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Bit is already moving when he wakes. It is February, still dark. He is five years old. His father is zipping Bit within his own jacket where it is warmest, and Abe's heart beats a drum against Bit's ear. The boy drowzes as they climb down from the Bread Truck, where they live, and over the frosted ground of Ersatz Arcadia. The trucks and buses and lean-tos are black heaps against the night, their home until they can finish Arcadia House in the vague someday.

The gong is calling them to Sunday Morning Meeting, somewhere. A river of people flows in the dark. He smells the bread of his mother, feels the wind carrying the cold from the Great Lake to the north, hears the rustling as the forest wakes. In the air there is excitement and low, loving greetings; there is small snow, the smoke from someone's joint, a woman's voice, indistinct.

When Bit's eyes open again, the world is softened with first light. The tufts of the hayfield push up from under trampled snow. They are in the Sheep's Meadow and he feels the bodies closer now, massing. Handy's voice rises from behind Bit and up toward all of Arcadia, the seven dozen true believers in the winter morning. Bit twists to see Handy sitting among the maroon curls of the early skunk cabbage at the lip of the forest. He turns back, pressing his cheek against the pulse in his father's neck.

Bit is tiny, a mote of a boy. He is often scooped up, carried. He doesn't mind. From against the comforting strength of adults, he is undetected. He can watch from there, he can listen.

Over Abe's shoulder, far atop the hill, the heaped brick shadow of Arcadia House looms. In the wind, the tarps over the rotted

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roof suck against the beams and blow out, a beast's panting belly. The half-glassed windows are open mouths, the full-glassed are eyes fixed on Bit. He looks away. Behind Abe sits the old man in his wheelchair, Midge's father, who likes to rocket down the hill at the children, scattering them. The terror washes over Bit again, the loom and creak, the flash of a toothless mouth and the hammer-and-sickle flag as it flaps in passing. The Dartful Codger, Hannah calls the old man, with a twist to her mouth. The Zionist, others call him, because this is what he shouts for after sundown: Zion, milk and honey, land of plenty, a place for his people to rest. One night, listening, Bit said, Doesn't the Dartful Codger know where he is? and Abe looked down at Bit among his wooden toys, bemused, saying, Where is he? and Bit said, *Arcadia*, meaning the word the way Handy always said it, with his round Buddha face, building the community with smooth sentences until the others can also see the fields bursting with fruits and grains, the sunshine and music, the people taking care of one another in love.

In the cold morning, though, the Dartful Codger is too small and crabbed for terror. He is almost asleep under a plaid blanket Midge has tucked around him. He wears a hunter's cap, the earflaps down. His nose whistles, and steam spurts from it, and Bit thinks of the kettle on the hob. Handy's voice washes over him: . . . *work, as in pleasure, variety is evidently the desire of nature* . . . words too heavy for the soft feet of this morning. As the dawn light sharpens, the Dartful Codger becomes distinct. Veins branch across his nose, shadows gouge his face. He rouses himself, frowns at Bit, shuffles his hands on his lap.

. . . *God, says Handy, or the Eternal Spark, is in every human heart, in every piece of this earth. In this rock, in this ice, in this plant, this bird. All deserve our gentleness.*

The old man's face is changing. Astonishment steals over the hoary features. Startled, Bit can't look away. The eyes blink but come to a stop, open. Bit waits for the next puff of smoke from the cragged nose. When it doesn't come, a knot builds in his chest. He lifts his head from Abe's shoulder. A slow purple spreads over

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the old man's lips; a fog, an ice, grows over his eyeballs. Stillness threads itself through the old man.

At Bit's back, Handy talks of the music tour he is going on in a few days, to spread the word of Arcadia. . . . *be gone for a couple of months, but I have faith in you Free People. I'm your guru, your Teacher, but not your Leader. Because when you've got a good enough Teacher, you're all your own Leaders* . . . and the people around Bit laugh a little, and somewhere little Pooh screams, and Hannah's hand comes from Bit's side and smoothes down his cap, which has come half off, his one ear cold.

Handy says, *Remember the foundations of our community. Say them with me.* The voices rise: *Equality, Love, Work, Openness to the Needs of Everyone.*

A song boils up, *Sing a song full of the faith that the dark past has taught us*, they sing. Abe shifts under Bit to the rhythm. *Sing a song full of hope that the present has brought us; Facing the rising sun of our new day begun* . . . the song ends.

