

Winner of the *Crazyhorse* Fiction Prize

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The Logic of Imaginary Friends

Four hours after Cecile left for sleep-away camp, I ran into my old imaginary friend, Kopel Cooperstein.

We reunited with each other in a supermarket parking lot—actually, in my car in the parking lot. There was a little girl standing in a shopping cart not ten feet from my car, a blonde girl in a pink bikini. She was singing to her mother opera-style, arms outstretched, chin to the sun.

She looks just like Cecile did at that age, I said to myself. Then I realized I was actually talking to Kopel. Something about that girl must have made me think of him, and then there he was, sitting in the passenger seat of my car.

Kopel looked nothing like he used to, but I recognized him right away. His hair had darkened almost to black, and it was more wild than it had been. He wore thick, black plastic-framed glasses, and his eyes had turned from the dull brown they were when we were kids into an almost otherworldly green. He was wearing a polo shirt striped with different shades of lime—it matched his eyes.

I hadn't seen Kopel Cooperstein in seventeen years, not since my first day of college. It was so good to see him I felt like crying.

It was Cecile's idea to go away to camp, I told

Kopel as we walked toward the market. She's eleven, I told him. She was afraid she couldn't handle it, so she had to try is what she said. She's like that.

Kopel smiled as if this made perfect sense to him. He held my hand as we walked.

The truth is, my relationship with Kopel did not end on good terms. My parents drove me to college in a small van they rented for the occasion. I sat in the very back with all of my stuff between me and them, Kopel straddling my lap, what with all my belongings leaving no other space for him.

I told him it was pathetic, what I was doing with him. That's what we talked about for most of the four-hour ride. I told him it was bad enough that he was, let's face it, my best friend, and bad enough—narcissistic and arrogant, even—to love so deeply my own invention because it was really just loving myself, wasn't it? Certainly I wasn't talking to a real person outside of myself, silently all inside my head, which was how I had to talk in the van that day, even if I was pretty sure my parents couldn't hear me. But far worse than friendship, I knew, was letting him provide me with any further physical comfort. Because of

course part of me wanted that. Part of me felt the weight of his body on my lap like he was really there, and of course I wanted him to hold me, to comfort me in any way he could because it was a big deal, my going away all alone for the first time. But the more I told myself to resist, the more I argued that Kopel and I shouldn't even be talking, let alone *this*, whatever we were doing.

And Kopel said, What *this* are you referring to? What *this* is there really? Ask anyone and they're going to say there's nothing to see, nothing happening here at all. So if you mean *this*, he said—and very slowly he pressed his chest and his hips into mine. Just let me, he said. I need to, he said, and he put his hands on my neck and his fingers in my hair. Just do it, Kopel said, referring my thought, my desire, really, to give in, to wrap my arms around my body and let it—in my mind—be Kopel embracing me like that, and yet I was pushing him away all the while, not letting myself feel him on my lap. But then this drowsy feeling came over me, like I had given up, except that it felt like conquest, not like defeat, and I felt dizzy in a good way. That's when he took hold of my arms and wrapped them around me, and then he was back on my lap again and it was his arms around me.

And then there was no stopping. Every part of him moved exactly as I wanted in every moment, the perfect pressure, just the right speed, so that I had to lean back and give in. His parts were mine to wield exactly as I liked. If I let him, he could satisfy me perfectly, I knew, for the rest of my life.

In the end it seemed like fate and even like luck or good fortune that my roommate arrived with her boyfriend that night, her real live boyfriend, who was much older than we were, who had long wavy hair like a rock star. She introduced us, and I immediately excused myself to go to the restroom. Marcy and her boyfriend smiled at me as I got up to leave, and then they started to laugh before the door had a chance to shut completely behind me.

I didn't have a choice—I had to get rid of Kopel—my future depended on it. I thought I was doing it for my own good, for the sake of my reputation and any chance I had to be happy.

I pulled Kopel into a bathroom stall with me and ended things right then and there. I ended our seven-year relationship by saying goodbye in that cramped stall and then throwing him from the fifth floor bathroom window. I saw his body fall to the ground the way a sheet of paper might fall on a windy day. He looked up at me one last time before dashing off to the forest on the outskirts of campus. I pictured him crying and sleeping with wild animals, doves or wolves and maybe a young doe. As I said goodbye and opened the window and pushed him out, I imagined Marcy jerking off her boyfriend in my bed. I blamed her for our breakup.

