In The Orchard

By Karin Lin-Greenberg

In the orchard, Jonas walks cautiously, trying not to step on any fallen apples. His wife walks a few steps in front of him and lists reason after reason for leaving Manhattan and moving upstate. She tells him they can afford to buy the orchard. She stops and points at the country store at the end of a row of Granny Smiths and says, "I could run the store, sell pies and apple cider. I could write my cookbook here. And you could set up a practice in town."

Jonas shakes his head, but he does it so gently he is unsure if Molly can even detect the movement. He does not like to deny Molly anything, but he needs to tell her no, she cannot have this place. This is not the right place to settle, to raise a family. She is pregnant with their first child, and he knows she is imagining their child racing around this wide expanse of land. She has some fairytale notion of the place, and when she'd seen that this orchard—right here in the town where Jonas had grown up—was for sale, she'd insisted they take a weekend trip up.

"There's nothing here for us," Jonas says. His parents are buried in the cemetery on Johnston Lane, but he can come back to visit their graves without living here. It's been twenty-three years since he lost his mother and only two years since his father died. His father had a fatal heart attack in Tampa, where he'd gone to retire, and Jonas had to take care of the arrangements to transport his father's body back to New York for the burial. His father hadn't left a will, but Jonas hoped he would have wanted to be buried next to his wife instead of in a graveyard in Florida.

A familiar gray pickup truck rolls by on Winnaker Road, past the eastern edge of the orchard, and Jonas looks away. He turns and walks down the path of grass between two rows of Cortlands, and Molly follows, still talking about what their life could be here. She says, "The fall, oh my God, I bet the fall is beautiful here." He knows what kind of life she is picturing: he'll give up his job at the law firm in the city and become a small-town lawyer, practicing every kind of law that's needed, always willing to do pro bono work for the sick and the poor and the elderly. Molly has been talking about quitting her job in publishing for months now. She's been working as an editor for twelve years. She has been editing cookbooks and thinks she can write her own. She's already bought a large, expensive camera and has signed herself up for night classes at the New School so she can learn to take gorgeous pictures of her food. She says she's going to start a cooking blog, build up followers, and then they'll all buy her cookbook.

"A swing," she says. She stops and points at a tree with a sturdy branch extended above her head. "Right here. Wouldn't this branch be perfect for a swing?"

"I don't think a swing is a good idea on a tree that bears fruit. The kid will get conked on the head if they get the momentum going." Jonas wants to leave, to get back in their rental car and drive straight back to the city. He wants to pull on Molly's arm and drag her away from this place.

"Well, there are other trees on the property. Plenty of them. We'll choose another one for the swing. It would be nice to have a swing right here, to not have to go to a city park, to not have to wait your turn for a few minutes on a dirty swing."

"There's something to be learned from waiting. From sharing," Jonas says.

Molly doesn't respond, heads off the path, moving to the wooded area beyond the orchard.

"You don't need to find a tree right this second, do you?" Jonas says.

"I'm just looking," Molly calls. She's not that far from him, maybe a hundred yards, but already her voice sounds distant, foggy, unrecoverable.

2006

Jonas's father's upholstery shop has burned down and now Jonas is driving upstate to help him sort through the wreckage. It is not altogether a surprise to Jonas that this has happened. His father has always been a smoker; Jonas can barely conjure an image of his father without a cigarette hanging out of his mouth. All those cigarettes and all that fabric in the shop have always seemed like a dangerous combination. He thinks of the ugly brown plastic ashtrays that were all over his father's shop, one or two on every flat surface. After Jonas's mother died when he was thirteen, after the oxygen tanks had been removed from their home, Jonas's father's ashtrays had appeared throughout the house, two on the kitchen table, one on top

of the TV, one, strangely, tucked into the soil of an overgrown fern in the living room.

Jonas turns up the music on the stereo and blasts the air-conditioning and points the vents so they blow the hair straight up off his forehead. He looks at his cell phone, but there are no messages. He and Molly have been dating for two months, and when she'd heard about his father's shop, she'd wanted to go upstate with him. She hasn't met his father yet, and Jonas doesn't want this to be their first meeting. He told her it would be better for him to go alone, and he's worried now that he's upset her. What he likes best about Molly is how neat her life is. Her life seems uncomplex in a way that is foreign and appealing to Jonas. He has already met Molly's family twice. The first time was at her grandmother's ninety-third birthday party, and the second time was when Molly's older sister had her baby. Jonas had been reluctant, saying that maybe this was an occasion just for family. But Molly had insisted, and he'd stood in the hospital room clutching a stuffed elephant by its trunk, and Molly's sister, Nicole, had smiled warmly at him. "Come," she said, patting the edge of her hospital bed. "Sit. Let me get a look at the guy Molly can't stop talking about."

