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Grasshopper Kings

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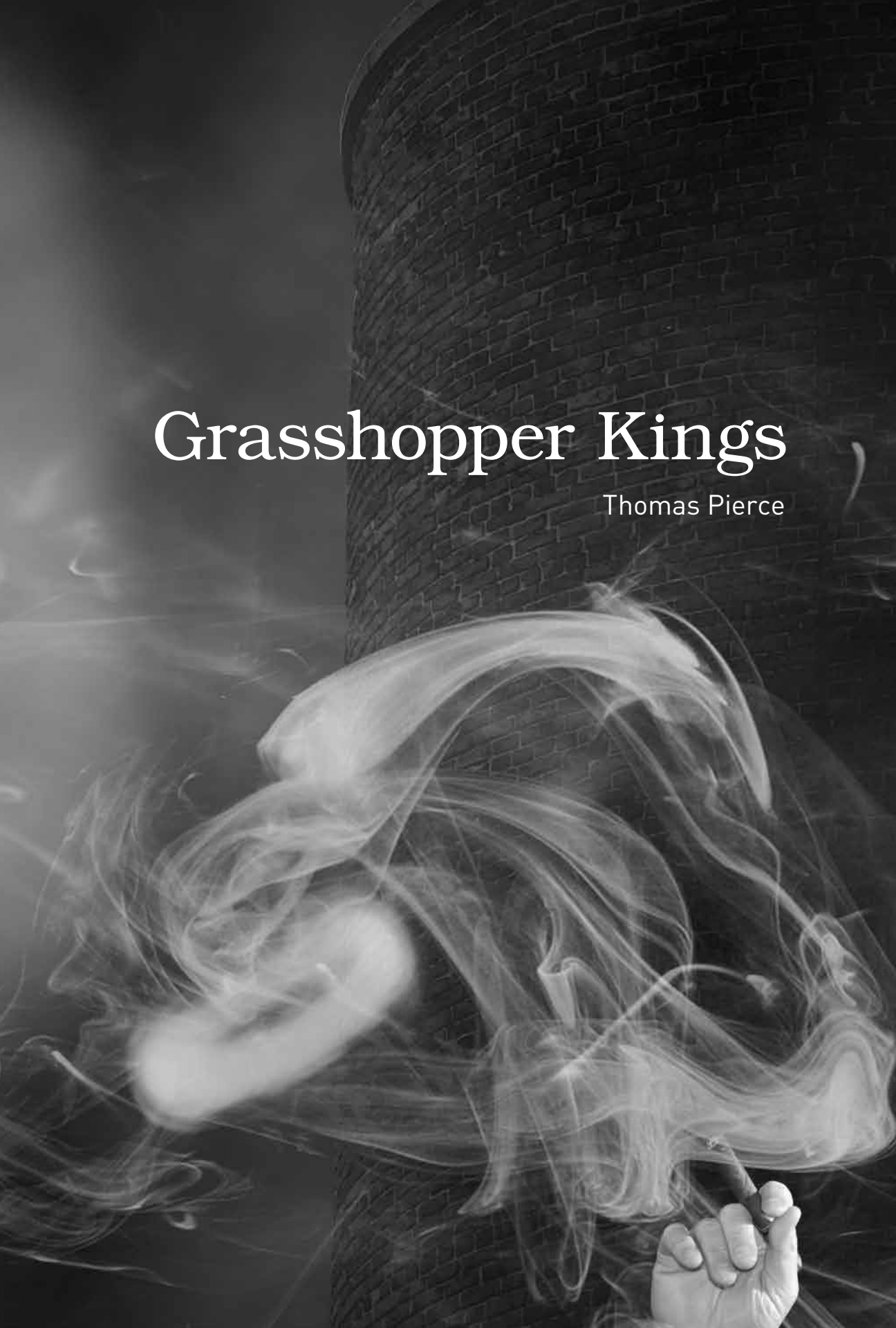
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His son flings the stick behind the hedges when he spots the car approaching. Flynn is home late again. The boy is on the front lawn in a shirt with the sleeves cut off, his wiry arms behind his back now. Even from a distance, Flynn saw the flames eating the end of the stick. The smoke hovers around his son's head like an apparition as Flynn steps toward him. Ryan, my sweet boy, he says, I thought we'd put this fire business behind us.

Illustration by Liz Priddy with photos by the following: smoke rings, David O'Connor; hand with cigar, Azmole; tower, Pete Birkinshaw; smoke wisps, Mikko Miettinen.

Grasshopper Kings

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His son's eyes are like his wife's eyes, which are like an owl's eyes, hardly blinking and gigantic. Nothing else about his wife is owl-like. She is skinny as a ferret and not at all nocturnal. She's in bed by eight, or seven thirty if *Jeopardy's* a repeat. He sends Ryan off to bed with the stuffed blue bear, Mookie. His wife used to call her sister Mookie, but that was years ago, before cancer took Mookie away at the nearly young age of forty-three. His wife doesn't like to talk about her sister's death, not ever. Ryan and Mookie (the bear) share many common interests: kites, erector sets, matches, magnifying glasses, flaming sticks, aerosol sprays, hot rods. Ryan and Mookie (the aunt) never met unless you count the birth, but Flynn doesn't count the birth, as his son was not then a real, thinking human animal.

