

stream

John Rekoumis

He was always considered for adoption, but that was as far as it went. Even the would-be rainbow family that adopted children from each ethnicity refused Alex when he stopped speaking to Rose. The day after, he left St. Joseph's Orphanage aimless and with a headache.

The family chose Lucius the Rwandan, the 16 year-old from Imbazi and 17 year-old Helmore Jones from Stratford. Alex, they thought, was rude and inappropriate for flicking them off. Sister Carol made Alex wear a red sweater when he was introduced to interested parents. It reminded her to forewarn the parents about his stiffened finger. Somehow she always managed to forget. The bags underneath her eyes looked like a permanent reservoir of tears, as if they were waiting to be tragically expelled. They did when she expelled Alex on his 17th birthday.



It was rather expected, really, that on his ninth birthday—when Alex broke his finger—he ran away from home. The home his great-great-great grandfather built. The home his mother died in. Where Daddy made him choose on excessively snowy winters: *Belt or Hanger, Alex, belt or hanger*, he used to say chillingly, like the inevitable shiver before someone slips on ice. What was unexpected was Alex's return eight years later.

His only gift had been his sister Samantha's old bicycle. She rolled it into his room while he was still asleep; Daddy was passed out in the yard. She woke him with the high-pitched chime, the tasseled silver bell. He jumped out of his bed, wearing his worn out Danger Mouse jammies, his bare toes flittered around the cold hardwood floor, *Sammy, no way! Thank you! Thank you!*

He rode fast. He daydreamt about how fast the streamers blurred along the street. Pink. Purple. White. Clapping against the handlebars as he went faster, like a bright leaf alighting the rocky water nearby.

He didn't know until the next night, however, Samantha's motive. The bike was his scapegoat, her alibi, for taking Alex away from home for good.

When Alex got the idea to jump the stream that day, he shook his head in refusal. The river was too wide, segregating his house and the Potames' with indomitable stone. He used to believe Daddy hated the Potames so much that one day he built the stream that divided the houses.

He studied the stream. It ran faster than his emerald eyes could follow, it eroded the soil as fast as time. And Daddy's stern, dreadful face pulsed through his bloodstream. His logical thinking left with the rest of his fear.

So he jumped.

The drop was a little more than five feet. Years and years of erosion, dissolution, fights, braces, deaths, unpaid bills, overwhelming debt made the jump impossible. The bicycle fell from underneath him, into the water. Alex cleared the stream but not the embankment. In that moment, falling promptly to

the earth he hoped for his mother to emerge from the stream and snatch him from falling. He saw her embossment in the waves. His middle finger hit a rock and bent back behind his hand like a steamed piece of asparagus then snapped like a thin tree branch, quickly and hostilely.

The bike was submerged beneath the stream. It disappeared below the murky opaqueness. Alex lied on the embankment and looked at the sky. A cloud reminded him of a grizzly bear. What would he tell Daddy? How would he? And then, at that moment, the waters came. The stream grew.

When Alex was born, the stream grew a few millimeters. From the beginning, Alex got the impression that Daddy never wanted more children after Samantha. He spent more time working at the sawmill, more time inhaling microscopic chips of wood. It grew some more when Samantha needed braces. It became a river when it washed away the bicycle, when Alex ran away.

He was so terrified to face Daddy he forgot about the mangled digit that dangled in between his index finger and ring finger. He didn't even cry.

There was a moist root he grabbed with his left hand—the hand that still had some feeling. He climbed up the mudfilly rock-strewn embankment. His pale knees quibbled with each other on the way up, they disappeared and reappeared from underneath his dirtied gray shorts.

The finger had grown to the size of a plantain. If he had told Daddy that night his finger would've gotten worse, he was sure of it. It was Samantha who cried at his hand, Samantha

who ran to the icebox, pushing Daddy away—head-deep in the freezer, wobbling on both feet, rummaging for another beer. It was Samantha that splinted his finger. It was Alex who removed the splint and tried snapping it back in to whatever empty space the bone detached from.

Alex, my God! Samantha covered her eyes, shook her head.

I lost your bike. Please don't tell Daddy. Please, please, please.