He'd perched on the edge of the bed, vigilant not to touch or squish Nicole, who cradled the baby in her arms.

"I brought an elephant," Jonas said, even though it was obvious that he'd brought an elephant, and then he didn't know where to set it down.

"Look," Nicole said to the baby, "it's your Uncle Jonas."

Jonas wanted to tell the baby he could just call him Jonas. How could Nicole be so certain at such an early juncture in his relationship with Molly that he was worthy of being called an uncle? But this family was open and trusting and kind. They seemed blessed in every way: everyone was healthy, everyone lived to ripe old ages, everyone got along. Molly, as far as Jonas could tell, had no skeletons in her closet, no darkness. Other women he'd dated had secrets that would eventually come tumbling out. An eating disorder. A rift with a sibling so deep that nothing could repair it. A plagiarized senior thesis in college. A childhood habit of stealing from drugstores that would reemerge during especially stressful times. But there was nothing with Molly. Just a happy childhood and then a happy adulthood. Jonas wants to be around this, wants to absorb the goodness and happiness that seem to emanate from her. He doesn't want to take her home, not yet, doesn't want her to meet his father with his wheezy cough, a charred shop, and an ever-growing collection of plastic ashtrays.

From a block away, he can smell the smoky aftermath of the fire even though it's been two days since the fire was extinguished. When he gets closer, he sees the shop; it still stands but looks hollow, blackened. Parked outside the shop is a gray pickup truck with Turner Exterminators stenciled on the side. Jonas rushes out of his car. He is shaking as he runs through the open door of the shop. Standing in the middle of the shop is Cody Turner, whom Jonas has known since kindergarten. Cody has never left town, has stayed and taken over his father's extermination business. He is wearing blue coveralls like auto mechanics wear and is standing in a puddle of grayish water in the middle of the room, a halfway charred spool of fabric in his hands.

"What are you doing here?" Jonas says. What is this—looting? Is Cody trying to pick what's valuable out of the charred skeleton of a shop?

"Welcome home, Jonas," Cody says. There is no emotion in his voice, just flatness. "I told your father I'd see if there was anything worth saving here."

"My father knew I was coming home," Jonas says. "I told him I'd help him."

"Maybe he got tired of waiting," Cody says. He steps out of the puddle and places the bolt of fabric he'd been holding onto a metal desk in the corner of the room. There are about a dozen halfway burned bolts of fabric piled on the desk. There is also one of those goddamn plastic ashtrays, melted over the edge of the desk, cascading downward and stopping a few inches from the ground. It reminds Jonas of the image of Salvador Dalí's melting clocks that he'd studied in an art history class in college.

"What are you going to do with this fabric?" Jonas says, stepping around blackened remnants of a wooden table where his father measured cloth.

"You think this thing still works?" says Cody, lifting an ancient sewing machine out of a puddle. "Nah, right? Once water gets in there, the mechanisms are probably broken. I can take it home, though, try to fix it up. I'll bring it back to your pops if I can get it going again."

"You and my dad are buddies now?" Jonas says. He feels a twinge of jealousy, even though he and his father were never

close. Jonas hardly ever visits his father anymore. He'll come home for Christmas, send a card and the cheesecake from Junior's that he knows his father likes for his birthday, but Jonas loves his life in the city, likes the friends who feel more like family than his father does. His father is alone and Cody is alone; neither have family left in this town. So maybe there is some sense to their pairing.

"Yeah," Cody says, "you know when we started talking? At the Businessmen's Association. I guess you could say that we have a lot in common, both of us guys that work with our hands."

Jonas bristles. Early on he'd decided that he didn't want a job that involved physical labor, where he'd come home covered with a day's worth of sweat, where his clothes would be stained, where callouses would thicken on his fingers. He knows his father was proud of him when he graduated from law school, but he knows that pride was tinged with a sense of loss because at that moment it became certain that Jonas would never take over the family business.

"You want to hear something funny? Your pops, he tried to get me to learn how to upholster. He said it be better for me to learn how to fix stuff, to make something old look new, instead of killing animals."

"What did you say?" Jonas thinks of his father running some strange apprenticeship in his shop with Cody as his protégé.

"I told him I wasn't killing animals. I was killing pests. No one needs a pretty couch. But people need the groundhogs who are digging up their foundation killed."

"You're performing a service," Jonas says, but he can tell that Cody doesn't catch the sarcasm in his voice.

"To tell you the truth," Cody says, "I think your pops was getting tired of it all. He wasn't busy. People like their Walmart furniture, couches they put out on the curb after a few years."