Flynn collects the stick from the hedges, wipes the ash from the tip, and takes it into his son's room wrapped in a red shower towel. Watching his son sleep, or pretend to sleep, he swishes a toothpick back and forth across his lower lip. The toothpick is no substitute for a cigarette. He rations out his pack across the week as a means of quitting, and he smoked the last of the day's allowance at work.

He stayed late tonight to help paint the set for an upcoming theater production. Flynn is the activity director at an upscale drug and alcohol treatment center in the mountains, and as such, he's in charge of the play, a romantic comedy adapted from a film. Paul Bunsen—"Small Paul," with the needle marks between his toes—has agreed to play the lead. Small Paul also goes by "Paul Bunyan," which is meant ironically, since you could fold the man into a shoebox. Tickets are on sale now, and it's buy-one-get-one-free unless you're a resident, in which case it's always free.

Flynn sits down on the bed, and the boy opens his eyes. His brown hair is wild and messy, the small snub nose just above the covers. He's short for his age, just over four feet, but then again, so was Flynn at nine.

I don't need to tell you I'm disappointed, Flynn says, Because you already know that. I really thought we'd solved this.

The closet door is decorated with Ryan's school paintings, and on the other side of that door, Flynn knows, there's a black ring burned into the beige carpet, hidden by a doormat. Ryan is not a pyromaniac, or not yet, anyway. The doctor calls him a "fire-starter." He's more curious than compulsive.

I'm sorry, the boy says.

Is it because of my smoking? Flynn wonders. Did you see me light too many matches? Is it because I work too much? Do I not pay you enough attention? Should we play more catch? Do you need more hobbies? Should I take you fishing? My father took me fishing and made me gut them in the

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sink behind the house, and at the time I hated him for it, but looking back, it makes me smile. Should we go fishing together? Would you like me to teach you how to weight the line and wipe the gummy knife across your shirt? Are you bored? Is it a feeling of boredom? Is it a feeling of not belonging? When you look inside your heart, do you see storm clouds or sunshine? Isn't that how the doctor put it?

The boy has dozed off again.

Flynn goes down the hall.

He's doing it again, he reports to his wife.

The boxy television on the edge of her dresser flickers blue across her bedroom. They sleep separately because of the snoring. His snoring, not hers. She is asleep, or was, nestled in her mechanized queen bed with the hospital controls. She isn't sick. She kept the bed after Mookie died and says it helps her back. He flips on her bedroom light, and she moans. She gives him a look like, *Please, not tonight*.

I found him in the yard, he says. I don't think he ever stopped. I think he's been hiding it from us.

She rummages for the control, and the bed vibrates into a sitting position. We should call the doctor first thing, she says.

What, so he can squeeze another three hundred dollars from us?

The doctor said to call him.

He can't fix the problem.

And what's the problem?

The problem is a feeling. A feeling of not belonging.

What does that mean?

It means the boy needs friends. He needs to be included. You know, to really *belong* to something.

She looks at him like, *I'm exhausted, but you look like someone I used to know.*

Flynn makes a phone call.

It's late, Vincent Hicks says.

Yes, I'm sorry.

We have a newborn.

You're right, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have called. This can wait.

Well, I'm up now.

Vincent Hicks is a CPA, a fine, upstanding citizen with a nice young family, and everyone says he could run for office because he's got that kind of generically handsome face, the fan-blown bangs and smooth voice, the American-made Suburban in the driveway. But Vincent Hicks is reluctant to enter politics. His brother Herbie is an addict. Not many people in town know that. Flynn has tried to help Herbie, but Herbie doesn't want to be helped.

I need a favor, Flynn says. Your oldest son is a Grasshopper, isn't he?

Bennie is, yeah. What about him?

The thing is, I've done a little research. I love the organization. I love what it's about. And I know that Grasshoppers can't go to Grasshopper camp until they've been in the program for a full year. Until they've earned enough beads.

That's right, Vincent says.

I was hoping they'd make an exception for my son. He's nine years old, and I'm a little late getting him involved. I want to take him to the father-son camp next month.

Flynn, like you said, the rules are the rules.

Look, he'd be a perfect fit. A natural Grasshopper.

I'm afraid I can't help you with this. I'm just one of the dads. I think the baby's crying. I'm sorry. I really need to go.

Please, Flynn says. We need this. My son does, I mean. Who do I need to call?

The phone is full of static, like it's being rubbed against a shirt. Vincent Hicks is talking to someone else, his wife maybe. Yes, I know what time it is, he says to her. You think I don't know about the baby? You think I forgot the baby? Flynn, you still there? Bill Tierney, he says. Call Bill Tierney.

Bill Tierney is a malpractice attorney with an ad on the back of the phone book. The rumor in town is that he made an easy three million off a botched plastic surgery. The client lost all feeling on the left side of her body, the surgeon's practice went bankrupt, and Bill Tierney moved into a four-story mansion on the sixteenth hole of a golf course. His son, Grayson, is twelve now and president of Ryan's elementary school. Instead of calling Bill Tierney, Flynn visits his downtown office in the morning. The attorney wears a tan suit and offers Flynn a seat on the other side of his desk. Bill Tierney wonders if maybe Flynn would like some pistachio nuts. Bill Tierney is crazy about them. Was Flynn aware that the nuts have been part of the human diet since the Paleolithic? That they're one of only two nuts mentioned in the Bible?