By morning, Alex regained movement in his hand. The finger, however, remained utterly lifeless, *en rigor mortis*. The fluid that filled the displaced space where his bone met his knuckle became ossified and stiff. It became an indelible fuck-you, a permanent middle finger. Flicking off anyone curious enough to look in that direction.

Samantha worked during summer. Alex knew how helpless she felt when she came home nights, tired and achy from standing, seeing Daddy's doings. She was just as frightened in the nights of their childhood—his wide adult face, enormous, stern, aloft. But she would leave in the morning, the time he needed alone with Alex, before he drank himself to oblivion. Alex got it the worst that morning:

You better put that fucker away.

No, Daddy, That's just how my hand is.

You're lying to Daddy?

No, Daddy. That's just how my hand is.

You're damn lying to Daddy!

No, Daddy.

Bring it here! He grabbed Alex by the joint of his elbow, dug at his skin, and pulled his bruised hand along the splintered surface, closer to his bloodshot eyes. Alex looked upward.

Tell Daddy if this hurts. A smile grew. A sad, sadistic smile Alex knew quite well. He smacked Alex's bloated finger with the same injustice a judge smacks a gavel.

He smacked it again, that inevitable injustice. Harder. He brought his thin, hairy hand up to the same rusted point Alex fixed his gaze upon, trying to avoid Daddy's cadaverous face, and struck with the same inebriated force. The warped, rusted ceiling looked unstable, more so, after each hit. He thought of the many times the ceiling and him were embattled in an extensive staring contest.

Daddy's helping you, you know? Trying to get that bone in place. He spit molecules of beer into the oily kitchen air and breathed as heavy as an ox—focused, motivated.

I know, Daddy, I know.

You know shit.

I know, Daddy.

There. How does it feel? He asked after the fourth.

Okay, Daddy.

I popped it back into place. Put ice on it and bring Daddy a beer.

Okay, Daddy. Alex stumbled back up from his chair. His legs felt weak and ropey. He wanted to vomit. There was no beer in the fridge. *I can't find any beer, Daddy.*

Look harder! He yelled from the kitchen table.

The last beer, of course, was in between the inescapable grip of his veiny hand and the feeble, dazed head resting upon it. *Then fetch me some wine. It's on top of the fridge.* He said.

Here, Daddy. Alex brought the bottle and a glass he placed next to Daddy's hand. The slight touch startled him and he looked over his shoulder, paranoid. They both saw it, then, next to the door.

Look what I found in the stream this morning. It looked brand new. The river burnished every gear, every axel, giving it a coat of algal shine. Alex was relieved to see the bike had not been lost. Terrified to see Daddy had found it.

It washed up a few yards down. Saw it as I was getting Kools. I've told you before not to play near there. That stream has danger.

Remember how Mommy died? Do you remember how you killed her? Remember for Daddy.

Yes, Daddy.

Come here.

Alex was smart enough by then to know what was coming.

Choose.

Please, Daddy.

Choose, shit head. He took a long, lasting swig of his beer, poured a tall glass of wine, swigged that, and laid out two items Alex had never seen.

Daddy, my hand's better, you don't have to—

This isn't about your goddamn hand. This is about you following my rules and not playing near that stream. Another swig. It dribbled down his thin, pallid body. His dingy overalls absorbed most of what had fallen. It soaked beneath his second

skin like the fur of a grizzly bear, the thicket of dark, coursing chest hair.

Daddy—Alex was biting the inside of his bottom lip, displacing the pain, somewhat, of what was about to come.

Choose!

Alex looked at both. Either one was going to hurt like hell, he knew. But he picked the chisel.

Daddy picked it up with animal indifference.

Now let's see if we can straighten you out. Bring it here.

He began tapping at it, lightly, incessantly, which hurt a thousand times more than the prior fleeting slaps. Tap. Tap... Tap. Tap... Tap. Tap...

Daddy, Daddy!

Remember?

He bit his lip till it bled; till Daddy saw the blood trickling down his chin and made the ignorant connection that he caused some internal damage from chiseling the boy's finger for a minute.

