

Fourth Picture

The Old Man's Mountain

I sat on the porch steps drawing the mountain while I waited for Steven. He was hanging over the motor of the Old Man's truck, fiddling with hoses or connections, muttering to himself. "If he'd let me drive this thing for half a minute, I'd know exactly what's wrong with it."

Half the arguments in that house had to do with Steven's wanting to drive the truck. "Right here on the property, that's all," he'd say. "No big deal." The other arguments had to do with his disappearing. It made the Old Man crazy. Up on the mountain road to follow a deer path, lying on the bottom of the rowboat to drift along searching for the kingfisher, gone somewhere and dragging me along with him.

One night at dinner the Old Man had dropped the box in my lap: tan leather, with dozens of pencils inside, points sharp and perfect, in every color you could imagine, a thick pad of paper, erasers, a pencil sharpener. I had picked up one of the pencils: French Blue, a soft color that was almost purple. "I love this," I told him.

I had wanted to throw my arms around him, wanted to tell him I had never had a present like this before, no one had. I wanted to tell him but didn't tell him; I ducked my head, my bangs a fringe over my eyes. But he knew; I knew he knew.

The Old Man was an artist, but a different kind. He drew circles and lines and squares that turned into plans for houses and buildings. He said he wished he could do what I did.

Now Steven flew around the side of the truck like one of Izzy's hens, his eyeglasses taped to the side of his head, his hands filthy from the truck. "Move it, Hollis Woods," he said. "We don't have all day here, you know."

I put the mountain picture carefully inside the box. At the end of the summer I'd give it to the Old Man as a present.

Don't think about the end of the summer, I told myself.

Steven and I raced each other down the road, across the bridge, dead tie, and stopped, out of breath, at the mountain road. After a moment we started up.

Steven lurched along. At one turn in the road he was all speed; the next he'd stop short, bent over, nose almost touching the ground. "Look at this, Holly, it's a raccoon print," he'd say, or, "See the way this branch is cut off? Beaver, building a den where the stream comes off the mountain."

The Old Man was right about the road: It was slippery, muddy in the shade, one side ready to slide off the mountain straight into the river. But worth it. "We going all the way to the top?" I drew in my breath. Did I want to do that, stand on top of the mountain, a mountain of trouble myself?

Steven shook his head. "Pop would have a fit." He ran his hand over an imaginary beard. "The rocks fall, Steven, use your head," he said in the Old Man's voice.

Halfway up was a spot that widened. We looked down and saw the house, and Izzy picking tomatoes, and we whistled at her until she waved, even though she couldn't see us.

Then we sank down on a rock and Steven fished in his pocket for a squished Hershey bar. "Should I give you half?" he asked. "You're not as big as I am."

"Give me all," I told him, laughing. "I'm more deserving."

He held up both pieces, squinting. "The Old Man would say that."

I knew that. Somehow the Old Man thought I was a great kid. How had that happened? I swallowed, thinking of the lemon lady: "You want tough?" she had said. "I'll show you tough." And someone else, I didn't even remember who it was: "You've missed school half the term, how do you think you can get away with all this?"

But I was a new person with the Old Man, with Izzy, with Steven. It was as if the angry Hollis were seeping right out of my bones, leaving chocolate as soft as that sticky Hershey bar.

I looked at Steven, wondering if he minded that the Old Man thought I was great. But Steven was splitting the candy bar, and he gave me the bigger piece but did it quickly. I wasn't supposed to know. I took a breath.

I thought about the W picture in my backpack: the mother, the father, the brother, the sister.

And don't think of that, either, I told myself.