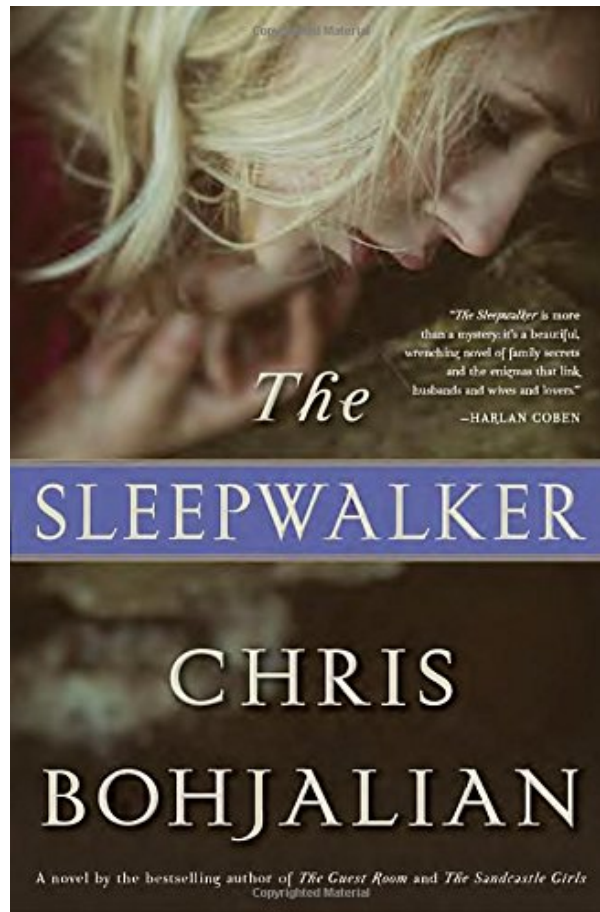
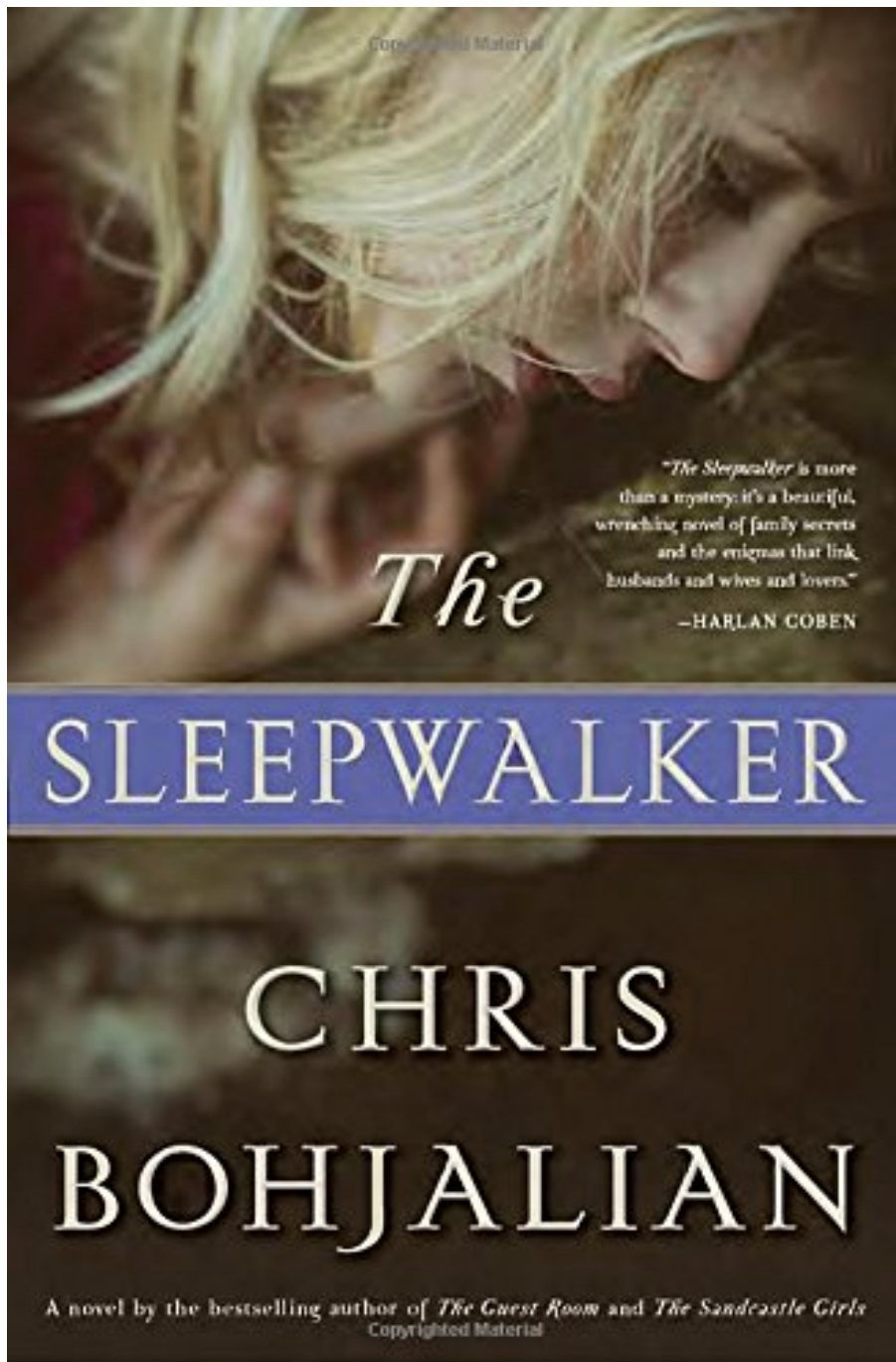


