen three big boys go down into the junkyard with a big glass jug.

"What kind of jug?"

"I don't know, but they had, like, a ice pick, and they stuck it in the bottom of some cars and got the stuff that dripped in the bottle."

"Liar," Joey said.

"Am not. I saw it. I swear."

"Gas," Henry said.

The boys arrived at the mouth of the tunnel. It was round, about as tall as two medium-sized boys, and as long as two house lots. Looking into it was like looking into a keyhole, all darkness, with a bright light at the far end; the brightness contrasted so sharply with the shadowy gloom of the tunnel that it was not clearly discernable as much more than a disc of light, not a scene or a view, but an out-of-focus shimmering glow. They entered the tunnel and began walking through. The curved concrete floor was slippery with wet moss, and the air in the tunnel was cool and clammy. Their footsteps echoed from the walls as they walked, and the bright image at the far end gradually came into focus, resolving slowly into clarity, the pinkish field of color in the upper half of the circle transforming itself into a hollow, red clay embankment, the blue-white lower semicircle becoming a sky-reflecting pool of dark water, a pool that suddenly exploded with a black splash, a deep *kat-hoosh* with plume and splat, as a skull-sized rock cannoned into it from above.

"Shit damn," Joey said, his voice echoing metallicly in the tunnel.

The boys stood still and looked at one another.

"Must be those guys we saw," said Henry. "They're waiting for us on top of the tunnel. We better go back."

They turned and started back, but they hadn't gone far when two silhouettes appeared against the dappled red and brown bank beyond the tunnel's opposite mouth.

They turned to see a shower of cinders and small stones pecking the surface of the pool.

"So, you think you can come in our tunnel without asking permission, huh?" a voice rang out from the other end. The voice was deep, and both boys moving into the tunnel were big boys. A big glass jug dangled from the hand of the one on the left.

"S'not yours. S'a free country," Frankie said.

"Oh, yeah? Don't be too sure. I think you're gonna have to pay for this, don't you, Del?"

"Yeah. Pay-up time."

"We're trapped like rats," Jack said.

"Lookit, Del, it's a baby and three sitters."

"M'not a baby," Frankie said.

"What do you want?" Henry asked.

"S'not what we want. S'what we're gonna get."

"We're jus' gonna have a little fun."

The one on the right reached into his pocket and took out a wooden kitchen match. He struck it against the zipper of his pants. The other started doing something with the jug. Suddenly the match was tossed into the stream and the water was aflame and flowing toward them. The walls of the tunnel glowed red, orange, and moss green; flames and black smoke rippled down the tunnel floor. The boys backed up against the curved walls, their faces glowing in the flamelight, the oily smoke smell choking them, making them cough.

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"Like our little game, boys?"

The big boy with the bottle was now on his knees, pouring more of the flammable liquid into the slow-moving stream. There was the scrape of another match and the arc of its light as it was tossed with the head still flaring, and *boom*. The raft of flames was bigger this time and floated toward the boys. It broke and danced, rolled blue along its bow, and sent yellow fluttering sails up into the darkness. This time it just reached the boys when the main part blinked out, and they felt the wave of heat on their arms and faces. Rivulets of flame clung to the edges of the stream. The boys were coughing, and their eyes were tearing from the smoke. Outside, the shower of cinders and rocks stopped.

"Let's go," Henry said, and the boys charged out of the tunnel into the pool at its downstream mouth. They were waist deep, trying to run but slowed by the heavy water. The rocks and cinders started again and rained down around them. Jack reached the bank first, then Joey, and they started scratch-

ing their way up to the steel mill yard above. Henry turned around to look for Frankie, and he saw him still in the tunnel's mouth, afraid to go into the water. The echoing laughter of the big boys boomed out of the tunnel.

"C'mon, Frankie!"

"S'too deep!" Frankie was bawling.

"Jump right, cemetery side—it's shallow there."

The dark mouth of the tunnel glowed orange again, and Frankie jumped out, reaching the knee-deep part just as the flames poured over the lip of the tunnel into the pool. As he got clear of the water, a rock hit him in the shoulder and knocked him down. He lay facedown on the rough dirt and stones with his hands over his head.

By this time, Joey and Jack were out of range of the boys above the tunnel, who had only heavy rocks and fine cinders to throw. Jack and Joey found some good egg-sized throwing rocks and were pelting them into the mouth of the tunnel. They heard a yell from inside.

"We'll get you for that, ya little bastards."

"Cover me," Henry called out to Jack and Joey. He then darted across the creek around the outer edge of the pool and headed for his little brother. Joey and Jack concentrated their fire on the two boys above the tunnel, so that they had to use their hands and arms to protect their faces and could only kick cinders down on Henry and Frankie. The boys in the tunnel were pouring more out of the bottle and getting ready to light it off. Henry reached his brother, grabbed him roughly by the arm, and pulled him up and away. Frankie, half running and half being dragged, howled like an animal: "*Aaa! Hank, it hurts! Aiyaaa!*"

"Clear," Henry yelled.