What's the other one?

The other what?

The other nut in the Bible?

Hell, I don't know. Noah? Sorry, a bad joke. Let's get down to business. Tell me about yourself.

I'm a father, Flynn says. And I love my son very much.

Yes, of course. I have a son myself. Family's got to be number one.

Right. And I want my boy to feel like he's a part of something bigger than himself. Flynn uncrosses his legs and reaches for a pistachio. The shell doesn't want to pry. He admits that he should have signed his son up earlier, but he'd be very grateful if the organization could make an exception in this case. His son is a good boy and loves the outdoors, and the camp would do him wonders. Flynn spins the chalky nut between his fingers. Tierney squints, his mouth half-open. He's confused. Is Flynn not here looking for representation? No, Flynn says, and mentions Vincent Hicks.

From the Grasshoppers? The boy's organization? Bill Tierney's face is flushed now.

Flynn nods. I was hoping you could help, Flynn says. As Head Guide.

Aha.

Right.

Yeah, okay.

Okay? Flynn didn't expect it to be so easy.

Sure, he says and pretends to sign an invisible paper suspended in the air between them.

The Grasshopper district office is in Charlotte, he says. You can go there and fill out the paperwork, pay up for camp. I'll take care of the rest. He stands up, smooths the wrinkles from his suit pants.

Thank you, Flynn says.

Glad I could help. Now, I'm afraid I need to . . . , his voice trails off as he motions to his desk.

Jeopardy is on, but during the commercial breaks Flynn's wife lists all the places she's wanted to travel to in her life. Bermuda. Hawaii. The Galapagos. Madagascar.

You're only naming islands, Flynn observes.

She's upset because after three years without even using a sick day, Flynn is taking an entire week off from work, and he's not using it to take his family on a long-overdue exotic vacation. Instead, he's taking his son to some kind of mysterious camp in the woods.

Ryan comes into the room with a bowl of cereal, the milk dripping down his chin.

Grasshopper Pledge, Flynn quizzes him. Go.

There's a way, Ryan says with a mouth full of cereal, around every wall.

The beads you can earn and their colors?

Beads of Truth are the red ones. Beads of Mercy are the white ones.

And the third?

I can't remember.

They're black . . .

Oh, Ryan says, Beads of Skill.

And how many beads does it take to move up a level?

Six beads, he says.

Good boy, Flynn says. And you'll have those beads in no time at all. Last one. The salute.

Ryan puts his index finger to his heart, and then Flynn does the same.

Are you sure this is what he needs? his wife asks. Will he know any of those kids?

This will be good for him, Flynn assures her. Kids make friends fast.

What is elephantiasis! Flynn's wife shouts at Alex Trebek, but the correct answer is Marfan syndrome.

He's inscrutable, his large eyes blinking and looking but not conveying any secret meaning. Flynn wonders if some fathers instinctively know what their sons are thinking, if there exists between them some kind of private language, little symbols and gestures that only the two of them can decode. Who are you? Flynn is tempted to ask.

Father and son depart on a Saturday morning with the birds tweet-tweeting in the sycamore tree on the front lawn, its bark hanging like strips of beef jerky, shafts of sunlight through the rising fog. You couldn't ask for a more suitable morning, Flynn thinks. The car is packed with sleeping bags, a tent, lanterns and all the other pieces of equipment necessary for two human animals to live comfortably in the woods for five nights. The boy is the navigator and is responsible for tracking their progress with his finger on the atlas and for calling out each step from the printed directions.

Aren't you excited? Flynn wants to know.

The boy doesn't like haircuts, and his brown, shaggy mop makes his small, flat face seem even smaller. He says he's not sure if he's excited. What if it rains? he asks.

That's what the tent is for. You and I are sleeping together. That will be fun, right?

The boy gives him an uncertain look.

They drive into the mountains and then down a long road with thick woods the color of katydids and khaki: muted greens and browns. Ryan directs Flynn onto a paved road that turns to gravel, the rocks popping under the tires, and the gravel road becomes a dirt one, the red dust a cloud behind the car.

Did you have any dreams last night? Flynn asks because that's what the doctor told them to ask.

Maybe, the boy says. I can't remember.

Flynn dreamed he was on an airplane. Midflight, the pilot announced that the plane weighed too much and that they'd have to dump all their luggage. Everyone on the plane peered out the small plane windows to watch their bags and suitcases spiral down below them through the bright blue sky, sweaters and shirts and dresses flapping this way and that. And then the pilot came back on the loudspeaker to announce that unfortunately they still weighed too much. Would anyone volunteer to parachute off the plane? Nobody volunteered. In that case, the pilot said, you'll have to vote one person off the plane. And in that instant, every passenger, at the same time, turned to Flynn, pointed at Flynn, shoved Flynn toward the door.

Up ahead, rough beams form an arch over the road. The camp's entrance. A wooden sign sways from the top, the letters soldered and dark: *Camp Gonnagogo*.

Here we are, Flynn says to his boy. You can put on your uniform.

The shirt is yellow, with a white rugby jersey collar and the Grasshopper patch sewn over the heart. It hangs loose on Ryan's small, pale body.