THE SLEEPWALKER: A NOVEL BY CHRIS BOHJALIAN



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Chapter One

Everyone in the county presumed that my mother's body was decaying—becoming porridge—at the bottom of the Gale River. It was the year 2000, and we were but three seasons removed from the Y2K madness: the

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I was twenty-one that summer and fall, and my sister was twelve. Neither of us fully recovered.

The experts were surprised that Annalee Ahlberg's body hadn't been found, since a drowned body usually turns up near its point of entry into the water. But near is a relative term. And so police divers had searched long stretches of the waterway and even dredged a section along the levee that was built to protect the road from the flash floods that seemed to mangle the great, sweeping curve there every other decade. But there was no trace of her. They had scoured as well the small, shallow beaver pond in the woods a quarter of a mile behind my family's red Victorian and found nothing there, too. Nevertheless, my younger sister and I thought it most likely that our mother was in that Vermont river somewhere. We hadn't given up all hope that she would return alive—at least I hadn't—but every day it grew harder to feign optimism for our father or say the right things (the appropriate things) when people asked us how we were doing.

One day after school, a little more than two weeks after the police and the mobile crime lab and the Zodiac boats had moved on—when all the tips had proven apparitions—Paige took her swim fins, a snorkel, and a mask and had gotten as far as the edge of the river before I was able to convince her that she was wasting her time. My sister was sitting on a rock about fifteen feet above the water in her navy-blue tank suit with the profile of a seahorse on her hipbone, the suit she wore when she swam laps at the pool at the college where our father taught. Clearly she meant business. Paige was in the seventh grade then, already a daredevil ski racer to be reckoned with, and in the summer and fall, at her ski coach's urging, most days she swam laps for an hour or so. She was still young enough to believe that she was a force of nature. She still dreamt when she was awake.

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The riverbank was steeply pitched, the slope awash with oak and maple saplings, the leaves already turning the colors of copper and claret. There were occasional clusters of raspberry bushes, the fruit by then long eaten by humans and deer. There were boulders and moss and mud—though that day, due to the drought, the earth was dry powder. Seven days earlier, Labor Day, the river was crowded with teenagers and children. Girls my age in bikinis sunned themselves on the unexpected rock promontories that jutted into the water. There were fewer swimmers than in summers past because, after all, it had been only a week and a half before then that the river had been filled with the search-and-rescue teams and the police. On some level, everyone who swam there or dozed on the boulders in the center of the Gale those waning days of summer feared they would stumble upon our mother's corpse. But still the swimmers and sunbathers came. Parents still brought their children.

The water was clear that late in the afternoon, and where it was shallow Paige and I could see the rocks along the bottom, some reminiscent of turtles and some shaped and colored a bit like the top of a human skull. Prior to our mother's disappearance, I doubt that either of us would have associated a rock with a skull; it was inevitable we did now. When we were quiet, we could hear the burble of the current as it rolled west, sluicing between boulders and splashing against the brush and a fallen maple on the shore.