His face was full of sweat. His uneven beard caught most of the salty droplets and he wiped it with his dirtied kerchief that rested idly in front of his overalls. Then, he dabbed at his son's bloodied chin until he left to rive and plane Burlington's pine supply.

That night, Samantha crossed the kitchen and made as much sound as she wanted knowing Daddy was in twilight, and so was the room. She kicked him in the leg with red, fervent anger. A cloud of wood-dust plumed up from beneath his overalls. He remained motionless.

She held a blue duffel bag full of Alex's clothes and a small teddy bear he fought with and made tea for. She was angry with herself. The bicycle she gave to Alex was intended to eradicate his seclusion and to get him away from pain. Instead it caused a new set of trouble. *Christ, that finger—the permanent fuck-you—What will the Potames say?* She worried, as she hurriedly dressed Alex in the middle of the night—his finger conducting a symphony of nighttime air. *Why did you have to go and do that to your finger, Alex, why?*

Sammy, where are we going? Alex barely slept anymore, his voice sounded blue and soporific.

You're going away from here. You're going away. You like the Potames, right Alex? You like Mr. Potame, don't you Alex?

Yes, Sammy. You're talking me there?

He was only going next door, just over the river, to the ends of the earth.

The Potames became better parents to him than Daddy ever was. They housed him for two years, home-schooled him for two years, loved him for longer, just next-door. But Daddy, too drunk and too lazy to ever know, never crossed the river. Samantha was happy for him, happy for the river between them.

On the first day, Mrs. Potame proffered a popsicle from the freezer. She kept a ready supply for her grandchildren:

Here you are, Alex. You can have one of these before we sit down for dinner.

Thank you Mrs. Potame—

You call me Jincy, Alex, Jincy. I don't want you to think I'm a teacher of yours or a lady that you're expected to stand for after she enters a room. I'll be like your aunt. Aunt Jincy.

I never had any aunts. Alex said, almost sorrowfully.

Well, we'll just pretend I'm your much-older sister, then. When she laughed, Alex couldn't help but remember the few times he had heard his mother's laugh. Both were illumined and brisk, every tooth accounted for.

I eat this? Alex asked.

My, haven't you ever had a popsicle before? Mrs. Potames' kitchen was red and full of light. Alex almost smelled the apples blooming boundlessly behind him. The Potames' backyard was full of apple trees. They used the river to irrigate their soil. Alex wasn't allowed to play there until Mr. Potame had built a fence, hiding him from Daddy's view when he chopped wood for the winter.

Alex examined the popsicle when Mrs. Potame handed it to him.

That's right, Alex. You hold it between your fingers, like this. When Alex did so, he inadvertently flicked off Mrs.

Potame.

She knew, though. Samantha explained to them what had happened the day before in the stream. But, nonetheless, Mrs. Potame instinctively felt embarrassed and clutched her chest, gasping briefly.

That's just how my hand is, Mrs. Potame.

I know, Alex, I know.

Alex embraced the welcomed and kind understanding Mrs. Potame tenderly conveyed.

Then you just lick the frozen juice until you're left with nothing but a stick. We can make art with the leftover sticks when we have enough. Would you like that, Alex? She said, knowing, then, that she was expressing something upon him that she knew hadn't been expressed for a long time: maternity.

Yes, Mrs. Potame.

Jincy.



It was expected for two years. She had been diagnosed with acute leukemia only a few months after Alex arrived. It was a very anticipated, quiet death. Unanticipated, however, that Alex saw her die. She was breathing rapidly, clutching at her chest when Alex entered her bedroom. He was holding his grizzily bear he fought with and made tea for. She looked like she had always looked to Alex, but thinner, much, much thinner. She wore the floral nightgown she had been wearing since she had become bedridden and anemic.

Flowers everywhere.

Alex, dear, can you get Frank, for me? She said without any fuss.

When Mr. Potame approached her, Alex was still in the room. He sat in the fuzzily lit corner where Mr. Potame and Alex constructed model boats from the leftover popsicle sticks and tucked his feet beneath his tiny thighs.

Mr. Potame tenderly grabbed her hand. Her eyes grew wider. So did his. It reminded Alex of the sun, in the morning, bursting, startlingly, from the tops of her apple orchards. It was

her piercing brightness, elucidating the room with quiet grace. He said nothing. But her gaze remained unremittingly clear. His eyes darted about the room trying to fix on something lifeless.