Flynn pulls up in front of the director's cabin, and a man in a green T-shirt much too tight for his potbelly comes out with a clipboard. He wants their names. He wants their district number. He's got the pen top in his mouth, a small red ink stain on his bottom lip. What was that last name again? The man's sweat drips down onto the pages. How do you spell that last name? He's shuffling through the pages. That was with a C? No, he doesn't see that one on here. Wait, here it is, on the back. There's a problem. Ryan hasn't met all the requirements for camp. He still needs eighteen beads. That's three levels up from where Ryan is now, which is nowhere, according to the information on the clipboard. Can Flynn show documentation that Ryan has earned even one bead?

He can't. But Flynn cleared this with Ryan's Head Guide. Is Bill Tierney there yet? He should be able to sort this out. He can explain that special arrangements have been made for Ryan.

The man puffs out his upper lip with his tongue, sniffing at his blond mustache hairs. All right, he says, wait over there. The walkie-talkie, crackling all along, comes off his belt, and he asks for someone named Bryant. Father and son sit together on a bench outside the cabin, slapping mosquitoes off their legs and arms and necks. Flynn didn't bring bug spray.

Tierney arrives on a golf cart. He's wearing a linen shirt with pink stripes and an Atlanta Braves baseball cap. He doesn't doff his cap to Flynn. He doesn't smile or wave.

What can I do you for? Bill Tierney asks the man with the clipboard.

This gentlemen says you told him he could bring his kid, even though he doesn't have his beads.

Bill Tierney lean-sits on the front of the golf cart, his arms crossed. Right, he says. I'm sorry. I meant to call the district office about that. This going to be a problem?

Maybe, the man says. The rules are pretty clear.

The two men are talking low now, their lips quiet like butterfly wings. Flynn can't hear what they're saying. Tierney laughs a little and pats the man on the back. The man nods and motions to the lake. Tierney nods then. Maybe Flynn should go over and join them. He can help make this okay. He stands, but the conference that will determine his son's fate has ended. Bill Tierney strides over to the bench.

Here's the deal, he says to Flynn. Ryan can stay. Only he won't be able to do some of the activities since he doesn't have his beads. Like the canoe trip to the island on the lake. That's for kids who've got their Swimming Skill Bead and their CPR Bead of Mercy. So he couldn't go on that, you know?

Flynn says he understands, of course. He gives his son's shoulder a squeeze.

The tent once belonged to Flynn's father. The canvas is military green; the paraffin wax that kept its corners sealed from the rain has long since lost its shine. Father and son tie the canvas strips to the metal poles they've erected in the wide open field with all the other tents. In all directions are tents, red, yellow, orange and green nylon rain-flies spilling out around the domes like fruit candies melting in the afternoon sun. Beside every tent is a parked car. The field buzzes with bugs and the sound of a dozen car-powered air pumps, blowing up mattresses two and three feet off the ground. Flynn has brought a number of pads and stacks them under their sleeping bags.

Do you want the left or right?

The boy picks the left.

Where's your pillow?

He forgot his pillow, but here's Mookie the blue bear, smuggled inside a pillow case.

I thought we agreed not to bring the bear.

His son prepares a throne of T-shirts for the bear at the end of his sleeping bag. Its cold, dark eyes are fixed on the two of them.

Just for the first night, Flynn says.

A bell echoes across the lake, and fathers and sons, a hundred of them, begin the boisterous migration to the dining hall. Like a herd of buffalo,

Flynn imagines. They're part of the pack. The boys, ages six to fourteen, run circles around the fathers, some as old as sixty.

One small boy with a round and ruddy face stops to examine an overturned kayak. Snake, he announces, and they all gather around him to admire the discovery, their first significant encounter with wildlife for the week. A dark, fat snake is coiled in the sand by the water.

Water moccasin, one of the fathers determines, and then they're all moving away at once, the fathers dragging the boys backward by their arms and shirttails. Someone should tell the camp director! Snakes in the lake again! Hadn't they hired someone to take care of this after last summer? Remember that kid who somehow trapped a water moccasin in a shopping bag and hung it from the rafters in the shower house?

Clearly that kid didn't have any Beads of Mercy, someone up ahead jokes.

Or a Herpetology Skill Bead, says another.

He wasn't allowed back this summer, yells someone farther back.

They converge on the flagpole outside the dining hall. The man with the clipboard is now the man with a megaphone. The boys are organized into single-file lines radiating out from the flagpole like spokes from a hub. Flynn helps Ryan find his place, the line for his group, Bill Tierney at the head. Two Grasshoppers take the flag down and fold it military style into careful triangular folds. Time for the Grasshopper salute. Time for the Grasshopper Pledge. *There's a way around every wall*, hundreds of shrill voices yell out in near unison. Time for dinner.

Go ahead, Flynn tells Ryan, find us a few seats. Flynn lingers on the porch, where a handful of men furtively smoke their cigarettes. They huddle near the steps, a conspiracy of tobacco. Flynn asks for a light. The man who gives him one introduces himself as John Price. You a newbie? he asks. Flynn says he is. John Price sports a chinstrap beard that still doesn't quite define his soft chin. He owns a dealership. Toyotas and Hyundais. Ever need a new car, give him a call. Come on by. That's how this works. Grasshoppers isn't just for the kids. The dads stick together, you know? Help each other out. Flynn nods enthusiastically. He couldn't agree more. That's how this should work.