A silence. An inhale. In the great *Om* that rises from the mass of Free People, startled crows speckle up from Arcadia House roof. The sunrise blooms all over them.

In such perfect dawn, even the old man is beautiful, the blue of his beard under the newly luminous skin of his cheek, the softness in his jaw, the tufts in his ears touched golden. He has been gentled in living light. He has been made good.

When the last voice falls silent, just before Handy's *Thank you, my friends*, Midge puts her hand on her father's shoulder. Then she takes off her glove and presses her bare palm against the old man's cheek. And when Arcadia moves, soul-shakes, hugs, shares its good energy, Midge's voice cuts through the din. Father? she calls out, low. Louder, then: Father?

It is not in the speed with which Hannah grabs Bit and rushes him back home to the Bread Truck, or the fact that Abe stays behind to help Midge. It is not in the special treat, the dried blueberries in the porridge, or Hannah standing, wordless at the window,

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blowing on her green tea. It is not even what Abe says when he comes in: Karmic energy rejoining the ether, or Natural, the cycle of life, or Everybody dies, Ridley, honey. Abe does his best, but Bit still doesn't understand. He saw the old man turn beautiful. He wonders at the worry on his parents' faces.

The sadness they feel begins to crack open only when Hannah drops the dirty breakfast dishes on the table and bursts into tears. She rushes out over the Quad to the Pink Piper, to the comfort of Marilyn and Astrid, the midwives.

Abe gives Bit a tight smile. He says, Your mama's okay, Little Bit. It's just, this morning struck a deep chord with her because her own papa's not doing so hot right now.

In this Bit smells the small sulfur of a lie. Hannah has not been herself for a while. Bit lets the untruth slowly dissolve away.

Hannah's dad who lives in Louisville? he says. In the fall, the grandparents had visited, a fat man in a porkpie hat, a nervous puff of a woman in all pink. Bit had been squeezed, remarked upon: So tiny, the woman had trilled, I would have said under three, not five years old! There were sideways looks at him, and Hannah saying through gritted teeth: He's not *retarded*, he's *fine*, he's just really *small*, God, Mom. There was a meal that the pink lady wouldn't touch, a handkerchief lifted to the corners of her eyes every few seconds. There was a bad argument, then the fat and the puff went away.

As her parents drove off, Hannah'd had angry tears in her eyes. She'd said, May they rot in their bourgeois capitalist hell. Abe had laughed gently at her, and after a minute, the fierceness fell from Hannah's face. Grudgingly, she had laughed, too.

Abe says now, Yeah, your Louisville granddaddy. He has a wasting disease. Your grandma wants your mother down there, but Hannah won't go. Anyways, we can't spare her.

Because of the Secret, Bit says. Everyone has been whispering about the Secret for a month, since Handy announced his music tour. While Handy is gone, they will finish Arcadia House so they can all move out of Ersatz Arcadia, that loose mishmash of buses

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and lean-tos, and, at last, live together. They had meant to these three years, ever since they bought the land and found the house, but they were distracted by hunger and hard work. Arcadia House is to be a gift to Handy when he returns.

Abe's eyes crinkle and his lips split to show his strong teeth in the red of his beard. I guess it isn't a secret if even the little guys know, he says.

They play a game of Go Fish until Hannah returns, her face raw but calmer. She tells them that Astrid and Marilyn have been called to the Amish neighbors' for a birthing. For a hello, Hannah rests her cheek in the crook of Abe's neck for a moment and kisses Bit gently on the forehead. Like a sigh into breath, life releases into life. Hannah turns to stoke the woodstove. Abe fixes the drafty chink where he had built the lean-to against the Bread Truck. They eat dinner and Abe plays a tune on the harmonica and when night falls all three curl on the pallet together, and Bit sleeps, a hickory nut within the shell of his parents.

The forest is dark and deep and pushes so heavily on Bit that he must run away from the gnarled trunks, from the groans of the wind in the branches. His mother calls for him to stay in sight, but he doesn't slow. When he comes into the clearing by the Gatehouse, his face smarts with cold.