After that, whenever I'd catch myself beginning to say something to Kopel out of habit, I'd try to imagine myself saying it to someone else instead, some real person actually in my life, if not within earshot. That night I had an imaginary conversation with Marcy in which I described my

relationship with Kopel and our breakup earlier that day. I told her everything except for the fact that he didn't exist, and I didn't tell her that we'd broken up because of her—in a way all of that was irrelevant to my point, which was to explain that if I seemed somewhat solemn or anti-social, it was only because the breakup was so recent. In our imaginary conversation, Marcy found this story inspirational. Later that night I pictured her breaking up with her own boyfriend, in the same bathroom stall, while I brushed my teeth at the sink not ten feet away.

At that time in my life, Kopel was tall and skinny with shaggy blond hair and sulky brown eyes, which was pretty much my type back then. His new look is more suited to my current taste—I mean, of course it is. He looks like a successful lawyer who works pro-bono on weekends. Or he looks like a neurosurgeon who is also a Special Olympics coach. He could be the conservative but understanding husband of a not-yet-famous artist. In other words, he looks smart and professional, impressive and even intimidating, but also sensitive, possibly understanding, if you had a story worthy of his sympathy.

As soon as we enter the supermarket and we're surround by all of these average men and women, I realize how tall he's grown. He's at least a head taller than anyone else in the store. It makes me want to wrap my arms around his shoulders and hang from him. I'd like him to carry me piggyback through the aisles. Instead, we stand and stare at the cold cereal.

I plan to eat nothing but cereal for the six weeks she's away, I tell him. No one is in the aisle with us, so I say it aloud, but quietly.

Kopel keeps his gaze on the cereal and so do I, but I picture him smiling.

I like you with this extra flesh, he says, and he shuffles himself closer to me, to show that he means it. I can feel his arm against my shoulder. It's nice, what he said. It makes me feel pretty in this way I don't usually feel pretty. But I have planned to be as waif-like as Cecile by the time she gets home from camp. I want it to be obvious to everyone that she's mine, but she has her father's build, long-limbed and lanky.

It seems strange that Kopel knows nothing about Cecile. He's not familiar with the story I've told my friends and family, that her lanky father left us when Cecile was three months old. He doesn't know that in fact I pushed her father to leave because—and this is the story I tell myself—I couldn't handle loving both of them at once, and his love for Cecile seemed to threaten in some way the love I felt for both of them individually.

I start thinking that I want to tell him the whole story. I want to recount everything that's happened to me since we last saw each other. He is meanwhile filling my cart with cereal, and that's when I realize he's planning to stay with me for the duration of the six weeks. We're going to eat this cereal together, and it's such a relief I would embrace him that instant if we weren't in the supermarket and if Kopel actually existed outside my mind. His hands, I notice, have

grown huge and beautiful over the years.

Is it wrong of me to stand in line at the register feeling excited about spending six weeks alone with Kopel, eating box after box of cereal and touching each other in every way I can possibly think of? Maybe for once my mind is working to help me through this, this time I have without Cecile. Maybe I shouldn't think about it too much or I'll mess it all up.

It's more than excitement; it's optimism. That's what it feels like—optimism, or maybe it's closer to pride—this feeling like I'm proud of my well-timed, almost entrepreneurial reunion with Kopel. And I'm proud of myself for feeling proud because it wasn't always this way. When I banished Kopel from my life, for example, that evening in the bathroom stall, I did so with complete blindness to the fact that our relationship made me more self-sufficient. But now I can't think of one reason why I shouldn't spend the next six weeks with him. In fact, it seems like close to the best idea I've ever had and a real mark of my maturity.

There was a real Kopel Cooperstein, I remind Kopel on our way home. I used to listen to his Sunday night radio show, an hour-long program airing at midnight that I discovered when I was eleven.

Have I told you about the real Kopel Cooperstein? I ask Kopel, but of course I have. The real Kopel Cooperstein, I say, had a voice so deep its vibrations tickled my throat and made my skin hot in these very particular places. I'm

trying to make him jealous, so I name the areas of my body I'm referring to: the hollow at the center of my back, my temples, under my arms, behind my kneecaps and along my inner thighs. The real Kopel Cooperstein, I say, could make me blush from my forehead halfway down my torso, just by introducing his guest for the evening.