One father says: Marty, your kid ever tell you about his Truth Bead?

Never, says Marty.

My kid never told me neither, another man says. I guess that shouldn't bother me, but it does.

There are only two Beads of Truth, John Price explains to Flynn, and the dads never get to know what they mean. The Head Guides decide when the

kid is ready. I think it's just like a single sentence that gets whispered in their ear. But the kids aren't supposed to repeat it. Ever. I've heard that the first one is about the nature of time. My kid's got that one, but he's just as tight-lipped as the rest of them. When I press him about it, he smiles at me like I'm an idiot who wouldn't understand. Just wait, it'll drive you crazy when your kid gets his.

Bowls of mashed potatoes, platters of chicken fingers and pitchers of lemonade are on all the tables when they go inside the dining hall, a flurry of hand-waving, lip-smacking and spilled drinks. Wouldn't mind a little vodka in that lemonade, John Price says with a forced laugh before wandering off to find his son. Flynn navigates the maze of tables and children. He watches one kid drown a chicken finger—perfectly fried on one side but mushy and gray on the other—in a gush of ketchup from a sticky red squirt bottle. Another boy, with a blue bandanna wrapped around his tiny head, drums on his plate with metal silverware until a father leans across the table with a stern look. All the kids are wearing their uniforms. From the right pockets, on leather strings, the white, red and black beads dangle proudly.

Ryan, in his unadorned uniform, is sitting at the end of a table at the far end of the hall, three seats away from the next person. He's barely touched his food. Flynn asks if he'd like to move over a couple of seats, but the boy says no, he's fine where he is. So they sit together, apart from the others, poking tunnels into their mashed potatoes, drinking more and more lemonade, until the man with the megaphone, the camp director, stands at the front of the room with some announcements: tomorrow's activities are posted on the back wall; the bonfire ceremony will be three nights from tonight; a special visitor is coming to help construct a genuine Native American sweat lodge; oh, and the water moccasins are back in the lake, so watch where you step.

That night it rains, but only a little.

The nature hike the next morning is a success. Flynn is waiting at the tent when Ryan returns, his legs scraped from the brambles, happy. Did he see any wildlife? No, no wildlife. Did he see any plants? Yes, they saw a few plants. Flynn has trouble understanding what exactly Ryan enjoyed about the expedition, but he doesn't want to spoil the effect with questions, so he lets it go. That afternoon, after lunch, Ryan isn't able to go on the canoe trip, as expected, so Flynn finds a tub of toys in the shed behind the director's cabin. He takes out the soccer ball and tries to get Ryan to kick that back and forth across the field. But Ryan isn't interested. How about the

basketball or the baseball? Nope, he says. The boy is satisfied to sit in the rocking chairs on the dining hall porch.

What are you thinking about? Flynn asks.

I don't know, the boy says. He's inscrutable, his large eyes blinking and looking but not conveying any secret meaning. Flynn wonders if some fathers instinctively know what their sons are thinking, if there exists between them some kind of private language, little symbols and gestures that only the two of them can decode. Who are you? Flynn is tempted to ask.

One of the cooks comes outside on the porch and says Ryan can ring the dinner bell if he wants. Ryan takes the cord like it might shock him, then gives it a gentle tug. Have to pull harder, the cook says gruffly, and Ryan does. The sound is immense, a physical presence, a peal felt in the bones, in the marrow. The boy is smiling, and Flynn is hopeful.

John Price finds Flynn at dinner. Does he want to smoke a cigarette? They go out on the porch with the other fathers. They struggle to keep the matches lit in the breeze.

So you never told me what you do for a living, John Price says.

Flynn tells him about the treatment center. How you can't understand addiction until you've seen someone fight one.

I got a sister-in-law who used to do cocaine, he says. Even at Thanksgiving. Did she get help?

Maybe, I don't know. My brother never talks about it anymore, so I guess she did.

Flynn opens a new pack and offers up cigarettes. Almost everybody accepts. They use their first butt to light the second because of the breeze.

My kid's up for his second Truth Bead this week, a father says.

Mine too, John Price adds.

The others perk up at that.

The second Truth is about what happens when you die.

That's not what I've heard.

What'd you hear?

My son told me it's about how the universe got started.

Was it with a bang or a whimper?

The Big Banger. That's what my oldest daughter calls God. I think she does it to get under my skin. She's a Unitarian now.

Does that make Satan the Little Whimper?

You guys don't know shit. The second Truth is about the end of the universe, not the beginning.

So enlighten us. How does it end?

The earth goes up in flames. God already tried drowning us once, so the next time he'll smoke us out.

Hear, hear, says a father with smoke sneaking out his nostrils.

If it wasn't for these Truth Beads, my kid would have dropped out years ago. He's obsessed. If I ever found out what they are, I'd just tell him so we could be done with it.

Anyone else think it's bullshit we don't get to know these Truths?

If you ask me, I think the whole process is bullshit. Why is it the Head Guides get to decide who's ready for those beads? Grasshoppers didn't used to be this way.

It can be a little clubby, John Price admits.

A little?

We're just in it for the camping trips.

Us, too. I wanted my son to stop playing his stupid computer games.

Has it worked?

Not really. He's got some kind of portable contraption.

I wanted my son to feel like he's a part of something, Flynn says.

Even if what he's a part of is a little cultish? I'm sorry, guys, but it is, right?

