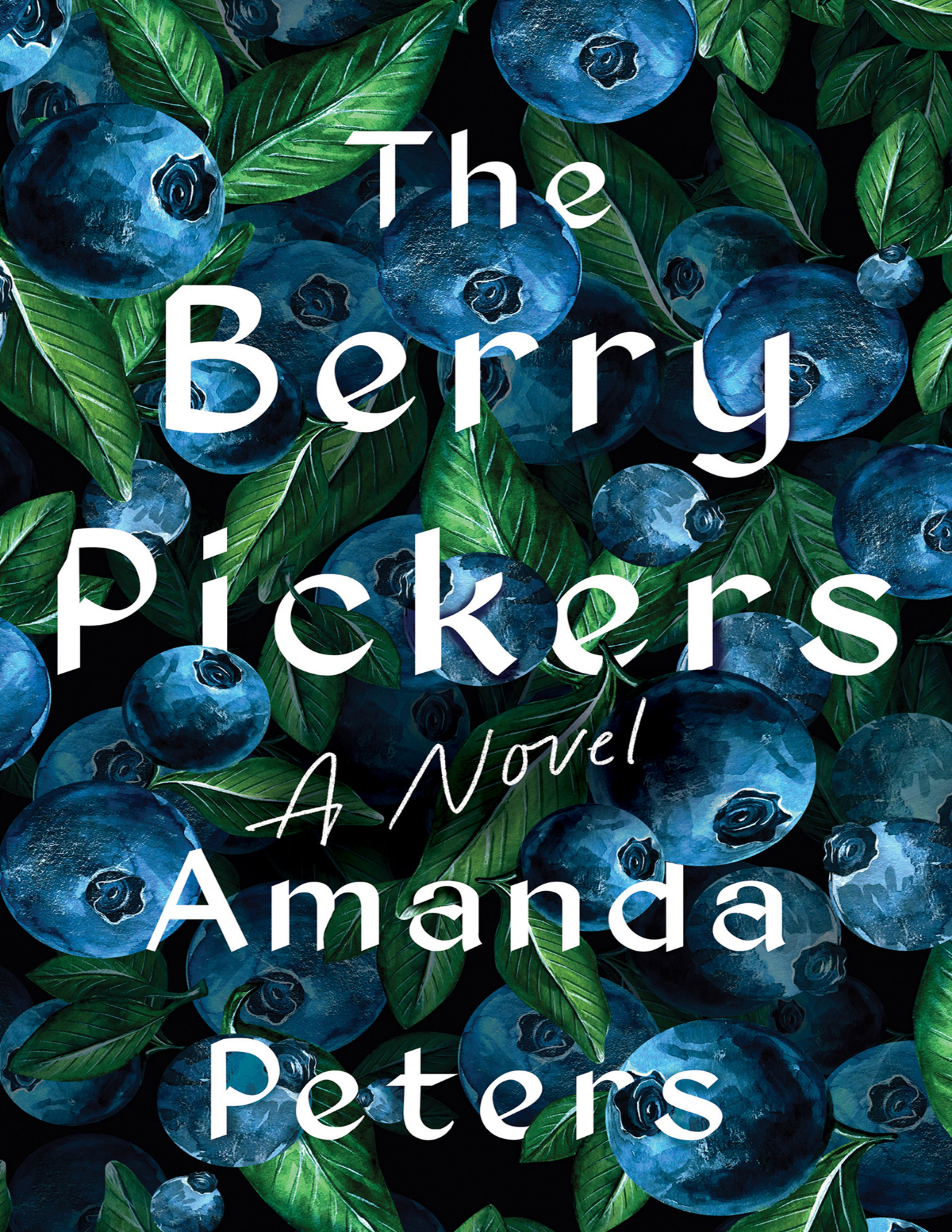
The
Berry
Pickers
A Novel
Amanda
Peters

THE BERRY PICKERS

THE BERRY PICKERS

A novel

AMANDA PETERS

Catapult
New York

For my dad. Thank you for the stories.

Wela'lin a'tukowin.