"You're saying this fire was a good thing?"

"I'm saying that maybe there were some suspicious circumstances surrounding the fire. The insurance money, you know, is more than he'd make in a few years. After our Businessmen's Association meetings we'd go to McSurly's and drink beer and he'd tell me stuff. Like how his arthritis was acting up, how his fingers hurt, how he wasn't sure how much longer he could do this."

"You think my father set his own shop on fire?"

"It was a trap to him," Cody says. He bends down, picks something up, holds it in the light that is streaming in from outside. It's a pen, and Cody tosses it back on the ground. "He wanted to leave New York, go somewhere warm. Florida. He just needed enough money to do it. And now he'll get it when he gets the insurance payment."

Jonas looks at a calendar on the wall. Although the pages are covered in a fine black dust, they are not burned, and he can see that his father has drawn an X through each day of the month, up to two days ago. Cody lights a cigarette, inhales deeply. Jonas thinks of Molly and wonders what she would make of all of this.

"Did he talk about Florida a lot?" Jonas had no idea his father wanted to leave. He had no idea his father's arthritis was bad enough that he was in daily pain. When Jonas was younger, his father complained about his "creaky bones" but said it was nothing he couldn't handle.

"All the time. He even showed me some brochure for an apartment building there where everyone had to be over fifty-five. Palm trees. Pool. All of that. You know, me and him, one week we took a road trip down there?" He points outside at his gray truck. "We got in that truck and took turns driving and we went and checked that apartment building out. The outside of that building, it was painted pink."

"You went on a road trip with my dad?" Jonas says.

Cody shrugs. "Yeah, so what?" he says.

Jonas thinks of his father and Cody sharing a carton of cigarettes, driving too fast, passing through state after state. He imagines them eating only in greasy spoons along the way, his father consuming the heavy foods the doctor said he should avoid, biscuits slathered with gravy, fried chicken, pie. "Did you like Florida?" Jonas asks.

"I thought it was okay. Too hot. I like it here. Your dad, though, he loved it. We saw a flamingo there, and I told him I didn't

even know they were for real. I thought there were just those plastic ones. He thought that was funny."

Jonas has never considered that his father would want to leave this town and this shop. Cody walks to a corner of the store and stacks up books of fabric patterns, which are wet. "Useless," Cody says, tossing them into a pile on the floor near the discarded pen. Jonas watches Cody move around the shop, observes the way he has taken charge of things, and is struck by a thought: what if Cody set the fire? It would have been easy, tilting an ashtray with a burning cigarette on it onto a pile of cloth. It was a criminal act, an act of vandalism and destruction, an act, Jonas knows, Cody is fully capable of. But if Cody was the one who set the fire, he is also the one who set Jonas's father free.

1999

Jonas comes home from Middlebury during his spring break, although he'd rather stay holed up in his room, eating Saltines and peanut butter until the dining halls reopen. But he feels this is something a son should do; he should go home a few times each year to make sure his father is okay.

On his first night home, Jonas asks his father about the shop.

"Good," his father says. "Business isn't bad." His father asks Jonas if he's found an apartment in the city yet for when he starts at NYU Law in the fall.

"Not yet," Jonas says. "I've still got some time."

"It's expensive downstate," Jonas's father says, and Jonas nods.

It is just the two of them at home, and they don't have much to say to each other. Mostly, his father is gone, at his shop, and when he comes home, he collapses into his chair in front of the television, shovels food into his mouth, and then goes to bed a few hours later. Each night they eat frozen dinners.

On the third day of his visit, Jonas has grown restless and after dinner asks his father if he can come to the shop the next day to watch him work.

"Not much to see," his father says. "You'd be bored."

"I wouldn't mind it."

"You'd just watch me work?"

"I could help if you want."

"Nah," says his father, and he laughs. "You're going to be a lawyer. You don't want to do this kind of work."

Jonas feels guilty. When he was younger, his father had often asked him if he wanted to learn the trade, but he always shrugged off his father, saying he had too much homework or that he'd rather read a book or watch a movie or go out with his friends. And then, once his mother got sick, he'd tell his father he would stay home and sit with her, keep her company. But, really, he just hadn't wanted to go to the shop. Maybe this, now, is punishment for all those times.

"You know what you could do?" Jonas's father says. "How about you cook us dinner? I don't know how long it's been since I've had a home cooked meal."

Jonas nods. "I could do that," he says, even though he's not really a cook.

"You know where the grocery store is? Down Hilltop, right at the light, then go down three blocks."