But Mr. Potame and Alex stayed with her until the last breath of her soul wisped from her soft, wrinkled lips, a flower-ruffling breeze.

With his puffed eyes covered by his weak, arthritic hand he swallowed what little saliva he had left in his mouth. He told Alex that night, after he got off the phone with his children and grandchildren. Alex was resting on his bony thigh; he wrapped his finger around Mr. Potames' sweater. They rocked back and forth. His face was covered. A single tear dropped onto Alex's cheek, making it appear as though he were crying.

You can't stay here anymore. Mr. Potame said. He didn't even cry.



The first day of Alex's arrival to Burlington's only orphanage Sister Carol, the head nun, spanked him. It was quite justified, on account of his finger.

We don't tolerate that kind of behavior here, Alex. She apologized afterwards as if she were receiving the spanking. Her eyes seemed to carry a clandestine burden after that day, though she always managed to forget about his finger, chiding the way he held a fork or prayed before supper.

Alex was 12 and had trouble making friends. But he did meet the most beautiful orphan in the world—Rose.

Considering every woman in his life, however, had either died or left him, reservations behooved him about accepting his immediate feelings for this one.

Part of Rose's disgrace was that she never turned out to be the right girl for Alex. But there was more to it. The real problem was that she carried the kind of qualities that reminded him of his insecurities.

The second week at St. Joseph's was when he met her. She came to him on the most uneventful of Wednesdays. Hump Day, as little Helmore Jones would yell every hour or so, scratching his scalp.

It was in class—while he learned about Bishop Laval of Quebec going to Vermont, bestowing the honor of the first episcopal visitation and ministrations in New England—when he saw her enter the room. She wore a scar on her face that began at the tip of her distal mouth and reached beneath the lobe of her left ear.

She was beautiful.

Her eyes were like sapphire diamonds, concentric. They beamed towards Alex, against the salty sunlight of Burlington harbor.

During the years that followed, Jesuit and other missionaries traversed the State and left the evidences of their zeal in the converted Indians and the Catholic settlers in many villages that had—Sister Carol was interrupted by Rose, the angel.

Excuse me, Sister Carol. Rose handed her a note. She looked at it as her glasses slowly slid to the edge of her nose.

Alex, Nurse Joyce needs to see you. Go with Rose. Alex's face turned red. His chest warmed slightly. He forgot where he was sitting when he slowly rose.

Hump Day! Yelled Helmore. *Huuuuump Day!*

When they left the room Alex swiftly put away his finger. He rested it behind him, near the dip of his back.

What are you hiding? Rose asked.

No, nothing.

What's behind your back?

Just my hand.

What's your hand hiding?

Nothing. Alex knew he couldn't keep this from her forever. He thought ahead. Months ahead. Dating Rose.

Kissing her lips, his middle finger caressing her punitive, pruned scar.

There must be something, Alex. When she said his name, delight pierced him.

I don't know if you want to see it. Alex said.

Is it bad?

I don't know.

Let me just see it, Alex. She pushed a few strands of her auburn hair forward. Curtaining, somewhat, the pink curvature of her scar.

Alex was enraptured; his blood coursed a little faster.

Okay, he swung his right hand in front of Rose.

What? What is it? She squinted, expecting something tangible to appear from his hand.

My finger. Alex curled his four fingers, revealing his unbending middle one. Even after three years the bottom knuckle was nearly twice the size of the others. Alex wished for it to fall off.

Oh. How did it happen? Rose asked.

The stream, then Daddy.

Uncle did this. She brushed away her hair and ran her finger along the scarred trail on her face.

He leaned in, unnoticeably, just a few inches, to smell the breeze of her hair. It smelled like rosehips. Alex wanted to nuzzle his face between her scar and the small of her jaw.

You have lice, Alex. Nurse Joyce said, sanitarily cocking Alex's head from left to right.

But how? Alex was more embarrassed than he was shocked. Rose stood not five feet from where he was being examined.