BORDER
MAINE
BANGOR
the berry fields
BAY OF FUNDY
annapolis valley
HALIFAX
NOVA SCOTIA
GULF OF MAINE
ATLANTIC OCEAN
BOSTON

THE BERRY PICKERS

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PROLOGUE

I SIT WITH MY BACK TO THE WALL, MY PILLOWS FLAT. Mae punched them and made them full, but that was hours ago. I'm holding a picture of Leah in my hands. In it, she is small, before I knew she existed. The sun is beginning to fade outside the window, and I am marvelling at how I've been shaped and moulded by women, even though I was absent from them most of my life.

The pain in my legs prevents me from sitting by the fire, the one beside the tree trunk that I have long considered a friend. I'm tired of this bed, of the medications, of the loneliness that comes with sickness, knowing that the people I love, no matter how much they try, will never understand my solitude. Dying is something I have to do alone. Leah, a grown woman now, visits a couple of times a week. My sister Mae and older brother Ben care for me even when I don't deserve it. My mother prays.

"Joe?" Mae opens the door a crack, her face framed by the door on one side and wall on the other.

"I'm awake."

The door opens fully, and Mae walks in. There is something joyful in her eyes. Something I haven't seen from anyone in quite some time.

"You look happy, Mae."

"It's because I am."

I try to sit up straighter. I want to be my full self for her, to show her that whatever is making her happy, makes me happy, too.

"Joe, there's someone here to see us. And I think we might have some catching up to do."

ONE

JOE

THE DAY RUTHIE WENT MISSING, THE BLACKFLIES seemed to be especially hungry. The white folks at the store where we got our supplies said that Indians made such good berry pickers because something sour in our blood kept the blackflies away. But even then, as a boy of six, I knew that wasn't true. Blackflies don't discriminate. But now, lying here almost fifty years to the day and getting eaten from the inside out by a disease I can't even see, I'm not sure what's true and what's not anymore. Maybe we are sour.

Regardless of the taste of our blood, we still got bit. But Mom knew how to make the itching stop at night, so we could get some sleep. She peeled the bark of an alder branch and chewed it to a pulp before putting it on the bites.

"Hold still, Joe. Stop squirming," Mom said as she applied the thick paste. The alders grew all along the thin line of trees that bordered the back of the fields. Those fields stretched on forever, or so it seemed then. Mr. Ellis, the landowner, had sectioned the land with big rocks, making it easier to keep track of where we'd been and where we needed to go. But eventually, and always, you'd reach the trees again. Either the trees or Route 9, a crumbling road littered with holes the size of watermelons and as deep as the lake, a dark line of asphalt slithering its way through the fields that brought us there year after year.

Even then, in 1962, there weren't many houses along Route 9, and those that were there were already old, the grey and white paint peeling away, the porches tilted and rotting, the tall grass growing green and yellow between abandoned cars and refrigerators, their rust flaking off and flying away with a strong wind. When we arrived from Nova Scotia, midsummer, a caravan of dark-skinned workers, laughing and singing, travelling through their overgrown and rusting world, the local folks turned their backs, our presence a testament to their failure to prosper. The only time

that place showed any joy at all was in the fall when the setting sun shone gold and the fields glowed under a glorious September sky.

Among all that rust and decay stood Mr. Ellis's house. It was on the corner where Route 9 met the dirt road that led to the other side of the lake, the side without Indians, where the white people swam and picnicked on Sundays, their skin blistering under the weak Maine sun. At home, years later and before I left again, I remembered that house like it was a picture from a book or a magazine that you looked at when waiting at the bus station or the doctor's office. The tall maples hung over the driveway, and someone had planted a long, straight line of pine trees between the house and the dirt road that led to the camps, so we couldn't peek at it, not that we didn't try.

"Ben, why do they bother having a house at all if it's just gonna be all windows?" I asked my brother.

"People need a roof over their heads. It gets cold here just like home."

"But all those windows." I gaped.

"Windows are expensive. That's how they show the world they're rich."

I nodded in agreement, even if I didn't understand exactly.

The whiteness of that house, painted every second summer, with the red trim and two columns framing the front door, was enough for me, who lived in a tiny three-bedroom with a leaky roof, to declare it "the mansion." Years later, when I returned, Mr. Ellis long dead of a heart attack, I had fresh eyes and realized it was nothing more than a two-storey with a bay window.