Titus, pocked and immense, heaves up the gate. He seems old, older even than Handy, because he was damaged in Vietnam. Bit adores Titus. Titus calls Bit Hop o' My Thumb and can lift him with one palm and will sometimes even smuggle Bit a few goodies from the Outside—pink coconut cake in cellophane or peppermints like bloodshot eyes—despite the ban on sugar and the harm surely done to animals in making the goodies. Bit believes the treats' chemical afterburn is what the world beyond Arcadia must taste like. Titus slips him a throat-thickening butterscotch in a crinkle of yellow paper and winks, and Bit buries his face in his friend's greasy jeans for a moment before he hurries on.

All Arcadia has gathered on the frozen road to say goodbye.

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Handy sits in lotus on the nose of the Blue Bus with his four blond children: Erik and Leif and Helle and Ike. His main wife, Astrid, tall and white-haired, gazes up at them. She unknots a hemp necklace from her throat and ties it around Handy's neck, kissing him over his third eye. Even above the roar of the engine, the radio belts out a jiggly country song. Handy's other wife, Lila, who wears feathers in her black hair, sits with skinny little Hiero, her other husband. The band hugs those they are leaving behind and lugs their stuff up into the bus, then Handy passes the children down: Ike, inches taller than Bit though a year younger; Helle, froggy as her father; Leif, who is always angry; chubby Erik, who slides to the ground by himself and lands on his knees and tries not to cry.

On the Gatehouse porch, Wells and Caroline argue with flushed faces. Bit's friend Jincy peers from parent to parent. Though the wind makes her curly hair spring in ten directions, her face is pale and still.

From the path comes a sweetness of bells, of voices. Out of nowhere, great broad heads of giants bob in the branches. Bit's gut swirls with loveliness. Onto the road come the Circenses Singers, Hans and Fritz and Summer and Billy-goat, in their white robes, carrying the Adam and Eve puppets. These are new-made creatures, naked and huge with flushed genitals. The Circenses Singers go off on the weekends to protests and rallies, staging dances at concerts, sometimes busking for change. Now the robed people bend and sing under the vast and eerie bodies above them. When they finish, everyone cheers and they pack the great bulbous beasts into the back of a Volkswagen van.

Bye-bye-bye-bye, shouts brown little Dylan from Sweetie Fox's arms. Bit runs to his friend Coltrane, who is poking at an icy puddle with a stick. Cole gives Bit the stick, and Bit pokes, too, then hands the stick to Cole's brother, Dylan, and Dylan waves it around.

Gingery Eden, her pregnant belly enormous, cracks a bottle of pop over the hood of the Blue Bus and rubs her back when

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she stands. The dazzle of her white teeth under her copper hair makes Bit want to dance.

Handy shouts about how they'll be back before Spring Planting, and the Free People huzzah, and Tarzan hands up a cooler of beer the Motor Pool sold an engine to pay for, and Astrid lays a long kiss on Lila's pretty lips, and Hiero does, too, and slides to the ground, and there are other kisses, the band's chicks and wives smooching up into the windows, and then the engine gets louder and the bus starts to move off toward the County Road. Everyone cheers and some people cry. In Arcadia, people cry all the time. Others do funny dances, laughing.

Helle stumbles after the bus, sobbing for her father. She is always in tears, the bigheaded, strange-looking little girl, always screaming. Astrid scoops Helle up, and the girl wails into her mother's chest. The bus's sound softens and filters away. The noises they are left with seem doubly loud in the quiet: the ice that cracks in the branches, the wind like sandpaper across the surface of the snow, the flap of the prayer flags strung across the Gatehouse porch, the squeak of rubber boots on frozen mud.

When Bit turns, everyone is looking at his father.

Abe grins at them, the ones who can't play music, the four dozen left behind. They seem so few. Abe calls loudly, All righty, everybody. Are you ready to work your bones to sawdust and shards?

Yes, they shout. Bit wanders back to Hannah, and rests his head against her hip. She blocks the wind and warms his face with her heat.

Motor Pool, you ready to go out into the wilds of New York and salvage and steal and sell your sperm and blood to buy what we need to do this?

Hells, yes! shouts Peanut, and behind him, Wonder Bill and Tarzan pump their fists.