Well, you might have gotten it from somebody. Can you think of anyone? Nurse Joyce asked.

Then it came to him. The boy who slept next to him in the dim annex of St. Jo's South Wing—the constant scratchings of little Helmore Jones.

That prick! Alex yelled. *Helmore Jones!*

Alex! Nurse Joyce drummed his head with her lice-examining sticks. *We'll just have to take care of both of you, then. Rose, please go get him. These boys need to be shaved and washed.*

What was so vexing to Alex was that he never felt the urge to itch. Helmore kept him up nights by the static his nails made against his scalp. But as both of them sat there and

watched clippings of their hair feather down to the floor—the air of embarrassment, Helmore Jones bawling after each snip—it was more than enough vengeance for Alex.

The only true itch, the discrepancy, he began feeling was in the outer walls of his heart. Embarrassment and love were so well twined inside Alex; he always managed to confuse the two.

Rose, he thought, found this maddening, so there was no need for him to ever even speak to her again. But the next night, as Alex sat, baldheaded and meek, reading next to Helmore in the South Wing's library, Rose approached him and ran her hand against his head and swiftly went to bed. It felt like a thousand tiny pins swinging like children on his glossy crown, singing Rose's name forwards and backwards.

My god. Helmore Jones grinned. *What was that about?*

I don't know. Alex grinned even larger. He flipped the page with the finger. The vainglory of desire or the discomfiture of self-doubt? Embarrassment or love? It kept him up at night.

Since he couldn't sleep, he masturbated, pretending to be asleep. Deceptively snoring, so the other orphans—especially Helmore Jones—wouldn't hear his thrusts beneath the woolen sheets. *Huuuuuuump Day!*

He was still a novice when it came to that. He had done it infrequently since he had arrived to St. Jo's—trying to fill his head with thoughts of how the naked female body possibly looked. It was quite exaggerated, really. Alex had trouble with proportions, which was probably why he was so bad at arithmetic. But he thought of Rose the following nights. He thought of Rose in class, at mealtime, when he brushed his

teeth, when he gardened the orphanage, when he talked to her. When he was expelled.



Alex told Rose about his mother the night Lucius the Rwandan and Helmore Jones found out they were being adopted by the interracial rainbow family with a thirst for hellraisers. A secret he had kept even from Sister Carol.

They were 17.

While there was still perceptible tension in their cautious relationship, there was also a sexual inevitability that had not yet been explored. They were at the South Wing library when the entire orphanage was asleep. They didn't bother to turn on the lights. The broad gleaming moon beneath the latent calm of Lake Champlain illuminated the room with blue.

She was aware of what was growing in her stomach but she refused to tell us. It was a reason for her to be maternal again, I guess. She tried hiding it for the first few months, but—She joked with me: 'you may have another brother to play with, Alex.' But I was costly enough, Daddy said. Another Alex, he thought, would set us back. She carried it until the fourth month I think it was. Then she drowned in the stream. It was the burden that killed her. Daddy found her. Dragged her out. Buried her in our yard, behind the oak tree he cut down the previous summer. Blamed me for what she had done. Alex finally said, exhaustedly, trying to remember what his heart had already forgotten. He looked down at his malformed middle finger, checking to see if Rose was looking at it too.

When he glanced over, her eyes were magnified, somewhat, by the tears that welled up inside of them. She scooted over, closer to Alex, and buried her head in his thigh. She squeezed his leg until Alex had to pry her away.

Don't let it bother you. I'm fine. I'm—

You know it wasn't your fault. Rose put her head against his chest and warmed it with her breath. Alex hid his hand. I know, he said.

Why would your father say those things? There was a shrill awe in her voice.

Because he was an asshole. He pushed Rose away from him. *He should've fucking died, not Mom. She was—Anyways, you wanted to know, so there, now you know.* He sounded blameful. He got up and was about to leave the empty South Wing library when Rose stopped him. She turned his shoulder forward and kissed him.

Do you remember her? She asked.

I try not to.

She brought Alex closer to her and pressed him against her chest. Rose's scar never appeared to change. Her face had changed. Her body had changed. It had grown more beautiful after each night. But her scar remained permanent. There was no new skin. There was no change in color. It remained the same pinkish stream that Alex fell in love with the day he saw her enter Sister Carol's classroom.