It is, yeah.

A little bit.

My boy's alone most afternoons, Flynn continues, and I think all that time alone was filling his head with bad ideas.

What kind of bad ideas?

I don't know, Flynn mutters. Typical kid stuff.

My boy used to trap squirrels so he could drown them in the pool.

My kid used to shoot a crossbow through the neighbor's screen porch, and one time he put an arrow in her leg. She's almost eighty! God, that was awful.

Alex, he's my stepson. Years ago we caught him with a hammer standing over his little sister's crib.

My son likes fire, Flynn says. But I think he does it for the attention.

My kid Tommy had a fire thing for a while. He almost burned down the garage.

The camp director pokes his head out the door and asks them to come inside for announcements, and they look at each other like, *Is this guy for real?* Flynn smiles at his new friends.

That night in the tent, Flynn lets his son fall asleep first. He takes Mookie the bear out to the car and hides him under a piece of luggage. He's stripping down for bed when he sees his son's eyes on him.

Just try it without the bear, Flynn says.

The boy closes his eyes.

But Flynn has not won this battle, not yet. In the morning, the bear is back on its T-shirt throne. Flynn is undaunted. The dew sparkles with sunshine and, Flynn imagines, with promise. Ryan goes off to the art shack for leather making. The camp isn't designed for earning beads—that's what the weekly meetings are for—but he might be able to earn a bead this morning. Flynn crosses the field, and by the time he reaches the edge of the woods, his boots are soaked. Flynn has volunteered to help build the sweat lodge. John Price is there with a cup of coffee and a cigarette. The camp director, a giant ring of keys jangling from his belt, introduces a special visitor, a man with a long brown-and-gray ponytail down his back. His name is Henri, pronounced the French way, though he has a distinctly American accent, perhaps even Appalachian. He says he's one-sixteenth Cherokee. He has a certificate in Native American Studies. Sweat lodges are used as a means of purification, he says, of the body and the spirit. Sitting in a sweat lodge can help you reach a deeper level of consciousness. Sometimes the spirit travels.

Henri asks for volunteers to gather the firewood and rocks. He asks for more volunteers to cut down and strip small saplings. He distributes hatchets. He uses string and a stick to sketch out a circle with a ten-foot diameter. He instructs everyone to be as silent as possible. He's tapping on a drum. John Price rolls his eyes at Flynn. They jam the saplings into the ground and bend them toward the center. Henri sends John Price and Flynn to collect grasses for the floor of the lodge, and if they find any sage, even better.

They move through the trees, hunched like hunter-gatherers.

Where did they find this guy, anyway? John Price asks. Do you think they just Googled *hippie* and *bullshit* and this guy was number one on the list?

Flynn's not sure. Will John Price try it out, though?

Sure, why not. I'm not against new experiences.

Their arms are full of green grass and dead leaves. So, John Price says, I finally got it out of my son last night. The first Truth.

Oh.

Yeah. He was on the verge of falling asleep. I feel a little guilty about it. To be honest, I thought it was a little anticlimactic. But I suppose that's the way it is with these things. There's a reason the Catholic Church only wanted priests reading the Bible, you know? You want me to tell you what it is?

Okay, Flynn says.

You sure you want to know?

Yes.

Okay, here it goes. *Let the mind enter itself. Let the dark burn bright.*

They're walking back to the sweat lodge. Flynn is quiet.

It's okay, John Price says, I have no idea what it means, either. My kid definitely doesn't. Probably doesn't mean anything. You know the guy who founded the Grasshoppers did time in prison, right? He also wrote fantasy books. That's how he made all his money.

What was he in jail for?

Tax evasion, maybe. I can't remember. Something very white-collar. This was way back. In the '50s. Before he came up with this Grasshoppers gambit. You probably know this already, but in the beginning the group had a strong flower-power element. Very antiestablishment. Very get-in-touch-with-your-inner-self. You can tell from the pledge. That bit about finding your way around walls? All the beads and the rules and the levels, that got added later, along with all the membership fees.

They emerge from the woods, and the fathers have stretched a black tarp over the skeletal sapling frame. Henri is still tapping on his drum. They spread the grasses across the interior and then stand back to admire their construction. The camp director takes a photograph for the Grasshopper newsletter.

The sweat lodge sign-up sheet is up in the dining hall, and at lunch, Flynn schedules time for him and his son. Ryan returns from the leather-working class with a new friend. The boy's name is Trevor. His face is freckled, his hair red and wild. They find seats together in the dining hall. Both boys are sporting the moccasins they made, the thin leather tight around their feet. They don't talk to each other, only sit and slurp up spaghetti casserole.

Where's Trevor's father? Will he be joining them?

Trevor shrugs.

Does Trevor like being a Grasshopper?

Sometimes, he says vaguely.

What does Trevor's father do for a living?

He flies airplanes. He's a pilot.

I'll bet you get to fly all the time, then, huh?

Definitely.

The camp director concludes the meal with his usual announcements: thank you to all the fathers who helped build the sweat lodge; the snake problem has been resolved, and the lake is open for swimming again; and would the fathers who smoke kindly stop dropping the butts off the edge of the porch?

Trevor's father, a skinny man with blue jeans sagging, finds them after lunch.

There you are, he says to his son.