I stretched my legs against a tree root. "And you know the water is a lot chillier these days than it was a couple weeks ago. It may be low in this section, but the temperature went down to forty degrees last night," I reminded my younger sister.

"It was sixty-five degrees at lunchtime today," Paige countered. "I checked at school."

"The sun's already behind the mountain. It's probably fifty-five now. Look, you have goose bumps on your arms. You'll last five minutes. Then you'll either get out or you'll get hypothermia. I'll have to dive in after you."

"I won't get hypothermia," she said, unable to hide her irritation with me. "And you wouldn't dive in after me, Lianna. You just don't want me to look."

"Not in the river, I don't."

"We both know—"

"If there were clues in there, the police would have found them. They didn't," I said—though the truth was, I did in fact believe there were clues in the river. I believed that probably there were more than clues. I couldn't help but imagine that our mother was in there. The body, in my mind, was lodged beneath the water somewhere between where the river passed through Bartlett and where it emptied miles to the west into Lake Champlain. The corpse was hooked to a jagged rock rising up from the bottom like a stalagmite. Or it was caught beneath a rusting car hood or trashed box spring or the barbed metal from a deteriorating wheelbarrow or boat or some other piece of detritus that had sunk to the bed of the river in those sections where it was deep. But if the divers hadn't found our mother—or any clues—there was no way in the world that Paige was going to.

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“What are you going to make for dinner?” she asked me after a moment, the question breaking the silence like a flying fish breaking the water.

“Can I take that to mean you’re going to put your energies to better use than going for a dip in the river?”

“I guess.”

“Thank you,” I said. “I would have been really pissed off if I’d had to go in and drag you out by your bathing suit.”

“You didn’t answer my question.”

It was a little before five. I had spotted Paige because I’d been walking to the general store for a bottle of Diet Coke and a brownie. I was only a little buzzed now, but I was still very, very hungry. I was also hoping that I might see something in the store’s refrigerator case that I could put on our father’s tab and call it dinner. Some potato salad, perhaps, and a couple of Mexican wraps. For a small store in a small village, the refrigerator case was impressive. When I was stoned—more stoned than I was that afternoon—the deli section made me think of a toy magic trick I’d had when I’d been younger than Paige was now, and I was first fantasizing that I might become a magician when I grew up. The trick was a red plastic vase no more than four or five inches tall, and it seemed never to run out of water. Or, to be precise, it seemed never to run out of water two times. Then it really did run dry. But twice you could seem to empty it before your—theoretically amazed—audience. The refrigerator case and deli section at the Bartlett General Store were a little bit like that to me, especially when I had the dope giggles.

“Dinner. Let’s see,” I murmured. In the first days after our mother had disappeared, our father had been a cyclone of activity. He tried to make sense of the path the detectives and a K9 dog named Max had outlined across our yard—the way the grass had been matted down in the night, the way you could see what they decided were her footprints in the dew, and (most compelling) the small piece from the sleeve of her nightshirt, ripped and found hanging on the leafless branch of a dead tree along the bank of the river. He had designed posters with her picture on them and had Paige and me plaster them on telephone poles and bakery and grocery store corkboards for miles. I had spent hours and hours alone in my mother’s midnight-blue Pathfinder—an SUV my parents had gotten my junior year of high school because it was perfect for carting us all (but especially Paige) to and from the ski slopes, and because we would use it to haul my belongings to and from college—driving between Bartlett and Hinesburg and Middlebury, where my father taught at the college. He had placed ads with his wife’s photo in the area newspapers to prolong the story’s momentum and to prevent people from forgetting Annalee Ahlberg—because, he knew, quickly they would. People survive by being callous, not kind, he sometimes taught his students, not trying to be dismissive of the species, but realistic. How, he lectured, could we ever face the morning if we did not grow inured to the monstrosities that marked the world daily: tsunamis and plane crashes and terrorism and war? And even when the police followed up on a tip—an alleged sighting of a woman wandering aimlessly in her nightshirt, or a piece of clothing floating miles away in the river—and discounted it, he would investigate it on his own. His inquiries those first days often confused strangers and infuriated the police.