"I know, Dad." Jonas is annoyed that his father has given him directions, as if he is a stranger here, a newcomer. "You want anything in particular?"

His father thinks for a moment then says, "Could you roast a chicken? I always loved your mother's roast chicken. Maybe some potatoes? What else did we have with the chicken?"

"Broccoli," Jonas says.

"Yes, right, broccoli. Here," his father says, standing up from the couch, reaching into his back pocket for his wallet, then handing Jonas forty dollars, "take this."

In the kitchen, Jonas finds an old cookbook he remembers his mother using, and he flips through it until he'd finds a recipe for roasted chicken. His mother jotted notes in the margins about rubbing dried sage and thyme on the chicken's skin before roasting. He is twenty-one now and his mother has been gone for eight years, and yet there are moments when he is stopped by the sadness he carries over her death. Looking at her scribbled notes in the cookbook makes his chest ache. He doesn't know how not to be angry with his father for his mother's death. She said her emphysema was caused by fumes she'd breathed in during twenty-five years of working at the textile factory, but Jonas blames his father's smoking. Even when he learned of her illness, his father didn't stop smoking; he just didn't smoke near her. But Jonas could smell the smoke still clinging to his hair and clothes.

At the supermarket, Jonas walks down the frozen food aisle, opens a freezer door, and takes out a frozen dinner. He looks at the long list of ingredients. He looks at the unpronounceable chemicals and wonders how much of his father's body is now filled with these chemicals. Maybe he should feel sorry for his father, but he does not. After Jonas's mother died, his father could have learned to cook simple, basic meals. But instead they subsisted on cereal and sandwiches. And now all these frozen dinners.

Jonas steers the shopping cart up and down each aisle. He needs to buy everything; his father's kitchen doesn't contain any ingredients, just prepackaged meals. He buys salt and pepper, spices, butter, olive oil, flour. Jonas is almost certain his father will not make use of these ingredients once he leaves and goes back to school.

* * *

The chicken is dry and bland and doesn't taste like the roasted chicken his mother used to make. How had she kept the meat so moist? Jonas wishes he'd had more time with her; she could have taught him so many things. If she were still alive, things would be different at home. He would want to come home over breaks.

"You did a good job," Jonas's father says, but Jonas knows this is not true. The chicken is dry, the potatoes are burnt, the broccoli is soggy.

"It's terrible," Jonas says. He wonders if his father's taste buds have been completely annihilated by all the smoking and the chemicals in his microwaved dinners.

His father spears a large piece of chicken on his fork and says, "Beats frozen dinners."

"You could cook, you know," Jonas says. He realizes he's nearly yelling. He hates the way his father lives, stagnating in this town. "You don't *have* to eat frozen dinners." He gets up from the couch, drops his full plate on the kitchen counter, and charges into his bedroom, where he changes into sweatpants, a sweatshirt, and sneakers. It is cold tonight, so he pulls on a wool hat, a pair of gloves.

"Going for a run?" his father calls out as Jonas slams through the front door. Jonas does not respond. He runs on the side of the road. Although it is March, there is still a chill in the air, and tonight a layer of fog has settled near the ground. Jonas imagines he's running through clouds. After all, aren't clouds and fog the same thing? Water vapor? He runs hard, down the road and into the apple orchard. The grass in the orchard is damp, and the fog hangs on the trees like blankets draped over the lower branches. It is eerie, cold, and Jonas runs faster, trying to warm up, puffs of breath coming out of his mouth. He looks at his breath, the fog, thinks of his father's smoke filling the house. All of it makes him feel lightheaded, as if he's navigating through a dream.

He sees something hanging from a tree, a fog-drenched shadow. He jogs closer and sees that it is a man wearing work boots, tattered jeans, a flannel shirt, and a denim jacket who has been hung from a thick branch of one of the apple trees. He moves closer and finds that he is not afraid. Maybe it's because of this dreamy, foggy world he's in right now. When Jonas gets within a few feet of the dead man, he smells a combination of urine and alcohol. The man is unkempt, unshaven, with greasy hair. Then Jonas realizes who it is: it is Albert Turner, his classmate Cody's father. He is the town drunk. He owns an exterminating business, but everyone knows that Cody has been handling most of the work since he was about fourteen. Often, he didn't come to school, and sometimes Jonas would see him driving his father's truck around town, his father slumped in the passenger's seat. Cody drove the truck long before he could legally have a license.