I hear you're a pilot, Flynn says and introduces himself.

The man looks at Flynn like, *Are you kidding?* You've got me confused with someone else, he says.

Trevor and his father walk ahead toward the tents.

The sweat lodge fits ten father-son pairs at a time. Thick steam rises from the rocks at its center. The hot coals beneath glow orange in the darkness. As instructed, Flynn sits cross-legged next to his son, both of them shirtless, dressed in swim trunks. If anyone feels faint, Henri tells them from the door, come outside and drink some water. Flynn can feel the trickles of sweat traveling down his back and his arms. He's swaying a little. His son stares wide-eyed at the rocks, then at the door, shifting restlessly.

What are you thinking about, my sweet boy? Flynn wonders. Does the steam remind you of smoke? Are you thinking about fire again? You've made a friend and earned a bead. Is it belonging you feel now? When you look inside your heart, do you see blue skies or thunderstorms? If you painted a picture, what colors would you choose? If you wrote a song, would the key be major or minor? Have I failed you? Am I not the father you wanted? Are you ashamed of me? Do you wish I had more money? Do you wish I flew airplanes? And then Flynn is in his dream again, on the airplane, the passengers urging him to the door. He's falling through the sky with the shirts and sweaters and pants flapping around him. He's reaching out for something to grab. He looks down to the earth, spinning up at him, and he sees only fire. Thick red flames eat everything, the trees and the buildings and even the surface of the water. All of it on fire. A fiery planet. Fire to the east and west and south and north. He's still falling. He's not alone now. Other people are falling, too. The sky is raining human bodies. Small Paul, with the needle marks between his toes, floats to him, swims to him; he's doing the breaststroke. What's he saying? He's yelling over the wind. Watch out, he says. Watch out, watch out, watch out.

Flynn opens his eyes. He's outside again, in the sunlight, three faces hovering above him. They put water to his lips, and he drinks. Flynn passed out, but he's okay. He just needed some air. He should have had more water. Henri is there.

Go someplace interesting? he asks.

Ryan sits nearby but doesn't look worried. Flynn guzzles an entire canteen of water.

Go back to your tent and rest for a while, they tell him.

He does. Flynn ambles back to the tent and stretches out on his sleeping bag. He's exhausted. He looks up to the canvas roof and lets his body sink. He sleeps.

When he comes to, it's morning. Early morning, the sunlight pale behind the trees. He's still in his swimming trunks. The entire camp is asleep, except for Ryan, his owl eyes hardly blinking.

You missed dinner, the boy reports.

Who'd you eat with?

Trevor.

I'm sorry I missed it.

The boy shrugs.

Flynn spends the day in a daze. He digs his emergency smokes out of the glove compartment and blows through an entire pack on the dining hall porch while Ryan is off at archery and then a few more while Ryan's at the low ropes course with Trevor. Aimlessly, Flynn walks the perimeter of the camp, exploring its boundaries. He finds a tennis court, cracked and full of puddles. He hears a bees' nest, somewhere far off in the trees. A thin path through the woods takes him to the back of the director's cabin. Flynn smells the cigar smoke before he sees the men on the back deck.

Who's out there? the camp director yells.

Flynn emerges from behind the brush with a wave.

It's me, he says, Flynn. I was just exploring.

Bill Tierney is there. So is Vincent Hicks. They're holding glasses with light brown liquid. Scotch. Flynn can almost taste it.

Come on up here, Bill Tierney says.

Flynn climbs the steps. He feels like a kid called to the principal's office.

Tierney offers him a drink, and Flynn says no, thanks.

Come on, just one drink.

I can't, Flynn says. What I mean is, I don't anymore.

I see, I see, Tierney says.

Vincent Hicks brushes a pine needle from his perfect hair. He comes over to Flynn.

Sorry if I was short with you on the phone the other night, he says. The baby's got us losing our minds a little. But didn't I tell you Bill was your man? He worked it out for you, right? I'm glad it all came together.

We were just talking about Vincent's son, Bill Tierney says. He's up for his second Truth Bead tonight. At the bonfire.

We weren't able to be up here earlier this week, Vincent Hicks says. We came up just for the ceremony.

This is the last stage, Tierney says. Once you get your second Truth Bead, you're a Grasshopper King. A very high honor. How's your boy doing? He enjoying himself?

Flynn says that Ryan has made some good friends. That he's loving it here.

They always do, the camp director says. My son's too old to come back now, but I remember the night he got his second Truth Bead. We were so proud.

Flynn, your son's starting a little later than most, Tierney says, but if he works hard, he might even be able to finish.

He'll be cutting it pretty close, Vincent Hicks adds. You said he's nine now?

That's right, Flynn says.

Oh, Tierney says. For some reason I had it in my head that he was seven or eight. Statistically speaking, he may not have enough time to make it all the way through. Not that he should give up. It's not all about becoming a Grasshopper King.

They swirl the ice in their liquor drinks.

Tell me, the camp director says, ambling over, you the one who passed out in the sweat lodge yesterday?

Flynn turns red. That was me, he admits. Didn't drink enough water, I guess.

They all take long sips, stifling reactions, their smiles sly. An old Willie Nelson record plays from a speaker propped up in the screen window.

Then Bill Tierney says, All right, fellas, should we get started? You'll have to forgive us, Flynn, we have some planning to do for tonight. Logistics and whatnot. We'll see you there, right?