At the same time, he had shocked the dean of faculty and the president of the college by informing them the Sunday of Labor Day weekend—barely more than a week after his wife had gone missing—that he still planned to teach that fall. It was, he said, the only way he could take his mind off the madness. Eight days later, Paige and I were sitting on the banks of the Gale. And while our father may have been himself in the classroom—inspiring one moment, glib the next—he had grown almost catatonic around Paige and me. He was utterly spent. He would drink till he slept in the evenings. In the days immediately after my mother’s

disappearance, he had depended upon my aunt—his sister-in-law—to make everyone dinner and do the laundry and, occasionally, brush Joe the Barn Cat. And then my aunt had left, returning to her own family on Manhattan’s Upper East Side. My mother’s parents, frail and inconsolable, tried to help, but my grandmother was descending fast into the murk of Alzheimer’s. They understood they were making things harder, not easier, and soon had gone home to their colonial outside of Boston, where my grandfather could do his best to care for his wife in the surroundings she knew. The neighbors stopped bringing us lasagna and macaroni and cheese and bowls of cut fruit. And so the task of making dinner had now fallen to me. Though our father’s classes met only three days a week, he had gone to the college every day since Labor Day. Faculty meetings, he said. Introducing himself to his new student advisees. His own writing. Talking to people himself who thought they might have seen Annalee Ahlberg. Each day he had left early in the morning and come home just before dinner. It seemed to me that he couldn’t bear to be in the house. Did he believe that his wife was still alive somewhere? At first he said that he did, reassuring his daughters, but already he was more likely to speak of her in the past tense. I knew in my heart that, like me, he was convinced she had walked herself to her death in a moment of slow-wave, third-stage sleep.

For a couple more minutes I sat beside my sister on the bank of the river, and neither of us said a word. I was just about to rise and resume my walk to the general store when Paige surprised me and asked, “Did they fight a lot? I mean, in comparison to other married couples?” She was talking about our parents.

The short story prequel to *THE SLEEPWALKER*, *THE PREMONITION* (9781524732936) is available to read now!

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From the New York Times bestselling author of *The Guest Room* comes a spine-tingling novel of lies, loss, and buried desire—the mesmerizing story of a wife and mother who vanishes from her bed late one night.

When Annalee Ahlberg goes missing, her children fear the worst. Annalee is a sleepwalker whose affliction manifests in ways both bizarre and devastating. Once, she merely destroyed the hydrangeas in front of her Vermont home. More terrifying was the night her older daughter, Lianna, pulled her back from the precipice of the Gale River bridge. The morning of Annalee's disappearance, a search party combs the nearby woods. Annalee's husband, Warren, flies home from a business trip. Lianna is questioned by a young, hazel-eyed detective. And her little sister, Paige, takes to swimming the Gale to look for clues. When the police discover a small swatch of fabric, a nightshirt, ripped and hanging from a tree branch, it seems certain Annalee is dead, but Gavin Rikert, the hazel-eyed detective, continues to call, continues to stop by the Ahlbergs' Victorian home. As Lianna peels back the layers of mystery surrounding Annalee's disappearance, she finds herself drawn to Gavin, but she must ask herself: Why does the detective know so much about her mother? Why did Annalee leave her bed only when her father was away? And if she really died while sleepwalking, where was the body?

Conjuring the strange and mysterious world of parasomnia, a place somewhere between dreaming and wakefulness, *The Sleepwalker* is a masterful novel from one of our most treasured storytellers.

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Features

- *The Sleepwalker*

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Chapter One

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“Then I won’t use them,” she mumbled.

“Maybe at the basin,” I suggested, throwing her a bone. The basin, a little downstream of where we were sitting, was at the bottom of a small waterfall. The water was perhaps a dozen feet deep there, and she could use her fins to push to the bottom.

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The water was clear that late in the afternoon, and where it was shallow Paige and I could see the rocks along the bottom, some reminiscent of turtles and some shaped and colored a bit like the top of a human skull. Prior to our mother’s disappearance, I doubt that either of us would have associated a rock with a skull; it was inevitable we did now. When we were quiet, we could hear the burble of the current as it rolled west, sluicing between boulders and splashing against the brush and a fallen maple on the shore.

I stretched my legs against a tree root. “And you know the water is a lot chillier these days than it was a couple weeks ago. It may be low in this section, but the temperature went down to forty degrees last night,” I reminded my younger sister.

“It was sixty-five degrees at lunchtime today,” Paige countered. “I checked at school.”

“The sun’s already behind the mountain. It’s probably fifty-five now. Look, you have goose bumps on your arms. You’ll last five minutes. Then you’ll either get out or you’ll get hypothermia. I’ll have to dive in after you.”

“I won’t get hypothermia,” she said, unable to hide her irritation with me. “And you wouldn’t dive in after me, Lianna. You just don’t want me to look.”