Joey and Jack shifted their aim to the boys in the tunnel again. A new match was struck and flipped out over the now shimmering, gas-slicked pool, and one of Joey's rocks caught the bottle-boy in the face. The bottle dropped and smashed, and the pool and tunnel mouth exploded red and gold.

Henry picked himself up off the dirt and turned to see ghosts of flame dancing across the water and a narrow burning river snaking its way downstream. He could see nothing but black smoke in the tunnel, and the boys above the tunnel were scurrying on all fours up the cinder slope of the track mound, away from the fire. Jack and Joey were halfway up the other bank, in the clear.

“Checkpoint green,” Henry called out to them and took off, dragging a screaming Frankie behind him.

#### 4. Fire and Air

The squad reformed behind the utility shed in the unsodded part of the cemetery, about twenty yards from the huge mound of used grave blankets, old wreaths, and dead flowers that the gravediggers and other cemetery workers had heaped up in their work area. The boys called this “the pile”; in it they had built their fort, its entrance marked by a sort of banner made of red and green ribbon. The banner wouldn’t have been noticed by anyone who wasn’t looking for it, but it was essential to relocate the chambers the boys had opened up in the heaped pine boughs. This was the second fort of the season. They had spent one whole midsummer day making the first one but had not marked it, and never found it again. That one was near the southwest corner of the mound and may have been caved in by the work of the men who ran the yellow pay-loader, small bulldozer, and dump trucks. The pile was newest there, so it was wetter, less brittle, didn’t cut and scratch the boys’ bare arms and—if they were wearing shorts—their legs. But that was where there was the greatest risk of having the work destroyed by the addition of more refuse to the pile, so the new fort was made almost in the middle, far from danger. The boys had tried to drive a tunnel out to the southern edge so that they would not have to climb across the top of the pile to enter their hideout, exposing themselves to view from the tracks, but, though they had hollowed out and shored up several passageways that struck out for the relative safety of that southern face, they had only succeeded in opening up a couple of alternate entrances and emergency exits somewhat nearer the perimeter, but still a fair distance beyond the wall of dead greenery that rose up before them now.

“I wanna go home, Hank. It hurts.” Frankie was sniveling.

“Let me see,” Henry said.

Frankie stretched his shirt collar out over his left shoulder. There was an angry red blotch alongside his neck, but it wasn’t bleeding.

“It’s just a bruise. Don’t be a baby,” Henry said.

Frankie started to cry again.

“Okay, if you want to go home, and if Jack wants to take you, that’s fine. But I’m not going.”

“Me neither,” Jack said.

“Then you have to come with us.”

Frankie had trouble keeping up, and Henry noticed that he was letting his left arm hang limp at his side. The boys regrouped at the mound and clambered into it. From a distance, the pile looked almost uniformly green, the color of the pine boughs that made up most of its bulk, but up close it ranged from the near-white of the rough-cut 1 x 2 framing that held the constructions together to the rust red of the dried pine needles from last season, to the bright yellow and orange-red of new flowers only beginning to sweetly mold. The fresh scent of cut pine mixed with the thick perfume of chrysanthemums. There were pieces of crumbly green Styrofoam in some of the arrangements, and there was a lot of red and green ribbon. Climbing over all this was rough going; the footing gave way often, and Frankie was whimpering the whole time, but the boys didn’t see anybody watching from the tracks. They finally got to their hideout, lifted the cover, lowered themselves into the sweet piney-smelling darkness, and closed the top over again. All four of the boys threw themselves against the shored walls in exaggerated exhaustion and relief, as if they had just reached cover in time to be protected from an explosion. They waited for their eyes to adjust. Dust motes floated in slanting shafts of green light.

“War is hell,” Joey said.

The other boys picked it up like a refrain.

“War is hell,” they all said, over and over again.

Frankie was crying quietly.

The boys examined the fort for signs of intrusion. It was secure. No one had been in it as far as they could tell. Their lumber supply of lath slats was still neatly piled in the corner, the collection of rocket ships—little pointed green plastic tubes that held enough water to keep a flower stem wet and had fins to hold them in the Styrofoam blocks they were stuck into—was untouched, and the cigar box full of diamonds was where it was supposed to be in a slot in one of the walls. They loaded their new loot into it.

“I think those guys blew themselves up,” Jack said.

“I didn’t see them after the brook went,” Henry said, “did you?”

“I didn’t see anything,” Joey said.

“That was a good throw, Joey,” Henry said.

The boys discussed the battle and speculated on whether Joey could be credited with a kill if the big boys were dead. Then suddenly they heard noises from above. They froze.

"Ja hear that?" a muffled voice came from above. "I told ya I seen the little bastards over here."

"They're gonna get us!" Frankie yelled.

"Shut up."

Frankie started crying loud, and Henry had to go over and put his hand over his brother's mouth. Frankie groaned and sobbed, but he didn't struggle.

"I told you to shut up," Henry whispered fiercely in his ear.