You will, Flynn says and leaves them there on the deck. He walks back toward the dining hall. Inside every group, he decides, there are more groups. Circles within circles and inside those, more circles still, all of them infinitely divisible. You could spend your whole life wondering which ones you're in and which ones you're not and which ones really want you and which ones are holes that have no bottom.

The bonfire is built in the outdoor amphitheater at the edge of the lake. The logs are stacked two across two, up and up, the kindling stuffed inside the column and doused with kerosene. The fathers cross their legs and swat mosquitoes. The boys fidget and squirm. John Price is there with his son,

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and so are Bill Tierney and Vincent Hicks. The camp director stands to the side with Henri, who's wearing overalls now. The sun sinks behind the pine trees on the opposite bank.

The ceremony begins with a procession of boys, most of them probably twelve or thirteen years old, gawky and pimply, moving down the center row with goofy smiles. The one in front carries a long torch, rolls of toilet paper jammed on the end of a stick. Another torch-bearer approaches in a canoe on the lake, a star-like light and its rippled reflection moving through the darkness toward the assembled. Flynn is reminded of the first Truth. *Let the dark burn bright.* The boys are forming a semicircle around the unlit bonfire, waiting for the second torch-bearer to reach the shore. They all have one Truth Bead on their uniform. Are they thinking about the first Truth, too? Is this ceremony designed to invoke it? The torches meet at the logs, and the entire structure, almost ten feet tall, bursts into flames, red and blue and yellow. Flynn is five rows back and can feel the blaze. His son's face shines, too. But he's not looking at the flames. He's looking up at Flynn.

Can you see okay? What do you think?

The boy says it's interesting.

The camp director opens a notebook. He tosses some grass into the fire, and the smoke curls around him. His voice is hoarse and thin.

Grasshoppers feast on the grass, he reads, and so do the flames. Grasshoppers are virtuous and vibrant, resourceful and resilient, patient and peaceful, creative and kind. These are the qualities we, this community,

value most. When the first grasshopper molted and shook the morning dew from his new wings, the world marveled at this development. The world took notice. Tonight, some of you have sprouted wings, and we are here to marvel at your achievements, to take notice, to bask in your light. Tonight, we are awarding ten boys their second Truth Bead.

One by one, the director names the boys in the semicircle around the bonfire, and, one by one, those boys step forward with unusually good posture. A red bead is placed in ten sweaty palms. The boys are all smiles as they're led to the other side of the fire, away from the audience, and the director whispers something in each of their ears, one by one.

They're learning the second Truth, Flynn tells Ryan.

What's the second Truth?

Only Grasshopper Kings are supposed to know, Flynn says. He puts his arm around his son, who will never be a Grasshopper King. One day he'll have to explain to his son how most games are rigged, and how sometimes it's best not to play at all.

After the ceremony, Trevor comes over with a Ziploc bag full of marshmallows and a coat hanger for Ryan. Flynn overhears Trevor telling Ryan how his uncle once branded himself with a red-hot hanger.

Then your uncle's an idiot, Flynn interrupts.

My uncle is a military general, Trevor says.

Flynn grabs their coat hangers and then rummages in the brush for two sticks. He gives those to the boys, and they run off to the fire. Flynn walks over to John Price, who stands next to his son. The son has a chin like his father's, one that slopes down to his chest in a gentle, fleshy curve.

He did it, John Price reports. He got that second Truth.

Congratulations, Flynn says. You must be proud.

Oh, of course. And maybe now I can get that next Truth out of him. I'll let you know what I find out. Say, you feeling better after the sweat lodge? I heard you passed out? That true?

Didn't drink enough beforehand, Flynn says.

Yep, number one hippie rule. Hydrate before going on your vision quest. Listen, you'll have to excuse me, Flynn. Apparently, all the Grasshopper Kings and their dads are supposed to go to some kind of function now at the director's cabin. Probably a cake-and-punch thing.

Circles within circles, Flynn thinks. He finds his son by the fire.

You ready to call it a night?

Okay, he says and tosses his marshmallow stick into the bonfire.

They leave the light of the ceremony. Their eyes slowly adjust to the darkness of the field. Ryan is swinging his arms and looking up to the stars. Flynn wants his boy to be happy.

What are you thinking about? Flynn asks.

Nothing.

What else are you thinking about?

I don't like this uniform, he says.

That's okay.

I hate it. It makes my armpits itch.

You don't have to wear it again, Flynn says. If you don't want.

They're following the edge of the lake now. A cool breeze twists the leaves in the trees. Flynn is still thinking about circles within circles. Also, he's thinking about snakes curled into circles by the water.

They reach the tent and climb inside. They stretch out on the sleeping bags and lie awake, side by side. They're still not asleep when the thunderstorm starts an hour later. The thought of all those Grasshopper Kings caught in the downpour brings a smile to Flynn's face. The tent shakes in the wind, the rain loud as bullets on the canvas. Everything is dark, but they can feel water dripping from the seams. The water bubbles up from below, too. Tonight they will get very wet. Tonight they may get washed away. Even Mookie the bear on his T-shirt throne will not be spared. The water will cover all. After tonight, Flynn imagines, nothing will ever burn again.

Flynn rolls over onto this side.

Do you want to hear a Truth?



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