“Not in the river, I don’t.”

“We both know—”

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Great little story, slow at first but stick with it

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"Masterful... **The Sleepwalker** is Bohjalian at his best: a creepily compelling topic and an illusionist's skill at tightening the tension. This is a novel worth losing sleep over." —Patty Rhule, USA Today

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"A perfectly crafted surprise ending... Bohjalian succeeds in making us accomplices in a dark world we never knew existed." —Laura Patten, Milwaukee Journal Sentinel

About the Author

CHRIS BOHJALIAN is the critically acclaimed author of nineteen books, including the New York Times bestsellers **The Guest Room**, **The Sandcastle Girls**, **The Light in the Ruins**, and **The Double Bind**. His novel **Midwives** was a number one New York Times bestseller and a selection of Oprah's Book Club. His work has been translated into more than thirty languages, and three of his novels have become movies (**Secrets of Eden**, **Midwives**, and **Past the Bleachers**).

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Chapter One

Everyone in the county presumed that my mother's body was decaying—becoming porridge—at the bottom of the Gale River. It was the year 2000, and we were but three seasons removed from the Y2K madness: the overwrought, feared end of the digital age. It was a moment in time when a pair of matching towers still stood near the tip of lower Manhattan. Fracking and photobomb and selfie were years from becoming words, but we were only months from adding to our vocabularies the expression hanging chad.

I was twenty-one that summer and fall, and my sister was twelve. Neither of us fully recovered.

The experts were surprised that Annalee Ahlberg's body hadn't been found, since a drowned body usually turns up near its point of entry into the water. But near is a relative term. And so police divers had searched long stretches of the waterway and even dredged a section along the levee that was built to protect the road from the flash floods that seemed to mangle the great, sweeping curve there every other decade. But there was no trace of her. They had scoured as well the small, shallow beaver pond in the woods a quarter of a mile behind my family's red Victorian and found nothing there, too. Nevertheless, my younger sister and I thought it most likely that our mother was in that Vermont river somewhere. We hadn't given up all hope that she would return alive—at least I hadn't—but every day it grew harder to feign optimism for our father or say the right things (the appropriate things) when people asked us how we were doing.

One day after school, a little more than two weeks after the police and the mobile crime lab and the Zodiac boats had moved on—when all the tips had proven apparitions—Paige took her swim fins, a snorkel, and a mask and had gotten as far as the edge of the river before I was able to convince her that she was wasting her time. My sister was sitting on a rock about fifteen feet above the water in her navy-blue tank suit with the profile of a seahorse on her hipbone, the suit she wore when she swam laps at the pool at the college where our father taught. Clearly she meant business. Paige was in the seventh grade then, already a daredevil ski racer to be reckoned with, and in the summer and fall, at her ski coach's urging, most days she swam laps for an hour or so. She was still young enough to believe that she was a force of nature. She still dreamt when she was awake.

“You know, the water is so low now, you really won't need your fins,” I observed, hoping I sounded casual as I sat down beside her. I thought it was a little ridiculous that Paige thought her fins might be of use. It was the middle of September and it hadn't rained in Vermont in a month. It hadn't rained since our mother had disappeared (which we viewed as mere meteorological coincidence, not a sign of astrological or celestial relevance). The water was only shoulder high in that part of the river, and the channel was no more than ten or twelve yards wide. The fins would be an encumbrance, not an asset, to a swimmer as strong as Paige.

“Then I won't use them,” she mumbled.

“Maybe at the basin,” I suggested, throwing her a bone. The basin, a little downstream of where we were sitting, was at the bottom of a small waterfall. The water was perhaps a dozen feet deep there, and she could use her fins to push to the bottom.

“Maybe,” she agreed.

The riverbank was steeply pitched, the slope awash with oak and maple saplings, the leaves already turning the colors of copper and claret. There were occasional clusters of raspberry bushes, the fruit by then long eaten by humans and deer. There were boulders and moss and mud—though that day, due to the drought, the earth was dry powder. Seven days earlier, Labor Day, the river was crowded with teenagers and children. Girls my age in bikinis sunned themselves on the unexpected rock promontories that jutted into the water. There were fewer swimmers than in summers past because, after all, it had been only a week and a half before then that the river had been filled with the search-and-rescue teams and the police. On some level, everyone who swam there or dozed on the boulders in the center of the Gale those waning days of summer feared they would stumble upon our mother's corpse. But still the swimmers and sunbathers came. Parents still brought their children.