When we arrived in mid-July, that summer we lost Ruthie, the fields were thick with green leaves and tiny wild berries. We were still full of excitement, the memories of hard work and long days from years past all but forgotten. My father dropped us off with the supplies we needed for the next eight to twelve weeks, and then left again the same day. The dust followed him as he headed back to the border. He went to New Brunswick to grab the same pickers who always came. The ones he could trust. Old Gerald and his wife, Julia, Hank and Bernard, twins who worked hard and stayed to themselves, Widow Agnus and her six children, all of them big and strong, and Frankie, the drunk. A funny man, scared of bears and the dark and not much of a worker.

Dad always said, "Your mother says that even people like Frankie need money and a purpose in life, even if only for eight weeks."

"I pick more than him, Dad," I said, nodding my head at Frankie as he absent-mindedly plopped a berry into his mouth, "and he eats just as much as he picks."

"There are some people, Joe, that we make allowances for. You know he nearly drowned as a baby and didn't quite grow up right after that. Nothing wrong with Frankie. God must have had a plan for him, so we take him just the way he is. He needs this each summer just like we do. He likes to come and sit 'round the fire and earn a bit of pocket change. Gives him something to look forward to."

“Yeah, but Dad—” I started to say, annoyed that Frankie got paid in money and I picked more and all I got were new school clothes in September.

“No but. Just get back to work and be kind to Frankie. You never know when you might need kindness from people.”

While Dad was away, loading the additional pickers onto the back of the truck, we cleaned out the cabin and set up the camp under the watchful and exacting eye of our mother. “You boys pull out the grass growing through the porch floor. Tidy this place up a bit.” We cut our hands pulling that grass that dared to grow in our absence. Then, we collected dry wood for the fires, one for cooking, which was lit almost all the time, and one for cleaning dishes and, on weekends, our clothes. My sister Mae and some of the other girls helped clean the cabin, and a few went to the landlord’s house like they did every summer to help his wife clean the house from top to bottom. They got a small amount of money for it, money they spent at the county fair on bobby pins, bootleg whiskey and popcorn.

We couldn’t see the lake from our cabin, but we could from the outskirts of the camp, down where Old Gerald and Julia had their tent. We were lucky to have a cabin with a roof, a door, and a few old mattresses to sleep on. Only a handful of us got to stay in a cabin. The others, including my two older brothers, Ben and Charlie, slept in a tent, their backs to the hard ground, their jackets used as pillows.

When all the other families arrived, families from all over Nova Scotia and a few from New Brunswick, the boys would get loud and boisterous. They hadn’t seen each other since last year’s berry season and had a lot of loud catching up to do. That summer, I wasn’t old enough to hang out with the boys, so I spent my time with Ruthie, who got nervous around those older boys. During the day when they were serious and working, she remembered them and loved them the same as the rest of us. But at night, when they were singing around the fire, flirting with the girls and play fighting with each other, she retreated to the cabin and slept with her back against the far wall, her doll made out of old socks settled under her arm. Mom lay on the other side of her, a barrier to protect her from the loud boys she had forgotten.

When we’d left home that summer and headed south, seven of us had piled on that old truck. Mom, Dad, Ben, Mae, Charlie, Ruthie and me. Ben and Mae used to live at the Indian school, and every summer before that one, Mom would wait for them to come home, pretending she wasn’t. And when they did, they’d hardly have a chance to get out of that car before Mom would be on them, grabbing one and then the other, taking their faces in her hands and just standing there looking at them, like they were made of gold or something. She’d kiss them on their foreheads, repeating their names over and over again like the Hail Mary. Dad would pat Ben on the back and hug Mae before he loaded us onto the truck and headed to the border. The Indian agent would only let us see them twice a year, at Christmas and berry-picking time. “Hard work will build their character, help them to become *proper* contributing citizens,” Ben read from a letter once, pieced back together after Dad had ripped it up. Dad didn’t like Mr.

Hughes, the fat Indian agent with little purple holes on his nose, and after Dad read that letter, Ben and Mae didn't have to go back. They got to stay home with us and go to the same school as Charlie and me.