Meanwhile, the imaginary Kopel and I drive home from the market, over the bridge, crossing the river that runs through town. We pass the parking lot where Cecile and I met the camp bus earlier that morning. We had to be there at 7:45, and the bus pulled away as promised by 8:01. It was a sunny morning and hard to see into the windows of the bus because of all the glare. There was one mother who practically jumped like a dog at the side of the bus, trying to get a final glimpse of her kid. My car was parked next to hers in the lot—the only two vehicles left by the time we both pulled out—and I sat in my car and watched her wail for a good fifteen minutes before driving away, her head in her hands, her back heaving. Even as she drove away, I swear I could see her shoulders trembling from the force of her crying.

By the time Kopel and I pass by the shopping center, the lot is full. People coming and going, running in here and there—it's just another normal day for most people, as most days are. For a moment I feel the emptiness of it all, and this sensation of days passing—before I know it I'll be driving up to the camp for visiting day, and then, a few weeks later, I'll return to this parking lot and it will be the bus turning the children

over to their parents; it will be the parents driving away and leaving the bus behind.

I would listen to the Kopel Cooperstein Show every Sunday night in an otherwise silent house, my parents asleep down the hall. It didn't matter that I'd heard of very few of the people he interviewed. What mattered was the seriousness with which Kopel addressed his guests, the tone of his voice as he spoke about their lives as if their lives were worth speaking about.

After a while I started to make his show interactive—I'd listen to Kopel's question and then lower the volume and answer the question myself, as if it were intended for me, the real Stella McBride.

In my mind we sat opposite one another in huge upholstered armchairs that smelled like Kopel—the fragrance of Irish Spring soap combined with the scent of pumpkin pie—fresh and clean but also comforting. During those interviews, I was an older version of myself, one who often spoke of my experience of the world as an eleven-year-old.

The first time I thought to participate, Kopel had just asked a Cambodian performance artist if she was a very dramatic child, and she confessed that she was actually very shy. Although she didn't sound the least bit shy, I knew she was telling the truth. My heart speed up. I felt almost blanketed by this feeling of possibility that came over me in that moment. For the very first time, I realized that I could be anything I wanted to be. It was as if something warm and comforting had been draped around me, but instead of weighing

me down, it infused my every movement with purpose.

I closed my eyes and I pictured Kopel across from me. Everything came into focus. His armchair was dark gray and covered in green paisley. Mine was navy, striped with thin orange lines. Kopel wore jeans, cuffed at the ankle, black socks and big black wingtips, exactly the pair I wanted for myself. I always liked the idea of steel at my toes, and I told him so. He wore a light green button-down shirt with a tie, a look I liked a lot at the time.

I said, I was very shy, and I said it aloud.

When I raised the radio's volume, I heard Kopel chuckling. That's hard to believe, he said to his Cambodian guest, but it really sounded like he was talking to me. I felt this conviction that the real Kopel Cooperstein was deeply interested in hearing anything I might say to him.

I told him I used to wake myself up in the middle of the night to listen to his show. I'd pretend that I was the one you were interviewing, I'd say, feeling bold even as I pictured him starting to blush. I'd talk to you just like I'm talking to you right now, I said. I told him it made me feel powerful and free, like I could be anyone I wanted to be. I'd picture him looking at me like I'd said something astonishing, something brilliant. I'd make eye contact with him and hold it.

I didn't tell him that after a while I didn't need him to host—I'd invent most of his questions anyway. Eventually, I didn't need the real Kopel Cooperstein at all. I didn't need the radio or the middle of the night—that feeling of freedom was

mine for the taking anytime I wanted it, and so was my very own Kopel Cooperstein.

Kopel and I are walking from the car to the back door of my house when I see my neighbor, Loraine, crouched down behind a bush, doing some kind of gardening work. I don't notice her until I'm already halfway up my walk, and I realize I've been whispering with Kopel, loud enough for her to hear. When I finally catch sight of her, I'm in the middle of explaining to Kopel that I moved into the house the very day Cecile was born.

I look at Loraine and Loraine stops what she's doing and looks back at me. But she doesn't look appalled or concerned, so I figure either she hasn't heard me or she thinks it's OK if I'm talking to myself. How would she know if in my head there's this image of Kopel, that in my head I'm not really talking to myself at all and that's the point.

"Have a good afternoon," she says, and she keeps her eyes on her shovel in the dirt.

"You, too," I say, and I smile as if she's looking at me.

As I'm unlocking the door, I go back to whispering to Kopel, more quietly, though. I say, We're going to go inside, and we're going to put down these groceries—we don't have to put away the cereal, though I guess we should put the milk in the fridge—then I'll give you a tour of the house.