He didn't know where to go from here. He kept kissing her and caressing her and then he stopped. He felt as though he shouldn't do this. As though it should not be done.

What, what is it? Rose asked, breathlessly.

Let's not do this, huh?

Why not?

I don't know, let's not.

You always say that, Alex. You don't even give a reason. At least give me a reason. Rose impatiently said. She finally mustered what courage she had: *I love you, Alex. For five years, Alex, five years and you've never told me how you feel. What you're thinking. I want to help you Alex. You're stuck, I know. I know because I've been stuck. But you're the person that makes me unstuck. Everything that your Dad did is done. Why can't you break free from that?*

There was a taut silence in the room that could have been cut with a spoon.

What, what is it you want me to say? He asked.

I always try and get close to you but you—you always push me away. You never talk about your feelings. You never express what I expect. It's like you're afraid of me. What's the matter? Is it me?

No, of course not.

Then what, Alex?

I don't know! I don't know, okay?

Just tell me—tell me you love me. Rose inhaled as much dusty library air as she could. *Alex?*

The room was well lit with an azure fluorescence that made Rose's eyes glow. He approached her swiftly and met his face with hers. Her cheeks were damp. They glistened against the twilight. They tasted forgiving and ferric. And then he left the room.

By the time Rose dropped to her knees and covered her head, Alex was far enough away to not hear her sobbing. Her

tears tasted forgiving and ferric and he went and brushed his teeth. He didn't even cry.

Alex fought Lucius the Rwandan the next day, their last day. He was wearing his red sweater for Sister Carol. They had just finished lunch when she sent Lucius the Rwandan up to his quarters to clear his things and get packed. The rainbow family's AstroVan was to be outside of the orphanage a little after 3:00.

All Alex wanted was to be excused to go to the bathroom, he wasn't angry that Lucius the Rwandan was going to have a new family, or at the fact they chose Lucius the Rwandan over him. But when Lucius the Rwandan saw Alex's raised hand up near his face he pretended to take it the wrong way—a final comedic goodbye to the Rwandan from Imbazi:

No, fuck you! I ainna gonnabe madefunof! Lucius the Rwandan jokingly laughed.

No, fuck you! Alex yelled unexpectedly. He thought of Rose. Then Daddy. Then his pseudo-fist locked bones with Lucius the Rwandan's cheek. Then Lucius the Rwandan punched Alex in the ear. Then Alex poked Lucius the Rwandan in the eye with his finger. Then Lucius the Rwandan smashed Alex's head on the wooden dinner table. Then Alex kicked Lucius the Rwandan's knee in. He heard a snap. And Sister Carol fainted. Nurse Joyce heard the raucous from her office and rushed to the dining room with a badminton racket. Her feet barely left the ground when she bonked Alex over the head. But he saw stars until Sister Carol came to and pulled him in her office and closed the door behind him and dropped her

head onto the net of her fingers and told him in a quavering voice: *You can't stay here anymore.*

He took the 3:00 bus northbound the same time Helmore Jones and Lucius the Rwandan were boarding the rainbow family's van. They made eye contact, or lack there of. Lucius the Rwandan's eye was patched as he crutched over to the inside of the van. *Fucking pirate*, Alex said under his breath. Helmore Jones gave Alex a distant salute and, with that, they were gone. Two more colors of the rainbow. Alex stepped inside the bus and sat down near the back. He rested his head against the window and saw Rose standing outside the orphanage looking as beautiful as ever. He pressed his hand on the glass and smiled. She lit up and ran inside, thanking God, thanking God, thanking God.

Alex had collected all of Samantha's letters he received every other week. She told him when she left Daddy. She told him when she moved to Canada. She told him when she became engaged. She told him when she got pregnant. She invited him up to Canada whenever he felt the urge to go. But he was anxious to see Mr. Potame before he decided to make any other plans.

When Alex stepped out of the bus he thanked the driver and flung his blue duffel bag over his shoulder. He carried books, clothes, a few apples, Samantha's letters, pictures of him and Rose, and his teddy bear he fought with and made tea for.