Now, Ben sleeps in a single bed across from me. He's awake most nights, scared I'll take my last breath on his shift. When he's not in the bed, Mae is there, grumbling and snoring. It's just us now, Mom, Mae, Ben and me. If the spirit world does exist, it'll be good to see those people I've lost. Be good to give them a hug and tell them I love them, tell them I'm sorry. I have apologies to say on both sides of the great divide. If heaven doesn't exist, I guess I'll never know, so I'm not going to let it bother me. I'd tell Mom that I doubt heaven, but she believes that all the people she loves, who've passed on, are sitting at the right hand of the Lord.

On a clear night in mid-August that same summer, we all sat around the campfire. Dad had just put away his fiddle, and we were tired from dancing and singing along. Ruthie and I spread out a blanket and lay down. Our hands cradled our heads as we watched the fireflies fight the stars for attention. Those who were lucky, and old enough, headed down to Allen's Mountain for their own fire. Mae told us tall tales about boys and girls dancing and kissing, trying to convince us that she was always on her best behaviour and never did any of those sorts of things. Neither me nor Ruthie believed her. Mae never found a party she didn't like, where she couldn't cause some sort of trouble. But back at our fire, talk turned to other things.

"They say it's good, help the kids fit in, get jobs." The old woman had hands like thick knots, but she weaved the long strips of ash into the shape of a basket without even looking down to see what she was doing.

"I say it's horseshit. No one's got the right to snatch our kids like that, 'specially white folk. You see how they raise 'em, all snivelling and blatting all the time. They got no joy, and now they're tryin' to take ours."

"Don't get me wrong, I love having Ben and Mae back home, but there must be something said about how they give them the teachings from the Bible," my mother said, leaning toward the fire to see as she cast on stitches for another pair of socks. "I'm never sure if taking Ben and Mae out was the right thing, but Lewis is, as sure as the sunrise." My mother, through no fault of her own, had come to love the church, the elaborate ceremonies replacing the ones torn from her heart during a childhood she rarely mentioned. Ruthie got up and whispered in my ear that she had to go to the bathroom, leaving a warm indent in the blanket we were sharing. She never came back to the blanket. Mom went looking for her after a bit and found her curled up, asleep in the cabin.

The very next day, Ruthie went missing.

Dad was walking up and down the rows, checking our progress, pointing out missed bushes and sloppy work. At the end of each day, he'd meet the rakers and jot down how many crates they'd picked that day. Some of the lazier ones would try to stuff the bottom of the crates with green leaves and stems, making it look like they'd

picked more than they had. But Dad never fell for it, no matter how many times they tried. Pickers got paid by the crate. Mr. Ellis was strolling along one of the long ropes separating the rows when Ruthie reached Dad from the other direction, carrying a small bucket of water. Ruthie, her little arms shaking from the weight, lifted her small blue plastic bucket with a white handle, the kind we'd use to build sandcastles on Sunday afternoons.

"*Wela'lin ntus*." Dad thanked Ruthie, taking the water and sipping it.

"She's a quiet one, Lewis." Mr. Ellis placed his sweaty hand on the top of her head and rubbed it in a circular motion, making a *tsk-tsk* sound with his thick tongue, like Ruthie was simple or something. She stood there and let him, his belly hanging over his belt, his jeans filthy with grease and dirt. "She's lighter than your others, Lewis. Probably be good for her in the end, but I reckon that talking to her in that gibberish won't help her any." Dad took a sip and handed Ruthie the bucket before he placed his hand on her back and pointed her toward Ben and me and away from Mr. Ellis. The water sloshed as Ruthie made her way over to me. Ben was reaching for the bucket when I grabbed it and poured the rest of the water over my head. I coughed and sputtered when some got in my mouth and I swallowed it by mistake. Ruthie crouched down and rubbed my back like she'd seen Mom do a thousand times.