I like to tell you what we're going to do before we actually do it, I tell him. Have I always liked

to do that? I do the same thing with Cecile. Even before she could talk I did it. She's been pointing it out recently. Ever since she made this decision to go away for the summer she's been noticing things about me. It's like she thinks I'm fascinating all of sudden, though not necessarily in a good way. But I don't think it's so strange, liking to announce what's going to happen as I prepare to do it. It helps me feel more organized and intentional about what I'm doing, and I think it makes sense, I say.

We're still at the door. For some reason, I don't want to open it. I feel like I'm going to find something horrifying inside the house, police officers huddled around a murder scene or just a huge mess I don't remember making. I'll find someone else's mess, or someone else's life, maybe. I'll discover that the last eleven years have only occurred in my mind—I don't have a daughter and this isn't my home. Now that Cecile is gone, it seems impossible that we ever lived together in this house.

We might not live here, I say to Kopel. I don't think this is my house.

Let's go in anyway, Kopel says. And right in front of me, he grows another inch taller. He's got to be six-five, a whole foot taller than me. He could carry me on his back for miles if I wanted him to. He looks at me and I watch his eyes get even greener. I've always wanted eyes like that, and so I give them to Kopel.

He looks amazing, but I still feel a little bit nervous, a little bit lonely, and then, out of nowhere, Kopel's wearing my father's red

Christmas sweater. It has to be ninety degrees out, and I do feel kind of bad, putting him in this ridiculous sweater, but I love the idea of him wearing it. He likes it too—I can tell. The sweater seems to fill him with the spirit of Christmas. His smile is huge. We both feel happier. When I put my hand on the doorknob, he starts to smell like cinnamon.

The back door opens to the kitchen, and we walk in to find the huge mess Cecile and I really did leave behind us. Our dirty breakfast dishes are still on the table, two tiny jagged bite marks missing from Cecile's toast. Her red hooded sweatshirt hangs from the back of her chair, and her slippers wait under the table, as if she's just in the other room and she'll be back to get them when she gets cold.

We both prefer to keep the house cold because we like to bundle up, but now it feels too cold, like something's wrong. It's so quiet I almost forget that Kopel is in the room with me—then the refrigerator starts to hum and it actually startles me, sends a tingling sensation from my elbows to my fingertips. Kopel wraps his arms around me from behind, and I let myself lean into him.

This is the kitchen, I say, starting the tour. Hunter—that's Cecile's father—he's the one who hung the wallpaper. And I realize right then that I almost never think about it. He said no one would notice if there was no wallpaper behind the refrigerator. He said no one would look back there.

Kopel is sitting at the two-person kitchen

table, his hands behind his head as listens to me. And he looks exactly like Hunter. He has Hunter's blond hair, his dark blue eyes and this expression on his face like he's blissfully happy but probably a little bit dim. He crosses his legs the way Hunter did, one foot tucked behind the calf of his other leg, like two willowy strands of a braid. He's not wearing the Christmas sweater anymore.

I stand in my kitchen, staring at Kopel looking exactly like Hunter, and it occurs to me that I could kiss him. I start walking toward him and he still has his hands up on his head. He's smiling like he's daring me to do it. And I'm feeling good again—that free feeling, like I can do anything I want.

I stand close enough that he could touch me. Did I tell you I'm a journalist? I'm a journalist, I tell Kopel/Hunter. And for a minute I'm confused about which Kopel this is—the real Kopel Cooperstein or the imaginary one—and I almost tell him that he was my inspiration. Did you know that your old shows were podcasted? I ask him, and I grab his hands from his head and I put them on my hips; then I'm hugging him and I'm crying. I sit on his lap and I push myself into him.

I love you, I say. I say it like I'm the romantic lead in a movie, like I'm lanky and gorgeous. Then I press my lips into his and press the back of his head to the wall. I let myself enjoy it, kissing all three of them at once—Hunter, the real Kopel Cooperstein, and the one I made up. And it doesn't feel pathetic, not at all. No one

knows what I'm doing anyway—if I don't think it's pathetic, then it's not.

That evening, Kopel and I sit on my porch eating Frosted Flakes and drinking alcoholic lemonade. Earlier in the week Cecile hung Christmas lights and a string of red lanterns around the porch. It's not quite dark yet, but I turn them on anyway.

