

Eighth Picture

End of Summer

We were frenzied that last week in August. That was Izzy's word: frenzied. And I drew it all:

Steven and I racing along the dirt road to buy beef jerky at the grocery store four miles away.

Sitting on a rock, pulling the jerky against our teeth as we counted the cars that went by on the highway.

Rowing up the river rapids and bouncing back in the rowboat with bruises all over our legs and arms.

Climbing partway up the Old Man's mountain after the rain, slipping and sliding in the mud on the edge of the road.

And we never stopped laughing.

Anything so we wouldn't think about my leaving.

Anyting.

They told me what they'd planned, the four of us sitting on the porch. I never needed a picture of that night. It was in my head, every bit of it, in there forever. But I drew it anyway: Izzy with one of my hands in both of hers, the Old Man reaching out to hug me until I had no breath left, and Steven blinking behind his glasses, trying not to let me see how close to tears he was. But I knew.

I drew another picture of what happened next. Before I could think, I leaned over to kiss Steven's cheek, stained with grease from working on the truck, captured there in that drawing forever. Both of us laughed, embarrassed, and Izzy said, "Lovely. I'm going to try that too." And she leaned over to kiss his other cheek.

We were still laughing as Izzy spread out her long arms. "It's settled, then," she said. "You belong with us. This house ..."

"And the river," I said.

"... is yours," the Old Man said. "All of it." "And Izzy's hard candy," Steven said, rocking back on his chair, looking happier than he had all summer.

Please let it be all right, I begged, looking at Steven's face, remembering all the arguments he and the Old Man had had: a lost lure yesterday, a rake left in the rain, the truck. Was it because I was there? Was the Old Man comparing him with me? Me? Wasn't that strange? Was trying to fit me into a family like jamming in a puzzle piece that didn't match? Would it ruin all the other pieces?

I looked up at the mountain. The trees had just a hint of fall color. The mountain looked soft, almost friendly. I thought about standing on the very top.

Izzy leaned over. "Hey, you two, don't look sad. We still have one last weekend. Remember?"

The last weekend.

Last.