Womenfolk, are you ready to clean and polish and varnish and scrape and sand and take care of the kidlets and operate the

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Bakery and Soy Dairy and Laundry and cook and clean and chop wood and do the everyday stuff we need done to keep we Free People going strong while all this work's happening?

The women cheer, and way above Bit's head, Astrid mutters to Hannah in her strange lilt, As if it is not what we already do, already. Bit looks away. When Astrid speaks, she shows her teeth, and they are so yellow and crooked he feels he's looking at something private.

All you Pregnant Ladies from the Henhouse, you ready to sew those curtains and braid those rugs and make the rooms all cozy and homey? Scattered yeses, the Hens surprised into acquiescence. A baby begins to squall.

Abe shouts: All you men, ready to work in the cold and stink of that old house to get her up and ready, with plumbing and a roof and everything? The men yell and yodel.

Abe's face goes solemn; he raises a hand. One thing, my cats and chicks. I know we're a nonhierarchical society and all, but since I've got my degree in engineering and Hiero has all those years under his belt as a construction foreman, we were thinking we'd be the ones to report to, yeah? We're just the straw bosses here, so if you got a better idea to do something, just let us know. But run things by us before you go off on your own initiative to do new stuff and we have to waste our time and dough to undo it. Anyways, serious talk over. We got about four more good hours of daylight today and only three months to totally refinish a fallen-apart nineteenth-century mansion. Or orphanage or whatever it was. So let's get our beautiful beatnik asses cracking.

A shout, a rush, and the group steams forward, up the mile-long drive scabbed with ice. They laugh, they are warm, they are ready. The last time Bit was in Arcadia House, he saw a sapling growing in a clawfoot tub and the roof caved in to show the clouds and sun. How wonderful it will be to have the house finished, tight and warm. If sleeping in a nest with two parents is happiness, imagine sleeping with eighty! Children dart around the legs

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of the adults until Sweetie Fox rounds them up and takes them down the shortcut to the Pink Piper to play.

Bit falls behind, feeling something gone wrong. He turns back.

Hannah stands alone at the gate. The ground is muddy around her. Bit hears a bird's low call. He begins to walk back toward his mother. When he is almost the whole way to her and she still seems small, he runs. She is hunched in an old sweater of Abe's, shivering. Her face is folded in on itself, and though he knows she is twenty-four, she seems younger than Erik, younger than Jincy, as young as Bit himself. He takes off his mitten to put his hand in hers. Her fingers are ice.

When she feels his hand, she smiles down from so high, and he can see his mother again within this shrunken woman. She says, All right, Bit. All right.

A snowstorm blows in. Bit dreams of hulking, hungry wolves with red eyes circling the Bread Truck. They howl, scabble at the door. He startles awake. He wants his mother, but it is Abe who rises and shows Bit, through the window, the clean white sheets blowing down, the trackless heaps of snow. Abe heats up soymilk, and burritos Bit in the softest blanket. In the hope of lulling him to sleep, Abe tells him the story of his birth, which Bit knows the innards of. The legend of Bit Stone, the first Arcadian ever, is another story so retold that everyone owns it. The bigger girls play it in the Pink Piper, substituting the newest babies for the role of Bit.

You were born on the Caravan, Abe says softly, when we were a bunch of groupies, following Handy around for spiritual food. Two dozen, max. Going to the concerts, staying for the meetings after. Everywhere we went, we saw communes, some that worked, others that didn't. Yurts and geodesic domes and sweat lodges and squatted-in mansions in the inner cities, and we started having an idea that even though everybody else was doing something along these lines, what we wanted to do was unusual. Pure. Live with the land, not on it. Live outside the evil of commerce

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and make our own lives from scratch. Let our love be a beacon to light up the world.

Anyways, those days, Handy was the only one with any medical training from being a medic in Korea, and he thought Hannah was five months along, because she wasn't huge. So here we are, driving through the mountains, trying to get from Oregon to Boulder, when a sudden snowstorm comes up, flakes huge as plates on the windshield, and wouldn't you know it, Hannah chooses this time to pop. We were in that little Volkswagen Camper the Motor Pool uses for trips into town. I'd fitted it out with a stove and all, pretty nifty, but we were in one of the smaller vehicles, so we were stuck at the back of the line, in these narrow mountain passes. I knew I had to get up to where Handy was because I sure as hell didn't know how to deliver any baby, undercooked or not. So up we go, fartleking past everyone in the left lane, and we'd all be dead if anyone came the opposite direction. Finally we pass the Pink Piper, and I slow the whole zoo down. Turn at a sign that says Ridley WY, pop. five thousand something, and I think there's got to be a hospital there, but there's snow on the sign, and of course, I turn the wrong way. On and on and on, mile after mile, and it's black out and finally we see lights and stop, and the Caravan folds itself around us and the Pink Piper to keep out the wind, and the door opens and some snowy person bursts in. I was expecting Handy, but who was it? Astrid.