The porch is nicely positioned at the side of the house—I have a view of the street, but I can also see into the yards of my neighbors. I can see Loraine's well-groomed yard to the left, and I can see onto the front lawns across the street. In the backyard behind mine, two teenagers are trying to make use of a kiddie pool they have on their lawn. They squirt each other with the hose, the girl standing in the turquoise plastic pool. I watch her lift her bikini top, letting the boy—who is either her brother or looks exactly like her brother—aim the stream of water at her bare breasts.

Kopel lies back on a lounge chair. There's an empty chair between us, where Cecile has abandoned another sweatshirt. Kopel stretches out on the lounge chair. He's wearing my father's Christmas sweater again, with a pair of green swim trunks. He rubs my feet.

Cecile's sweatshirt looks almost like a small animal, a skinny old alley cat that used the last of its strength to crawl up onto that chair, curl itself into a ball and die. I've always wanted a cat, I tell Kopel, but Cecile is allergic to them. And that's when it occurs to me—I hold Cecile's sweatshirt

in a bundle on my lap, and then there's my cat.

His name is Kopel, I tell Kopel. Pet him, I say, and Kopel pets the cat.

I'm a little bit drunk, busy petting my kitten and being interviewed by Kopel when my six-year-old neighbor, Mika, comes into my yard and then up onto the porch.

Hi, Mrs. McBride, he says. He doesn't smile. Is Cecile here? he asks me, and then he does smile.

Mika is not cute for a six-year-old, mostly because he's very pudgy and his facial features are small to begin with, but I find myself wanting to hold him in my lap.

Have a seat, Mika, I say. How are you? I ask him.

He walks over to the chair next to mine. He stands in front of it but doesn't sit down.

Do you like cats? I ask Mika.

Yes, he tells me, but I'm allergic. He holds his palms up in the air. *What can you do?* his palms seems to be saying. He looks up at the Christmas lights and Chinese lanterns. He shifts his weight from one leg to the other, like he's dancing for me.

Is Cecile here? he asks again. His eyes dart around my porch, as if he's suspicious and searching for evidence. But then he sits down.

I finish my third lemonade, tip the bottle to the sky and drain it. Cecile's not here, I tell him.

Mika nods. Oh, he says. He keeps nodding, and then I nod too. When I look over at Kopel, he's nodding along with us and smiling like he thinks I'm funny. Mika smiles too, and then he's staring at the ceiling again.

Why did you hang your Christmas lights already? he asks me.

I like Christmas, I explain. Don't you?

But it's the summer, he says. He bends forward from the waist and starts to scratch his ankle. He has very pale skin. Freckles cover most of his body. His legs have some dark hair on them already, which seems incredibly sad to me.

Do you have any imaginary friends? I ask him. I smile. You can tell me, I say.

He sits up and looks straight at me. Not really, he says.

I have an imaginary friend, I tell him.

Mika stares out into the yard; then he looks toward his own house. I start to imagine myself pulling him onto my lap, but I stop myself.

I have an imaginary friend, I repeat. He's sitting next to you, actually. Other way, I tell him. There, I say, and I point to the recliner.

Mika nods and bounces in his seat. If you're allergic to cats, I say to him, why don't you get yourself an imaginary cat? You wouldn't be allergic to an imaginary cat, would you?

He giggles, but it seems forced. No, he says, serious again. Is Cecile at sleep-away camp? he asks me. His eyes widen, and they seem to grow bigger as I look into them. All of a sudden he looks so sad and sweet that he's adorable. His too tiny nose and mouth are precious, I realize, and his big cheeks look so soft I'm tempted to reach for them.

Six weeks, I tell him.

Kopel the human and Kopel the kitten both look up at me. Then human Kopel stands up

and takes off my dad's Christmas sweater. He's bare-chested. He takes the kitten from my lap and knocks the sweatshirt to the ground in the process.

You should consider getting an imaginary cat, I tell Mika. Do you want me to help you pick one? I ask him. We could go to the imaginary pound right now! They're open all night, I say. The way it comes out, it sounds like I'm talking about a strip club.

I don't realize that Mika is imaginary too until he turns into the four-year-old girl I saw earlier in the day, the opera singer. She agrees to go to the pound with me. She really loves the idea.

We end up crouched down under a small tree in my backyard—me, all three Kopels, Mika, the imaginary Hunter, and the four-year-old in the pink bikini. An imaginary version of the topless teenaged girl has come along too.