Mr. Turner's hands are behind his back, and when Jonas steps closer, he sees that they've been bound together. The knot is complicated, and Jonas knows there is no way Mr. Turner could have tied this knot himself. It seems to be a signature, a

sign that someone else was here. But what does it matter? A man is dead, whether he did this himself or someone did it to him. Jonas unties the knot. It takes him a minute to figure out how to undo the complicated twists and ties. He's grateful that he's got gloves on, a hat, that he won't leave behind fingerprints or strands of hair that show he's been here. As he's untying, the sky opens, rain pours down, and soon Jonas is drenched. Rain washes over the orchard, and Jonas knows that by the morning his footprints will be gone. He will not report the hanging; someone else will find Mr. Turner in the morning. Jonas is glad to see that Mr. Turner has no rope burns on his wrists. He'll hide the wet rope in the garage, and when it dries out, he'll burn it and it'll be no more. When the police find him, they'll think that Mr. Turner chose to end his own life, that his last moments were spent all alone in the orchard. Although Jonas is not sure exactly what has happened here, he is certain there is more to the story than almost anyone in the town will ever know.

1995

Jonas is back home for fall break after six weeks at college. The break is only a few days long and some of his new friends are going camping in the Green Mountains, but Jonas has decided to go back home, check up on his father. He thought maybe his father would treat his return like something special, but two days into his visit, his father continues to go to work, to leave at the crack of dawn, to stay at work until seven or eight. Before college, it was normal for Jonas to be home alone, but now he feels lonely. Maybe it is because he's grown used to having so many people around, eating every meal with his hallmates, studying at crowded tables in the library, falling asleep to his roommate's wheezy breaths.

Jonas decides to go for a run. He's become friends with a boy named Adam on his hall, who runs every morning and had been on the cross-country team in high school. Adam is teaching Jonas how to run, how to hold his head straight, how to move his arms to help propel himself forward.

Jonas leaves his father's house, jogs down the street, heads downtown. He jogs past the convenience store, the apple orchard, the small library, the post office that closes at 2pm every day. Even though everything looks the same, Jonas feels different. His brain feels bigger, as if it has been stretched, pulled, then filled with new information. He has been exposed to so many ideas and books and theories. He has met exciting new people. His roommate colors his hair green with a dye called Manic Panic and plays guitar in a punk band named Atomic Mass Unit; no one from home has green hair, no one from home is in a band.

Jonas hears someone call his name. It is Cody Turner, who is sitting on the steps outside the post office smoking a cigarette. He wears khaki coveralls with his name stitched over the heart, and Jonas wonders why he is not at work. Cody works for his father, who owns an exterminating company. Cody stands up and dusts off his rear. He drops his cigarette and stomps on it with his boot. "Can I run with you?" he asks.

"It might be hard to run in those boots," Jonas says, but Cody shrugs.

So Jonas runs again, and Cody jogs next to him. Jonas is surprised. Cody has no trouble keeping up, even in the boots. In fact, it seems like Cody is slowing himself down so Jonas can keep up. When they run together, Adam jogs in place, takes extra small steps in order to let Jonas catch up. It feels the same running with Cody, as if Jonas is holding him back.

"I know where we can get drunk. For free," says Cody.

Jonas laughs. "It's ten o'clock in the morning." He doesn't want to get drunk, and he certainly doesn't want to get drunk with Cody.

"So?" Cody says.

Jonas thinks about the people from high school he'd rather hang out with. Sarah Lowell, his girlfriend senior year, is at Skidmore and didn't come home for break because she has too much homework. Ned Stoll, who was Jonas's co-captain on the debate team, is at SUNY Oneonta, but his break is a week later. None of the friends he wants to see are home right now, so maybe Cody is his only option for companionship.

"Follow me," Cody says. They jog back through town and into the apple orchard. Cody leads Jonas through the orchard, beyond the trees that people are allowed to pick from. Far back, behind all the trees is a wooden shed Jonas has never seen before. It is ramshackle and has no lock on it, and Cody opens the door. Jonas follows him inside. Cody shuts the door behind them. It is dark and the floor is dusty. Cobwebs stretch across the corners of the ceiling. There are a few rakes, some shovels, twists of thick rope, empty bushels, and several coffee cans lined up on the floor filled with nails. On long shelves are glass bottles of a murky brown liquid.

"Cider," says Cody. "These must have been here a long time." He twists open a cap, and the fluid inside hisses. He takes a

long chug then hands the bottle to Jonas. Jonas takes a sip of the fermented cider, then hands the bottle back to Cody. It tastes terrible.

"You don't like it," Cody says.

Jonas shrugs. "Are we supposed to be in here?"

"I found this place when they hired me to kill some raccoons that were overrunning the orchard. I don't think they ever come in here. I think they forgot about this place." Cody drinks some more of the cider and Jonas looks at the one small, opaque window on the side of the shed and wonders if anyone can see them in here. His nose itches from the cobwebs and dust. "I kind of like it in here," Cody says. "It's sort of my secret place."