"They're here somewhere. I know it."

The roof bounced, and a shower of dry pine needles rained down. One of the big boys was directly above the fort. Henry silently signaled Joey and Jack to move into the narrow escape tunnel. The roof shook again.

"Goddamn it. I know they're here."

Then a different voice: "We'll get you little punks. You just wait."

Joey was through the narrow doorway into the low passage. Jack started through behind him, caught his pack on a branch, backed out to unhook it, wriggled forward again, and disappeared like a worm into soft earth. Frankie had stopped whimpering, and Henry sent him after Jack. There was a yell from above, and a leg and foot came crashing through the roof into the fort. The pant leg had caught in the pine boughs, and the leg was bare above a black high-top sneaker and a drooping dark sock.

"Shit!" came the voice from above.

Frankie turned, saw the foot, and screamed. Henry didn't know what to do, so he picked up a piece of wood from the stack near him and started swatting the bare leg as hard as he could. Cries of pain filtered through the woven pine boughs, softened, almost distant.

"Go, Frankie!" Henry shouted.

The other leg came through the green thatch. Henry cracked its shin with the slat. The slat broke off in his hands, cutting the white leg as it broke. Frankie disappeared through the hatch, and Henry dropped his weapon and dove after him into the green darkness. He crawled for his life as the big boy screamed for help.

"Run for it!" Henry shouted into the black-green tunnel. A shower of light flooded the passage as Joey threw back the cover at the other end.

"There they are!"

The boys clambered out of the hole, ran, stumbled, pulled themselves across the irregular and unsteady pile, tearing their clothes and scraping their arms and hands and faces on dried pine branches. It was like running lengthwise through a living hedge, but they managed to get clear of the pile ahead of the big boys, who lost time when another of them fell through the roof of the boys' fort while trying to help the first one free his legs. The squad ran across the red clay of the work area to the toolshed. The big boys were still after them. Then they saw a blue car come around past the row of yellow trucks.

"Hey, you kids! Stop. Junior Police."

The boys kept running, back into the creekbed, around behind the Bible Stone, across the brook, through the woods by the Weird Sisters' house, across Delaware Street, up Minuit to the vacant lot, and over the low fence into the Bowman yard. Joey kept going up the backyards to his own house.

Frankie whimpered through their mother's scolding for the way they looked, the way they smelled, the pine tar on their clothes.... He whimpered through the undressing, crying out when his T-shirt was pulled over his head.... He whimpered through his turn in the bath, crying out again when he was dried and when he had to put on a clean T-shirt. His mother was watching him closely by the time Henry and Jack were dressed again. She told him to sit still and wait until his father got home from his Saturday job.

When the boys' father arrived, their mother spoke quietly to him, and he examined Frankie's arm and shoulder carefully, moving the arm slowly and gently different ways and asking the boy questions in his softest voice. He carried the boy out to the car and drove off.

Several hours later, the car pulled up in front of the house again. Henry and Jack went out to meet it. That was when Henry noticed the smoke.

"I told you I was hurt," Frankie was saying.

The sky was pearly with a coral sunset behind a billowing pillar of gray rising cloud.

"It's the pile, Dad. It must be. Can I go and watch?"

"The fort," said Frankie.

"The kids from the other side," said Jack.

"We'll stay on this side of the brook," Henry said. "Can we go, Dad? Huh?"

"We'll all go," his father said, "as soon as we get Frankie inside."

“No, Dad. I’m okay,” Frankie said. He was wearing a complicated chrome and white leather brace around his shoulders and his chest. “It doesn’t hurt so much now.”

“You’ve got a broken collarbone, son. You’re going to have to take it easy...”

But their father relented, and he walked with the boys through the wooded lot, across Minuit, through the foundry yard, to the mill storage lot. There were other families out there, mostly boys with their fathers. Joey was there, and his father and Mr. Bowman exchanged a few words, and Joey filled the Bowman boys in on the rumors that the police had picked up two kids who had burn marks on their clothes. Then Joey went back to his dad, and the Bowman boys stood with their father on the rim of the brook’s bank.

“That’s where they got me,” Frankie said, pointing down through the pooling darkness to the barely visible tunnel’s mouth. “I bet it was them that started the fire, too—right, Hank?”

But Henry wasn’t listening; he was completely occupied by the fire. It had spread from one corner to almost the whole mound of dried pine boughs and dead flowers. And the fire trucks seemed to be having little luck in quenching it. He could hear the crackle and roar disconnected by distance from the plumes of sparks and smoke, and the time-delayed *whoosh* when a hollow part caved in. The passages and the fort must be flowing with fire, Henry thought as he watched towers of sparks soar up into the darkening sky. Sometimes the flames detached themselves from the pile’s burning mass and climbed on waves of smoke high into the air, where they hung for a few moments, roaring, hissing, pure fire. The cemetery lawns lay back like a dark sea behind the fire trucks, and the cinders sloping up to the railroad tracks glowed red.