

The Descent

Zack has almost finished digging the holes for the posts. Only two or three holes still need to be dug and Zack is anxious to be finished with it. He curses a bit and thrusts his shovel once more into the soft yellow earth. He is near the chicken coop now. I don't know who it belongs to. I suspect that Zack doesn't either. It looks quite similar, though, to one I'd seen before. But the landscape is different. We have built the fence all the way to the river. The deep gully is missing, but I remember canoeing on this river once. Perhaps I had passed this very point. That's unlikely, though, since I don't remember the chicken coop. The coop is hardly new. It's so weathered that anyone can see it's been around for an awfully long time.

The posts have been set but the holes haven't been filled in yet or the dirt tamped. The barbwire lies close to the chicken coop in heavy porcupine rolls. Zack wonders out loud if he should unravel them now or later.

Later perhaps.

"What the hell," I say. "The fence doesn't keep anything in or anything out anyway. I don't even know why we're building it."

I begin counting the steps between the posts. They are irregular. Zack has been careless in his measurements and he won't let me keep any records. Simply divide the distance by the number of posts. But I can't work out the figures in my head.

The river swells, even though the sky is clear and no rain has fallen. It is then we discover that there are more posts we had overlooked. They are floating downstream past the chicken coop like logs set adrift by lumberjacks. There's an unmistakable urgency to their movement. I'm in the water after them and Zack isn't far behind. I'm less concerned about the posts than Zack is. Even though I had a head start, Zack quickly swims past me. I'm swimming as fast as I can, but I can't keep up with him. My head jerks from front to side mechanically, with the rhythm of a pendulum on an old grandfather clock. My eyes remain fixed in their sockets and jerk with my head. Everything I see is blurred—first water, then trees, then water then trees again. I'm dizzy, but my face is completely immovable.

One of the posts is flying like a kite on the horizon. Zack is the first to see it and he calls out to me. My head is still jerking so I stop swimming and look up into the sky. Then I see Zack running on the water, leaping up with clumsy movements aimed at the airborne post. I remain calm but Zack is hysterical.

The post begins its descent, like a flying saucer about to land on an alien planet. It disappears behind some treetops. It's sure to touch down on a bend in the river we cannot yet see. Sure enough, when we get there we catch sight of the post just as it's starting to sink into the river. No decision is made. We follow it, sucking in a full breath of air and diving under the water.

I'm the first to reach the shaft. It is transparent and bright, easily noticed but difficult to enter. We pass through a gooey membrane which allows us in but keeps the water out. Zack and I grab onto a pulley just on the other side of the membrane and lower ourselves down. At the bottom of the shaft is a cubicle. The furniture is brilliant white, like bleached fiberglass. There are four people in the room, but two of them, a man in a tuxedo and a woman in a wedding dress, are obviously of no importance. They slink into a corner of the cubicle, hoping to go unnoticed. Another woman, with a long scar running down the side of her cheek, greets us with an unfamiliar gesture, which neither Zack nor I know how to respond to. (I suddenly wish I was back at the ranch, even if the grass is burnt and the house is about to collapse. I can still see the old white car rusting on the front lawn.)

The fourth person is a short man about fifty years old with a bald crown and some strands of long white hair flowing from the edges of his scalp onto his shoulders. His face is covered with black tattoos, spelling at random the letters *O* and *K*. Two *O*'s form heavy circles around his eyes. His chin is missing and I can't be sure if he has a mouth. But then he tells us, "You're welcome to stay, but there is nothing here to do." The woman who had greeted us nods her head in agreement.

The couple in the corner looks at us imploringly. The man in the tuxedo says, "If you are going back to the surface, please take us with you."