Jonas wonders why Cody would share his secret place with him. They are not good friends, but then again, Jonas is not sure Cody has any friends. Cody sits down on the floor and crosses his legs, then Jonas does the same.

"What's college like?" Cody says. He finishes one bottle of cider and stands up to get another. He hands Jonas a bottle, but Jonas does not open it.

"It's okay," says Jonas. He is unsure of what else to say. He doesn't know why Cody decided to stay home. He'd managed to graduate from high school, and there must have been some college out there that would have accepted him. And if money is the issue, there are loans. Jonas knows all about loans; he'll be paying them off for decades.

"Like what's good about it?" Cody says.

"Classes are good. The kids on my hall are pretty cool. My dorm room isn't bad." He could go on and on, but he won't. It seems too much like bragging to say that he loves college, loves sitting at a rectangular wooden table and debating with his classmates about the meaning of one line in a poem, sitting in a lecture hall and listening to a brilliant professor discuss geology, which was something he'd once thought was boring. He even loves the dining hall, the endless options, the warm food ready for him at every meal. Other students skip breakfast, but he doesn't. He is amazed by the dining hall, at the amount of food he can pile on his plate, the fact that he can send his tray down a conveyer belt after the meal instead of washing the dishes.

"You miss it here?" Cody asks.

Jonas shrugs. He doesn't miss it, not in the way some of the girls on the floor above his miss their homes, shuffling around the dorm in their slippers, moping in the TV lounge, counting down the days until break, telling everyone who'll listen how homesick they are. Jonas supposes it's good to have a place to call home, but maybe people outgrow their homes, become too different from what they've left behind.

"What's to miss, right?" Cody says. He's finished two bottles of the fermented cider and lets out a long burp. Then he pulls his shirt up so Jonas can see his abdomen. It's bruised, like he's gotten into a terrible fight. "My dad did this."

"My God," Jonas says. He thinks of the woman from the counseling center who'd come to speak to the freshmen in his dorm. Students from all three floors gathered in the dorm lounge and ate Oreos one of the RAs had brought. The woman from the counseling center told them that if they were having problems they should come speak to someone, and she handed out magnets with the counseling center's phone number on them. "Did you get in a fight with him?"

Cody laughs. "A fight? Didn't you notice the bruises I'd have when I was a kid. A black eye. My arm in a sling. Did you think I was just clumsy?"

"I guess I did," Jonas says. Throughout school, he hadn't paid much attention to Cody. They seldom had reason to be around each other.

"I think he might kill me one day," Cody says, and Jonas doesn't know how to respond. If they were at school, he could tell Cody to talk to an RA or walk with him to the counseling center. "He's so mad because he thinks he's sick, but he won't go to the doctor. He thinks the doctor will only give him bad news. He hasn't stopped coughing for six months and his back hurts so much that some days he can't get out of bed."

"What about your mother?" Jonas asks. He has only known Cody to have a father, but maybe there is a mother living nearby, maybe she sees him on weekends.

"I never knew her," Cody says. "Don't even know who she is. He won't tell me."

Jonas nods, runs a finger down the dusty bottle of fermented cider. They are alike in this way, both of them without mothers, both of them trying to figure out how to live with their fathers.

"Maybe you should call the police the next time he hits you," Jonas says.

"I don't think so." Cody stands up, collects his empty bottles, then lines them back up on the shelf. "You want to finish our run?" he asks, as if he hasn't just drunk two bottles of cider, as if he hasn't just revealed a secret to Jonas.

"All right," Jonas says. He opens the door of the shed, and sunshine filters in, illuminating the dust spiraling through the air.

"Try to catch up," Cody says, springing out of the shed, his heavy boots leaving dents in the grass. In his khaki coveralls, he reminds Jonas of a deer leaping through the orchard. Jonas runs behind him, following him, pumping his arms for speed. "Try to catch up, college boy!" Cody screams, and then he runs so fast that Jonas loses sight of him.

1991

Early on the morning after his mother's funeral, Jonas wakes to his father standing in his doorway, staring at him. "What?" says Jonas, blinking in the darkness. "What do you want?"

"Do you want to come to the shop with me?" his father says.

"Why would I want to do that?"

"You could learn the business. I won't be here forever, you know. One day you could take over."