Handy is seeing faces in the bus ceiling, she said (Abe says this in Astrid's Norwegian lilt; Bit giggles). He just ate three tabs of mescaline. But I have a Ph.D. in Victorian literature and I have three babies myself. I am well used to parturition.

She may have been thinking leeches as far as I know, but I know less than her, so I say, Okay, sure. So we all get naked because that is natural, and Astrid orders me around, Boil this water! Boil these knives! Get clean towels! But as soon as I have the hot water on, Hannah faints, and just like that, out you come, all bloody, with a plop. Well, I had no hope. You were so little, an apple, and

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barely moving. You couldn't even cry. Your poor lungs were too tiny. But Astrid cleaned you up and put you on your mother's boob and you had this ferocity for life, little man, you just started sucking her nipple like this huge sugartit as big as your own tiny mouth. Astrid gave out a cry and moved back down to Hannah's yoni because, guess what, there was another thing coming out, an afterbirth.

Abe pauses, strokes Bit's head absently.

Astrid wraps it all up in a batik and sends me out with a shovel and I struggle on through the snow to the black lake and dig through the frozen pebbles and into the ground and finally get it all covered and say a few words of gratitude and trudge my way back.

Then it was morning, and the sun came up, and I'll tell you, it was beautiful. It lit up that frozen lake so it was shining from within and the ice looked like hot lead at the base of these gorgeous purple mountains, and the churchbell rang up in town to celebrate you, our miracle baby. Then the townspeople came out, all shy, with food and bread, and deposited it on the hood of our Camper. That morning Astrid knew she'd found her calling. Her hands were meant to coax babies into the world. You were a gift, she said. She wrapped you around and around with a thick wool scarf and went to the grocer's and weighed you. You were three pounds, exactly. The size of an itty-bitty butternut squash.

The old grocer lady was this crusty German hag, cussing out all we longhairs among her twisted potatoes, her cabbages, but she took one look at you and her face cracked wide open, suddenly stunning, I mean a beam of light blasted out of her mouth. And she said, Oh, well if that ain't the littlest bit of a hippie ever made!

So this is how you came to be, Ridley Sorrel Stone, named for a town we never did see. Our Littlest Bit of a Hippie. Oldest soul in Arcadia. Our heir with no spare, Abe says, and his eyes pinch, then go clear again, and he nuzzles Bit around the neck, which tickles and makes Bit laugh, healing the invisible soreness in the Bread Truck, making them both forget the red-eyed wolves and

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the storm and the weariness of Hannah and the morning full of hard work now bearing down on them.

The first few days without Handy, the world feels off balance. He's not there for the weepers or the bad trips, for his daily cheery wanders around each work unit to urge them on. No scraggly gray beard, no quick-blinking eyes, no constant tinkle of his guitar or ukulele or banjo. For a few days, the ones left behind tread too softly on the ground, and every other word that falls from their lips is *Handy*. Then, one morning goes by and Bit doesn't think of Handy at all, until he trips over little Pooh, who throws herself in Bit's path, and he skins his hands, and waits for Handy to come down from the Pink Piper to lift him, to look deep into his eyes and gather cosmic energy, and say, *Oh, Littlest Bit, you're A-OK, man, don't have a freak-out. Pain is your body telling you to be more careful.* Instead lovely Sweetie Fox kisses his palms and rinses them with cold water and puts a bandage on them. Abe organizes the work crews. Astrid smoothes over conflicts, assigning the hug therapy or work yogas to dissolve the tension. Two of the guys from the Singleton Tent are so mad at each other that in their yoga they rip down almost all the rotten plaster in the upstairs of Arcadia House in one day, a miraculous feat, and now are best friends, hanging on one another's shoulders. The music isn't as good but there still is music: recorders and guitars and harmonicas. It is as if all of their edges have bled a little into the space where Handy had been, the way separate stews eke across the plate to mingle when the rice in the middle has been eaten.