Sometime around noon, Dad and his blue truck crawled along the edge of the fields collecting the rakers, who were hungry for lunch. Back at the main field closest to the camp, Mom handed out bologna sandwiches. The bread was dry and stuck to the roof of my mouth. Sometimes we'd have ketchup or mustard, but most of the time just the bread and bologna. When Mom wasn't watching, I snuck the bologna out and threw the bread to the crows. She would have found a nice strong switch if she'd seen me doing something like that. Mom had no tolerance for waste, not with seven of her own mouths to feed, plus the camp.

That day, Ruthie and I sat at the edge of the field on our rock. We liked to sit there while the boys wandered off in their few minutes of freedom, sneaking down to the lake for a quick swim or a kiss from one of the girls. Mae was already working to prepare supper, usually potatoes and meat cooked outside under a setting sun. But we fed the whole camp, so it took time to peel all those potatoes. Mae always complained and sometimes she'd run off. She'd hitch a ride into Bangor without a thought to Dad's worrying or Mom's rage. Then she'd come strolling in after dark and secretly pass candies to Ruthie and me. We never asked where she got them—we didn't care. The taste of sugar and that sour powder was exciting. The candies stuck in our teeth. Mom would yell a bit and Mae would sit and listen. She'd be good and helpful for another couple weeks before she'd take off again. Back then, there was no telling about Mae.

Not another soul could remember seeing Ruthie that day after I threw my bread to the crows and pushed my pointer finger into my lips. "Don't you tell Mom, Ruthie."

"I'd never tell on ya, Joe." Her voice was soft, and she had that look on her face. Silent and thinking. It's funny what you remember when something goes wrong. Something that would never stick in your memory on an ordinary day gets stuck there permanent. I remember that Ruthie was wearing a sundress that had been handed down through the older girls. By the time it got to Ruthie, it was thin and patched, too big for her small frame. The original blue was patterned with bits of red and green, and even a small piece of brown corduroy from my work trousers from last summer, just under her arm. And I remember her face, the face of my mother—uncanny the resemblance, so similar that everyone remarked on it—as Ruthie looked away and settled on watching a crow swoop in to steal the bread I'd discarded.

I ran down to skip stones on the lake, like I did most days in the time between finishing my sandwich and returning to my row. I never imagined that she'd wander off. After she finished eating, she'd always just sit and watch the birds and wait for Mom or Mae to come fetch her. When Dad passed by with the truck full of pickers returning to the field, he never even noticed that she was missing. Only when Mom went to the rock to find her after she hadn't returned to help Mae did anyone think that something might be wrong. Mom hollered for her, thinking she was just trying to get out of helping, even though that wouldn't be like Ruthie at all.

"Ruthie! Ruthie! Come on now, girl, come out where I can see you." Mom was walking along the edge of the trees when Dad drove up, the truck bed empty of people. He slowed down, following Mom, bumping along the dirt road.

"What's going on?"

"Ruthie's wandered off. I'll tan her hide when I find her for making me worry so much." Dad smiled, reached over and rolled up the passenger-side window to keep the dust and blackflies out as he continued down the road, leaving Mom to holler for Ruthie.

Dad was cutting lines of twine to section off a new field when Mom showed up back at the camp without her youngest by her side.

Out in the fields, we were surprised when we saw Dad's truck again, coming down the dirt path, dust and stones flying into the air. Dad stopped and yelled for everyone to get back on the truck. Ben, Charlie and I looked up to the sun to see that it wasn't yet quitting time, before we dropped our equipment and climbed into the truck bed along with the others. When we got to the camp, Mom was sitting in one of the plastic chairs, her head in her hands, Mae huddled around her.

"Now listen up. Ruthie seems to have wandered off," Dad said. Everyone turned their heads in unison, looking at the trees and the path that led to the lake, as if all of us looking at once would somehow reveal her. "I want you to split up in pairs and start looking in the trees."

Mae went with Charlie and I followed Ben into the woods, the brush scratching at my legs and face. Until the day I die, and that isn't too far away anymore, I will remember the sound of all those voices yelling Ruthie's name. We looked all through

the woods and down by the lake, searched the edges where the water met the land, just in case. We listened for the cheers of someone finally finding her, but they never came. As the sun sank and the yelling continued, I began to feel sick right from the top of my head to the bottom of my feet. The yelling echoed in my belly as the sky began to darken. Ben stopped when I had to sit down on the damp ground between the trees to catch my breath.