Jonas doesn't like his father talking about his own death. He's just lost one parent, and he doesn't want to immediately think about losing another. It is Sunday, and there are still some relatives at the Motel 6 a few miles down the road. Everyone is supposed to go to lunch at Bill's Diner. And his father is going to work instead? In these past few months, when his mother's breathing became the most labored, when it was clear that she didn't have much time left, Jonas's father spent more time in the shop. He acted like his work was so important, like he was a doctor or something, someone who had emergencies at work to deal with.

After his father leaves, Jonas walks to Stewart's four blocks away. He picks up a bag of peanut M&Ms and Cool Ranch Doritos and Mountain Dew. He is not sure he wants to eat these things, but he wants to have them in case he gets hungry. There are casseroles at home that people have brought over, but the casseroles make him sad, make him remember over and over again that his mom is dead. "Hey," he hears. He turns around and sees Cody Turner.

"Hey," Jonas says back. Yesterday, Jonas was surprised to see Cody at his mother's funeral. He sat in the back row of the church, wearing a black t-shirt and faded black jeans. He was all by himself, no one else in the row. Jonas wonders if the right thing to do would be to thank Cody for coming to the funeral. Instead, he says, "I saw you at the church yesterday."

"Your mom," says Cody, "I liked her." He opens a freezer, takes out a carton of butter pecan, stares at it for a moment, then puts it back.

"You knew her?"

Cody walks down an aisle, picks up a pack of ramen noodles, looks at the teenager at the register, who isn't paying attention to them. He squeezes the noodles, and Jonas hears them crunch and break. Cody puts the noodles back on the shelf. "Well, not really, but sort of. Remember how in kindergarten parents had to come in once in a while to help with snack time and play time?"

Jonas nods.

"Do you think he would sell me cigarettes?" Cody asks, pointing toward the boy behind the counter.

Jonas shakes his head. They are only fourteen, and even though Cody is tall, he still looks fourteen.

"I can't wait to be older," Cody says. He takes three cans of SpaghettiOs off the shelf and puts them back on the shelf upside-down. "You mom was nice to me. When I got in trouble for knocking down a building Jeremy Hutchinson made

with blocks, she came to talk to me in the corner. She told me she knew I was really a good boy. No one ever called me a good boy."

"She was nice like that," Jonas says. His mother could see the good in people, and maybe she was right about Cody. After all, he did come to the funeral when most of Jonas's other classmates had not.

"She always paid attention to me when she was the class parent. And she gave me stuff. You know that every year she'd give me a regular sized candy bar when I came to your house for trick or treating? Like I was special or something."

"I didn't know that," Jonas says. What else doesn't he know about his mother? What other small kindnesses might she have practiced without his knowledge?

"In kindergarten, she asked me what I wanted to be when I grew up and you know what I told her? A sailor. I don't know why I said that, but when I was little I had these dreams all the time about getting in a boat and sailing away. Then I'd wake up and be confused about where I was."

Where had Jonas been during all these conversations his mom and Cody had? He was probably playing with the other kids, too distracted to notice his mother and Cody.

"She bought me this book called *Nautical Knots*. She said I could learn all the knots and maybe one day I really could be a sailor."

"Do you still have the book?" Jonas asks.

Cody nods, then says, "You want it? I can bring it over to your house. I memorized all the knots, practiced them a ton. Maybe you want it now because it was from your mom?"

Jonas shakes his head. His mother bought the book for Cody. "You should keep it."

"You want to hear a secret?" Cody says. "When I was little, I would sometimes pretend your mom was my mom."

Jonas is taken aback, but there's something nice about what Cody has said. Jonas knows that death can make people say strange things, that it's hard to know what exactly is the right thing is to say. So far no one has said anything that's felt in any way right, but maybe Cody's odd statement is the closest thing to right that Jonas will get.

"That's weird, I know," Cody says. He looks back at the counter and now the boy at the cash register has his back turned and is rearranging a rack of air fresheners. Cody takes a Snickers bar off a shelf of candy and slips it into the back pocket of his baggy jeans. "Forget I said anything," he says, and when he leaves the mini-mart, the bells attached to the door jingle, but the boy at the counter does not look up.

1983

Jonas is on his first school field trip. He loves the words *field* and *trip* together; they make him feel like he is an explorer and they are going somewhere foreign and far. They are only at Golden Orchard, which is just down the street from Jonas's home, but they've gotten to meet Mr. and Mrs. Hull, who own the orchard. Mr. Hull takes Jonas's class on a hayride on a wagon attached to the back of his trailer, the large wheels rolling through dirt and muck in the fields, the kids in Jonas's class bouncing, their shoulders in puffy jackets squishing into each other. They are sitting on cubes of hay in the wagon, and Jonas likes the way small pieces of hay stick to his blue corduroy pants.