In his half sleep, late, Bit hears Hannah murmur: It's nothing. I'm just tired.

You sure? Need a break? I'm sure we can scrape together the Greyhound . . .

No, baby.

Fabric sounds, something against his foot.

Speaking of which.

Hey. Wait. I'm sorry. Babe, I'm sorry, no.

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Will we ever? Do you think? Ever again?

It's just. I would prefer not to.

Okay, Bartleby.

His parents laugh quietly, and when they stop there is a different kind of silence. Bit listens until his hearing fades and he carries only the sound of the kiss with him into his sleep.

Like the tractor that leaps forward with a nudge of the throttle, Arcadia jumps into high gear. Someone is always breathless, someone is always running. People have long conversations about wood rot and epoxy. There are knocks on the Bread Truck door in the middle of the night, the Scavengers home from Syracuse, Rochester, Albany, Utica, from the abandoned mansions they rip into for parts. In the morning, Abe whistles while he fondles the intricate carved mantels or soapstone sinks that have magically appeared on the Quad in the Octagonal Barn. He is a whirlwind of plans, sudden private laughs, and his energy spreads into the others, makes even Bit want to dance.

Bit makes up a song and sings it to himself all the time: *Renovation, renovation, renovation, fix and patch and clean and paint . . . renovation.*

At night, making soy cheese and onion quesadillas, Abe beams at him, saying, Renovation, honey. But Hannah squeezes Bit and whispers, I think your word is apt. Re-novelization. Reimagining our story. She touches under his chin with her soft fingers, his mother, and he laughs for the happiness of pleasing her.

It is morning. Hannah has put hot coffee into Abe's thermos. She has made them scrambled yeggs, soft, fresh tofu yellowed with nutritional yeast. When Abe marches up the hill to fix Arcadia House, his toolbelt jingling, Hannah goes to work in the Bakery.

Bit is building a castle out of woodblocks with Leif and Cole when he sees Hannah trudge back across the Quad and go up into the Bread Truck. He waits all day, but she doesn't come to get him. Twilight spreads over the windows. All around the Quad the

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cold air sounds with the voices and bootsteps of the menfolk and ladies who are coming home. The Family Quonsets are abuzz, the Pink Piper spills kids into the dusk, the scents of fried onions and tempeh rise from the Singleton Tent, the tinny wail of baby Felipe is answered by the echo of a smaller baby, Norah or Tzivi, startled awake. Doors open, doors slam, voices call out in the raggedy homecomings of Ersatz Arcadia. At last, he gets Sweetie to suit him up and walks home alone.

Hannah sits up from the bedclothes, stretches, and gives Bit a piggyback outside for a pee, hopping barefoot over the frozen ground. Inside the loo, it smells like wet muskrat, though it is warm out of the wind. Hannah curses when she eyes the wipe-nail, filled with glossy squares cut from a *Life* magazine. Glossy means sharp and cold against your crack, itching later.

When they come in, the damp chill of the Bread Truck seems somehow colder than the outdoors, and Regina is standing at the kitchen table, a loaf of bread before her. She turns and gives a small wave. Hey, she says.

Hey, Hannah says, setting Bit down. He runs to the bread and tears off a hunk to gnaw. Bit hid when Hannah didn't pick him up for lunch, and hasn't eaten since breakfast. He's starved. Hannah crouches to start a fire in the white ashes of the woodstove, the pinecones a fragrant kindling.

So we missed you this afternoon in the Bakery, says Regina. I looked up to ask you to make the granola, and you were gone. She has flour in her black crown of braids and a smear of something shiny on her cheekbones. Her eyes are tiny and set deeply in her head, her eyebrows are crows' wings.

I got sick, Hannah says. Her voice is taut, but when she touches the match to the kerosene lamp, her face looks normal in the glow. I didn't want to get anyone else sick, so I thought I'd go home.

Oh. Uh-huh, says Regina. Okay. It's just that what with the Arcadia House project, it's just me and Ollie up at the Bakery when you do that. Which is okay on the days you tell me, but when we're relying on you, it's a real pinch.

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