When he found himself standing on the bridge directly in between the house he loved and the house he hated, his belongings dropped onto the pavement. Two humble clouds

blanketed the dim gibbous moon, they crept passed its ephemeral light with an ominous swoosh. Alex squinted to see if there was anyone in the Potames' home. He saw a figure that skulked past the window. He hadn't even looked at Daddy's house until he heard a faint crack of wood in the backyard. It sounded like someone was chopping. His blood turned cold. The base of his stomach snuck up to the lining of his heart. The river kept running. He headed towards home, following the cracking din as it became louder.

Crack.

Alex followed the stream. It led him to the backyard.

Crack.

The night was darker than normal.

Crack.

A work light was attached to the outer brick of the house. It illuminated, only, the oak tree stump—where Daddy was chopping—his wife's grave.

Crack.

Alex crept slowly to the light.

Crack.

The stream grew louder and muffled the noise.

Crack.

Alex stopped. He stood and examined Daddy—before Daddy even knew Alex was watching him.

Crack.

Daddy put down the axe and wiped his forehead with the dirtied kerchief that still rested idly in his overall's front pocket. Tufts of grey hair glistened on the sides of his head. They crashed onto the shores of his ears. He finally noticed Alex.

Who's that standing there in my yard? He asked.

Alex froze. His thoughts cracked against his head.

Crack. Crack. Crack.

Show yourself! Daddy shaded his eyes from the work light for a better look.

When Alex stepped into the spotlight, he felt an uneasy warming that, seconds later, chilled him to the bone. He eyed the axe that rested on the tree stump next to Daddy's feet. Crack. Crack. Crack...Crack. Crack. Crack.

Who are you? Daddy asked malevolently.

Daddy. Alex came closer. Crack. Crack. Crack.

Who are you, I say? Daddy screamed.

Crack. Crack. Crack. Crack. Crack. Crack.

Alex picked up the axe. He didn't realize what he was doing until it had already been done. Crack!

The sound of Daddy's head splitting was barely audible. The stream became louder than anything Alex had ever heard. It was soothing.

Daddy dropped. A few seconds later, Alex dropped the axe and fell to his knees. They became moist atop the hot viscous blood the earth was slowly sopping. He bent over Daddy's face and made sure he was dead. He squeezed a handful of blood-congealing soot in his hand and buried part of his stiff middle finger. He had to fight back the titters. He did this by making himself stare right into Daddy's red eyes. His eyelids were twitching, making the blood from his head course faster onto the soft, wet grass. His final breath was a quick, liquefied lungful of blood and alcohol.

Alex cried.

Tears streamed down his face. His middle finger was buried, still, beneath the cool, numbing soil of his yard. He eyed the axe again. Its cutting edge was alive with his father's blood. Crack. Crack. Crack. Crack. Crack. Crack. He grabbed it by its handle and struck his buried finger.

Crack!

The first appearance of the axe's sharp bevel slicing his skin, then into the bone, set off a crackling chain of neurotransmissions. They surged a strange memory, by happenstance, calling to life a winter evening when Alex was three:

His mother, Samantha and Alex are outside in the yard long enough to forget their hands have feeling. They are playing a game their mother invented. They bury their hands in the snow and when she yells *Stream!* they form long curves, diverting a shallow river-like route that goes around their yard. Their paths never cross, until their mother yells *Home!* and Samantha and Alex race to her with their hands still rending through the packed New England snow. Alex makes it to mother first and is greeted with a frozen kiss against his red, blushing cheek.

The axe was already stuck in the ground. Alex ran his four remaining fingers through the confetti of woodchips and soil and whispered to himself as he drew curves, up and down: *Stream*—it couldn't help but grow.

He stumbled over to the river, the very river that birthed his finger, and put his bloodied hand into the water. It stung like alcohol. This wasn't good enough. He needed his hand to

be bandaged so he crossed the river and knocked on Mr. Potames' door.

When he finally answered, slowly getting up from his living room chair to see who's at the door through the window, Alex had fainted. He immediately recognized Alex then called the police, dialing those three numbers with a delayed sense of urgency.

The phone trembled as he spoke.