We need lots of kittens, I say to the imaginary guy working at the imaginary pound. We'd like a litter's worth, I say, and everyone else nods and smiles.

But the man shakes his head. All the kittens are at camp, he tells me.

I hear Mika's fast intake of breath in disappointment, and his chubby hand squeezes my forearm. I see the real Kopel Cooperstein reaching out and I think he's going to touch the teenager's breasts, but instead he holds each of mine in one of his hands. The teenager puts her hands over his. My Kopel hugs me from behind and puts his hands on top of hers. Hunter gives

the girl from the shopping cart a boost, and she climbs to the top of the tree. We all watch Kopel the kitten run away, out into the street. The girl begins singing, but her voice isn't human—she's singing like a dove, coo-cooing.

I picture Cecile up at the top of the tree with her. She holds onto the girl's hand. She opens her mouth to sing along, but no sound comes out. And then everyone but my Kopel disappears.

I really think she's scared, I tell him. I don't think she was ready for this.

When he tries to comfort me, tries to hug and kiss me, I push him away.

I can't choose you over her, I explain.

Then I take him inside and give him the rest of the house tour because I realized I never finished it. When we're done, I put him to bed in Cecile's room. I give him a kiss on the forehead and a quick hug. I tuck him in tight and I tell him a bedtime story, a true story about my former roommate, Marcy.

Before she could let herself have any sex fantasy, I tell him, she had to imagine her boyfriend dying and she had to mourn his death. She had to imagine it in detail and really feel the sadness of it. Only then could she allow herself to enjoy her fantasy.

At one o'clock that morning, the phone rings. I'm certain it's the camp, calling to tell me that Cecile can't handle it, that she's miserable and it's too much for her bunkmates to take. They're afraid her homesickness will spread like a virus through the camp. I start to feel frantic, like I

can't get to her soon enough. I feel every emotion she must be feeling, and I know she won't feel any better until I'm actually there, until she's in my arms and I'm driving us home. It's the only thing that calms me—this thought of us in the car, her warm head in my lap as I drive. I picture her falling asleep, exhausted from all that she put herself through. I picture all of this in the few seconds it takes me to walk ten feet to answer the phone.

I'm not even sure if I've said hello when I hear this almost cackling wail, and for a second I think it's someone I don't know—that's how foreign and strange it sounds—someone who's in the process of being murdered and they've called me by accident, trying to reach 911 or a neighbor. Then I hear a girl's voice in the background. She says, "Cecile, hurry!" and she sounds like she's crying too. I want to talk but I can't get myself to say anything. It feels like my heart has catapulted from my chest to my feet and I can't seem to breathe. I can't even form a concrete thought about what might be happening on the other end of the line—there's just this intense feeling of panic until I hear Cecile's voice. "Mom?" she says, "Mom, can you hear me?" She sounds out of breath and I can't help it, I start yelling at her—it's what I do when I'm worried. I'm begging her to tell what's happening, but she's wailing so hard she can't talk.

"You need to tell me if you're OK," I manage to say calmly, and that's when she stops crying—only, in that second, I realize she isn't crying—she's laughing, laughing hysterically.

“God, Mom, I’m fine!” she says. It starts a chorus of laughter around her. “We snuck out,” she says. Me and these girls from my bunk. I just wanted to say hi. We found this payphone.”

She sounds happy. She sounds like she’s having fun. But I still feel leftover panic. My toes are tingling from it.

“You’re OK?” I ask, just to be sure.

“Yeah,” she says, but she sounds distracted. In the background I can still hear laughter, and then the same girl as before telling her to hurry. “Mom,” she says, “I’ve got to go.”

The tingling is getting worse—it’s getting almost painful and it’s traveling up my calves. I feel like I’ve lost her. I sit down on my bed. It seems possible she’s going to tell me that she wants to stay at camp year-round, that the camp runs a boarding school during the year and she

wants to go. I imagine myself having to pack up all of her stuff and send it up there.

She’s laughing again, and the sound of it seems to collect at the back of my throat in a giant lump.

“I love you,” I say. It feels like it’s the last thing I’ll ever get to say to her.

“Uh huh,” she says, and my eyes well up with tears. Then I realize she wasn’t talking to me. “What, Mom?” she says. “I didn’t hear you.”

“I-love-you,” I repeat, and my voice sounds retarded to me, the way it used to sound when I’d talk to girls who were popular and prettier than me.

Before she says anything else we get cut off, and I sit by the phone for thirty minutes, but she doesn’t call back. 