

In his father's shed, he fingered hooks where the tools hung idle. For moments, he could fetch Tom back by sniffing a whiskey bottle or the roach of an old joint stamped out and discarded in some corner. He continued looking down that dirt track. Darkness fell. Still he waited. Goodbye was too good a word.

At the dining table, Finbar refused to talk. Taking meals underneath, he gazed no longer at faces, only boots and sandals. He spoke to ankles, answered questions from legs. After meals, he scampered back up the tree to sharpen pencils. His shavings curled like a summoning finger.

From school he ran for the National Park to watch creatures kill and mate. He stroked hide or feathers. While other boys ran around skateboarding or torturing kittens, Finbar collected leaves. Trees circled his home, reaching to the limits of eyesight. He saw further.

One day in the Park he found another boy, almost as crazy, apparently listening to tree bark. Finbar had never met anyone like him before, a weird kid with black eyes and a faraway manner, with an older sister almost as strange. Together the trio built a secret compound in a nook of outcrops. They invented passwords. His new friends taught him their private language. Then without any warning, somebody smashed up the hiding house. One afternoon he arrived to find timber panels trampled. Finbar refused to let the friends see him cry. Without a word, he ran home to his tree. For years, he would not see those two again, except from a distance. At school, Finbar refused to play with other children—who were all crazy, if only they knew. Overhearing secret thoughts, he felt their hates and horrors. He knew their answers to class questions before they spoke. School brought others too close. He kept playground contact to a minimum. After the bell, he ran for leafy dark, finding a hollow trunk in the National Park or some animal carcass overrun with ants. Bushes offered fruit that he dared not eat. Snakes inched. Bats slept.

Then suddenly he began to sob.

The creek might parch that summer but not Finbar's eyes. His crying lasted an entire day, and then another. Blubbing for every dying sparrow, he watched bugs clustering on the remains of a magpie savaged by feral cat or fox. He wet his face and cuffs. Plants continued to sicken. Possums carked it. Nobody else would cry for them. He took to sleeping in the tree house, more afraid of his bedroom than of hoots and creaking amid branches. In bed certain dreams returned, especially the one with a black-browed man chasing him to a river. Finbar avoided sleep, fearing he might never wake. Back in school, he nodded off. Crying stopped. Still he dreaded closing his eyes at night.

Then came a day when he tasted dirt.

Discovering him face down near the top dam, his big brother screamed for help. It came in the form of Kate. The woman arrived in time to see blood

well in sobs from his throat. She wiped a cherry puddle while the elder boy ran for a phone. From clouds, Finbar felt the hands of ambulance medics clawing him back. He heard a doctor informing his mother that her son had been clinically dead. Someone asked what he could remember. Finbar lied, refusing to admit looking down and seeing his limbs soaked red: a failed angel, unworthy to meet his dead brother. If he did own up, his mother would only blame herself for raising a crazy boy, and his Gran would grope for rosary beads.

Frightened and angry, Finbar returned home from hospital. Under the table, he spat words. His mother blamed herself. Gran went for the beads.

He fled, burrowing deep into the Park where he could hurl stones at birds. He didn't want to be back. Nor did he want interfering adults. Daylight hurt his eyes. Noises scratched and prickled. In the soft white place where he had risen and floated, everything seemed to hover. He played with a new friend, a boy who glowed. Then big ones made him return. A chute sucked his feet, squirting him down to a land where adults and children shouted, and no one could hear his explanations. So unfair. It should be his brother Declan coming back, not him.