After the hayride, they go into the store and Mrs. Hull gives each student a small slice of pie on a paper plate and a white plastic fork. Jonas balances his plate on his stretched-out palm, and he can feel the warmth of the pie through the thin paper. The pie is sweet and tastes like cinnamon and it might be the best thing Jonas has ever eaten, except for the chocolate cake his mother baked for his sixth birthday. The cake was decorated with astronauts that his mother made out of icing because one day Jonas will be an astronaut, will be blasted into outer space, will walk on the moon.

After they have finished their slices of pie and wiped their hands with wet paper towels, they are each given a brown paper lunch bag, and Mr. Hull says they can fill their bags with apples from the orchard and bring them home to share with their families. They are told not to run or climb the trees, to only pick the apples they can reach without shaking branches. Jonas will follow these rules because he always follows rules. Jonas is a good boy. Already, as Jonas puts his hand into the empty bag to open it up, three boys from his class run past a row of trees, and his teacher yells at them, tells them that if they do not immediately stop they will have to sit at the picnic table at the edge of the orchard and wait until everyone else is finished.

The boys lurch, stop, then walk slowly and stiffly, as if they are robots.

Jonas works alone. He decides to pick one apple per tree. He will get different kinds of apples, yellows and greens and reds. At the end of a row, he finds an enormous apple, the size of a grapefruit. It hangs low and is easy for Jonas to pluck. He intends to give his father this apple to take to work the next day. He pictures him sitting down on a half-upholstered couch, sighing like he always does when he lowers himself because of his creaky bones. He'll eat the apple in big, crunchy bites. He will be alone in the shop, music faintly playing from a small radio on the desk in the corner. His unfinished cigarette will smolder in an ashtray. He will eat the apple and think of Jonas at school and wonder what he is learning. Each night, Jonas's father asks him to tell him one interesting thing he learned at school that day. Some days Jonas has much more than one thing to share. His mother says he has a brain like a sponge, that he absorbs everything. "My smart boy," his father says every night after Jonas tells him everything he's learned that day.

Jonas loops around the last tree in the row that he'd been picking and sees Cody Turner throw an apple at Sarah Lowell's cheek. She drops her bag of apples, and they roll on the grass. Their teacher runs to Sarah, kneels down, and the teacher's aide pulls Cody aside then drags him down the aisle to the red wooden picnic table at the edge of the orchard. Cody is not allowed to pick any more apples. The teacher waves Jonas over. She asks him to be Sarah's buddy for the day, to stay close to her, to make sure she is okay.

Jonas feels a tenderness toward Sarah and wants to take her hand and hold it tightly, but he knows the other boys will laugh at him. Instead, he plucks the grapefruit-sized apple from his sack and hands it to her. Jonas looks at Sarah's cheek, which is pinkish gray now, a bruise blooming. She takes the apple and puts it in her empty bag. She opens her mouth and wiggles a front tooth with a finger. It's almost ready to go. "My mom has to cut my apples for me until this tooth falls out," she says. Jonas bends down and helps Sarah pick up her spilled apples.

Jonas is glad he still has all of his baby teeth. He knows they will fall out, that things will change, that he won't always be a little boy. But for now he has all of his teeth, none of them wobbly, and he can eat an apple without needing someone to cut it up for him. He reaches into his own bag and takes out another apple, this one much smaller, halfway green, half red. He takes a bite and it is juicy and crisp. He wonders what the name of this apple is. He has only been reading for a few months, but there is something magical in the way that letters push together to form words. He sees a sign at the end of one row of trees and reads "Granny Smith" and then "Golden Delicious." Delicious takes him a few seconds to figure out, but once he does, he knows he will always be able to read this word, that next time he sees it, he won't have to sound it out. A few months ago, in the heat of the summer, he couldn't read and now he can and this newly acquired knowledge does not fail to stun him each day. It is something new he has, something precious, like the pair of white leather sneakers his mother bought him in September before the start of school. He asked her to put the sneakers on his nightstand so they would be the first thing he saw in the morning when he woke up. And when he opened his eyes, he saw the shoes and the delight was new. He'd forgotten as he'd slept that he owned the shoes, and now he forgets sometimes that he's able to read. Before, he could only pick out letters; now he can put the letters together to make words, to make sense. He is at a strange age, when sometimes he wants to still be a baby and sometimes he is glad that he is beginning to know more.

It is late October of his sixth year, he has a sack of apples, his teachers know he is kind and capable of being a good friend, the air smells like grass and leaves and apples, and he can read, oh, yes, he can read the names of all the apples. He looks at the rows of trees, feels the cool breeze flutter his hair, and he thinks there is nowhere he'd rather be than in the orchard.