"Come on, Joe, get up. This ain't no time for a rest. Ruthie's gotta be scared by now." Ben grabbed my arm to lift me, but my legs gave out and I fell hard. "Joe, don't be a baby. Come on."

I broke into tears before twisting my body away from him and throwing up all over a patch of moss.

"Jesus. Come on, I'm taking you back to the camp." Ben lifted me and swung me around to carry me on his back, like I was as light as a feather. I wrapped my arms around his neck and laid my head on his shoulder. "Now, don't be throwing up on me, or I'll drop you right here in the middle of nowhere."

I nodded weakly, my chin bumping against the bones in his shoulder.

When we got back, Mom was still sitting in the plastic chair, staring into the fire. It was almost time for supper but there was no sign of food. Mae grabbed me off Ben's back and laid me down on an old blanket on the ground, my head at my mother's feet. She didn't even call me a sissy when Ben told her about my stomach betraying me in the woods.

"Don't you worry, Joe," Mom said. "She probably just wandered too far. Someone'll find her. You just don't worry now." She reached down and ran her strong hands through my hair.

It was that time of day when the sun starts making room for the night and everything looks ghostly. Dad walked up to the campfire, but I couldn't be quite sure if he was real or not until he spoke.

"I'm going into town to get the police. Good to have more people helping, and they might have more lights than we do. And she's just a girl." As if her age made a difference. Dad turned, got in the truck and drove off.

"He still has faith that they care," Mom said, as we watched his tail lights disappear into the gloomy dark of dusk. Half an hour later, he was back, one lone officer in one lone police car following the beat-up truck. The officer, shorter than Dad but just as skinny, sat in his car for what seemed to be forever. We all watched as he just sat there and jotted things in his notebook. Occasionally he'd look up to spy those of us gathered around the fire. He was too far away and it was too dark for me to see him clearly until he got out. Dad pointed to me, still lying at my mother's feet. The officer came over and crouched down to talk to me.

"You see anything strange around here this afternoon, little fella?" I shook my head no. "You see your sister wander off into the woods? Down to the lake?" Again, I shook my head no. His breath was foul like onions and cabbage mixed together and

left out in the warm sun too long. He stood up and straightened out his pants before he asked my mom and Mae the same questions. He looked at the people gathered around the fire, barely listening to anything anyone said, and Mae was getting testy.

"You just gonna ask the same stupid questions or you gonna help us find her?" she said.

Mom grabbed Mae's hand to calm her down. The policeman didn't even turn in her direction. I remember clearly how the firelight cast half of him in shadow like a villain in one of the comic books that I admired but could never buy.

He tapped his pad with his pencil. "Well, not much more I can do that hasn't been done. You let us know when you find her. I'll keep my notes, just in case."

"You're not going to help us?" Dad said.

"Sorry there"—he looked down at the pad of paper—"Lewis. I'm sure you'll find her. Besides, nothing much we can do. She's not been gone long enough, and you not being proper Maine citizens, and known transients. You understand." He paused, waiting for Dad to agree. Dad crossed his arms over his chest, waiting. "And there are only three of us police officers, and we had a break-in down at the farm supply store a couple weeks back, so . . ."

He walked back to his car and was starting to climb in when Dad grabbed him by the collar. The policeman's hat toppled off his head and bounced off the car door, landing at Dad's feet.

"She's a little girl," Dad said quietly.

The police officer regained his footing and stood between the car and the door, Dad's hands still gripping his collar. "I would suggest that you take your hands off me. There are more of you here looking than I could bring. Now, let go."

Dad let go and the police officer adjusted his clothes. He bent to pick up his hat and tapped it against the car door to get the dust off.

"If you were so concerned about the girl, you'd have taken better notice, I guess. Now, step back. I told you I would keep the notes in case we hear anything. You feel free to let me know when you find her." He crawled into the car, careful to not take his eyes off my dad. Dad was as tall and thin as a willow, but when he was mad, he could be scary. The car backed into a hollow place between the trees, turned, and headed down the dusty path back to Route 9. Dad picked up a large stone and threw it, busting a tail light. The car stopped for just a second before it moved on until the one remaining light disappeared altogether.