The water was clear that late in the afternoon, and where it was shallow Paige and I could see the rocks along the bottom, some reminiscent of turtles and some shaped and colored a bit like the top of a human skull. Prior to our mother's disappearance, I doubt that either of us would have associated a rock with a skull; it was inevitable we did now. When we were quiet, we could hear the burble of the current as it rolled west,

sluicing between boulders and splashing against the brush and a fallen maple on the shore.

I stretched my legs against a tree root. “And you know the water is a lot chillier these days than it was a couple weeks ago. It may be low in this section, but the temperature went down to forty degrees last night,” I reminded my younger sister.

“It was sixty-five degrees at lunchtime today,” Paige countered. “I checked at school.”

“The sun’s already behind the mountain. It’s probably fifty-five now. Look, you have goose bumps on your arms. You’ll last five minutes. Then you’ll either get out or you’ll get hypothermia. I’ll have to dive in after you.”

“I won’t get hypothermia,” she said, unable to hide her irritation with me. “And you wouldn’t dive in after me, Lianna. You just don’t want me to look.”

“Not in the river, I don’t.”

“We both know—”

“If there were clues in there, the police would have found them. They didn’t,” I said—though the truth was, I did in fact believe there were clues in the river. I believed that probably there were more than clues. I couldn’t help but imagine that our mother was in there. The body, in my mind, was lodged beneath the water somewhere between where the river passed through Bartlett and where it emptied miles to the west into Lake Champlain. The corpse was hooked to a jagged rock rising up from the bottom like a stalagmite. Or it was caught beneath a rusting car hood or trashed box spring or the barbed metal from a deteriorating wheelbarrow or boat or some other piece of detritus that had sunk to the bed of the river in those sections where it was deep. But if the divers hadn’t found our mother—or any clues—there was no way in the world that Paige was going to.

“Well, we have to do something,” Paige insisted, her voice morphing from vexation to pout. “I know doing something—doing anything except calling your friends at college or doing your magic or smoking pot—is against your religion. But I’m not you.”

“I’m doing something right now. I’m trying to stop you from accidentally freezing to death. Or, at least, wasting your time.”

Paige lay back against the bank and spread out her arms like she was about to be crucified. For a kid who made short work of Olympic-sized swimming pools, it seemed to me that my sister’s biceps were sticklike. Paige had turned to the river that day only because she had given up her search of the beaver pond and the woods behind our house. I had seen her back there the other day, wading methodically in hip boots in invisible lanes from one end of the beaver pond to the other, scouring the water. In the end, she found nothing more interesting in there than a man’s tennis sneaker. Another time she walked through the woods, hunched over like a witch from a children’s picture book, studying the fallen leaves and humus for any trace of our mother. But this was land that had been searched and searched again by professionals and volunteers. Rows of women and men had walked side by side, almost shoulder to shoulder. They had found nothing. And neither had Paige. She had found nothing there and she had found nothing—other than empty beer bottles and candy wrappers and plastic coffee-cup lids—as she had walked for hours along the river-bank beside the road, kicking at the brush with her sneakers.

“What are you going to make for dinner?” she asked me after a moment, the question breaking the silence like a flying fish breaking the water.

“Can I take that to mean you’re going to put your energies to better use than going for a dip in the river?”

“I guess.”

“Thank you,” I said. “I would have been really pissed off if I’d had to go in and drag you out by your bathing suit.”

“You didn’t answer my question.”

It was a little before five. I had spotted Paige because I’d been walking to the general store for a bottle of Diet Coke and a brownie. I was only a little buzzed now, but I was still very, very hungry. I was also hoping that I might see something in the store’s refrigerator case that I could put on our father’s tab and call it dinner. Some potato salad, perhaps, and a couple of Mexican wraps. For a small store in a small village, the refrigerator case was impressive. When I was stoned—more stoned than I was that afternoon—the deli section made me think of a toy magic trick I’d had when I’d been younger than Paige was now, and I was first fantasizing that I might become a magician when I grew up. The trick was a red plastic vase no more than four or five inches tall, and it seemed never to run out of water. Or, to be precise, it seemed never to run out of water two times. Then it really did run dry. But twice you could seem to empty it before your—theoretically amazed—audience. The refrigerator case and deli section at the Bartlett General Store were a little bit like that to me, especially when I had the dope giggles.

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