"You knew they were never going to help us, Lewis. You put too much faith in these people." Mom sat down again, leaned back and stared up at the stars as she started to cry.

No one slept that night. I was sent to bed alone and lay beside a space where Ruthie should have been. The light from the fire snuck in through the thin cracks separating the pine planks that made up the outside walls. The hushed sounds of adults in conversation reached me, but I couldn't make out anything they said. I closed my

eyes so tight that stars appeared. When they started to fade, I drew a picture of Ruthie's face on the back of my eyelids.

Two days after Ruthie went missing, Mr. Ellis stopped by. He hadn't been around, but we were too busy to notice. He knew about Ruthie. All the camps up and down Route 9 knew by now. But on the third day of empty berry crates, he stopped his truck, got out and waved Dad over to him, pretending he couldn't hear the searchers still calling her name.

"This ain't my problem, Lewis. This just ain't my problem. Do you know what my problem is? I need those berries picked." Mr. Ellis pointed to the fields, empty of rakers. "And if you don't get back to work, there are lots of other Indians around that would be more than happy to work these fields."

His spittle hit Dad in the face, and for a minute everyone froze and waited to see if Dad was going to lay him out flat, but he didn't. Dad didn't seem to have the fight in him anymore.

"That's right, get back to work," Mr. Ellis hollered as he crawled back into the cab of his truck. "Sorry about your missing girl," he said out the window to Mom as he drove off.

We searched for Ruthie for two more days, taking turns picking berries in the fields. Mr. Ellis would drive by every morning at ten thirty, so we'd have lots of people out picking then. He would nod and drive on. But from the time the sun came up until it slipped behind the trees, taking hope along with it, we searched, only taking time away to stuff the berry boxes with grass and twigs before the sun went down. We hollered Ruthie's name so much that the trees knew it by heart. We wandered up and down Route 9, through the fields and across the lake, but couldn't find a single trace of her. She wasn't in the thin forests that ran along the back of the berry fields, and she wasn't in any of the outbuildings or rusted-out refrigerators of the half-dozen neighbouring houses.

After four days with no sign of Ruthie, Mom's temperament was becoming more unpredictable. She only moved from her chair to use the bathroom or to go sit on Ruthie's rock. Mae found her sitting beside the rock, crying her eyes out because she could see Ruthie's tiny footprint in the dirt. Mae looked at the ground from every way that she could, but there was no footprint. Mae couldn't get Mom to move until the weather turned and the rain carried the invisible footprint toward the ditch at the end of the dirt road. All the way back to the cabin, Mae holding Mom under her arm, she wailed and cursed God in the ancient language known to her and Dad but not to us.

Dad paid one of the other pickers to drive Mom back to Nova Scotia with Mae. Mom cried and wailed for hours before they left. It was unsettling to see my mother cry like that. Mom never cried. We watched as the old beat-up 1952 Crosley station wagon crept along the dirt road, the rust falling to the ground whenever it went over a dried-out mud puddle. I waved as my father's chapped hand rested on my shoulder.

After Mom left, the other women at the camp huddled together, shaking their heads, speaking in hushed tones about the worst thing that could happen to a woman.

"A shame to lose a child. I lost three before birth and a little one to the fever some forty years back. Not something a woman ever gets over." The old woman shook her head and bent over her sewing, trying to catch as much light as possible from the fire.

"And especially one so quiet and sweet as Ruthie."

"Let's hope it doesn't get to her too bad. She still has four others that need a mother."

I sat and listened, thinking that Mom would be better if it'd been me and not Ruthie that disappeared. She had three boys and only two girls. I was the youngest boy and one that could be spared. At least that's what I told myself that night, the firelight throwing sad shadows on the ground. It was a simple matter of math.

We looked for Ruthie for six straight weeks, right up until it was time to go home, after the berry fields were empty and we'd pulled the potatoes from the ground. We packed up the camp, taking the owners of the station wagon with us on the back of our truck. No one spoke about her, but when we passed the small stone where I saw her last, a sandwich in her hand, I just knew that we were leaving Ruthie behind.