

The Woodfall Home

SquidToad sneaks in after dark. Most nights, he wears an overlarge wife-beater, gym shorts, and hotel slippers that whisper quietly. His buzzed head is capped by a Red Sox hat. It's an every week thing, the burglaries, sometimes more than once. He walks until he finds a new house and then tries the back door. If it's locked, he's gone. If he hears a noise, he's gone. He's never been seen, but once, on the way home after pinching a wallet, a policeman stopped him. SquidToad didn't get in trouble. The cop just thought it was too late for an eleven-year-old to be out alone.

Popponeset Island is familiar territory. Tucked away in the Nantucket Sound, it's separated from mainland Cape Cod by the narrow Popponeset Creek, passable over a bridge only wide enough for a single car. It's an autumn night when SquidToad crosses. Boats from the marina laze in the tide. SquidToad imagines diving from the bridge and floating with them, but knows he can't. Squid never taught him how to swim. She promised to years ago, before Toad moved in.

The island is a closed community. The owner of the Patriots has a mansion here, somewhere far from the bridge, where the normal houses are. In the scrub forest off the road, SquidToad claws through bramble and black oak, his path lit by an iPhone he can't unlock. Moss and salty dirt extend to the brink of the sound. It's too cold to be sleeveless. SquidToad's fingers tremble like a bad dream.

After a while, he stops outside a house. The front gate is made of steel with new-gold spirals. Its topmost portion is styled into a curve, and the lower part splits to form bronze flowers. Gravel from the driveway crunches noisily under SquidToad's feet. He reminds himself of the rules:

Watch out for nosy neighbors.

Watch out for dog walkers.

SquidToad circles the house's wide, spacious porch. He dodges a leaf falling from the steeply sloped roof and stays low to avoid bay windows. The backyard has a yacht anchored to a private dock. It's so different from the boat SquidToad lives on. This one has two floors, and portholes paned with glass instead of duct tape. The gangplank clunks as he steps aboard.

All of a sudden, a man stumbles forward. He is on the opposite side of the ramp in a white button-down with white slacks and a captain's hat. SquidToad is blinded by the yellow dust of a flashlight. He turns around, running as fast as his slippers allow. He doesn't see the mesh pool cover, indistinguishable from the lawn in the darkness. Before he can process his mistake, the mesh gives, and SquidToad falls in.

He is submerged. The water is a freezing, gelatin-like substance, much thicker than he would have imagined. Toad always says swimming is a waste of time since there's nothing valuable underwater. The Red Sox hat and iPhone float away as SquidToad flails, helplessly trying to

latch onto something. Before his legs give out, his fingers find the stainless-steel rung of a ladder. He wills his body to the pool's edge and pulls himself free.

Drenched, he goes around the house, past the gate, and back into the driveway. Except now there is a car. Teenagers sit on the hood while music plays. Their laughter dissolves into the night as they see SquidToad and point, screaming what-the-fuck as if he is an animal, wild enough to startle but too small to fear.

He tears into the brush. Without the light from his phone, SquidToad can barely see, cutting his hands on low-hanging branches and offshoots. He comes out to a different yard, this one large and pristinely landscaped. There is a pergola decorated with buntings of the American flag. Across the yard is a single-floor building forming a horseshoe around a pond. A sliding door encircled by Christmas lights has been left open.

SquidToad pauses for a moment to catch his breath. He whispers a rule to himself: No houses with lights on — especially Christmas lights. He never steals from houses with Christmas lights. Inside are families laughing as they argue over boardgames or snap pictures by the tree. Fireplaces crackle. Carols play softly over the radio. Those are the things that can't be taken. The things he wants most.

A police siren sounds in the distance. Its warning gets louder with each turn. Toad only has one rule, but he reminds SquidToad of it every night: Don't get caught.

The door makes a rubbery squeak as SquidToad closes it behind him. Though the building seemed normal from the outside, the inside is expansive. Instead of a hallway, there is asphalt on the ground separated by double yellow lines like on a road. On opposites sides of the road are lawns separated by picket fences and front yards made of fake

grass. The yards are occupied by miniature houses, each with doors and mailboxes. There are windows too, though their curtains are drawn.

The ceiling has stars and a moon illuminated by fluorescent lights that cast a dim glow. Under the synthetic beam, SquidToad spots a pill bottle resting on a swing bench. He reads the peeled label: *Mematine, 20mg three times a day*. He looks inside and sees a dozen or so pills, which he shakes into his pocket.

“Are you the new postman?”

An old woman stands at the doorway of one of the homes. Her hair is gnarled with knots. She wears large glasses and a moth-eaten nightgown with loops for a missing cinch. Without looking at SquidToad, she walks out carrying a broom and sweeps a patch of grass in no apparent need of sweeping.

“Nice to meet you, mister postman,” she says, her gaze lingering on his hotel slippers, soaked and streaking mud. “Should you be doing deliveries at midnight?” The woman leans on the broom, presumably waiting for SquidToad to answer. When he doesn’t, she shrugs. “No mailbag, no uniform,” she says. “Bad first day, huh?”

SquidToad can only stare.

“Come have some milk,” the old woman says. Rubber crumb infills are caught in her broom’s brush. They dribble free as she spins the handle. “Wash away the mistakes, mister postman.”

Inside, the miniature house is mostly empty. The space is split into a front room and another room separated by a door. The front room, where SquidToad and the woman are, has a table and a single armchair facing a television. There is no kitchen or bathroom, not even a microwave. It looks like the waiting room at a doctor’s office. Never before has he entered a home without

anything worth stealing. It's as if the space was abandoned long ago, the furniture shadows of a life scaled down.

There is an empty bottle of milk on the floor near an all-white trashcan. SquidToad picks the bottle up and sticks his nose over the opening, cringing at its smell. He presses his eye against the rim and sees that it's empty, the inside a ceremony of light glistening through the glass. SquidToad remembers the Christmas decorations Squid used to line the boat with before Toad decided to sell them — the lights, and the generator they ran on too.

SquidToad's tank top leaks chlorinated water. There is a twig stuck in the band of his gym shorts. He unfolds a towel on a chair and dries off before taking a seat opposite the old woman. In her hands is a notebook lined with graph paper labelled ESCAPE PLAN. There are shaky outlines of the facility's halls, with homes labelled numerically and exits highlighted in yellow.

"Do you have any mail?" she asks. She isn't paying him much attention, but instead stares at the notebook. "I haven't heard from my son in a while. He doesn't like to go too long without writing."

"I'm not...I don't—"

"He and his wife moved to Boston a few years ago," she says, absentmindedly clicking her nails against the table.

SquidToad peels the towel off. "I have to go."

"My husband, whew, he's great guy," she says. "He's a...sorry no, my *son*, my son is a wonderful boy. Only he's a man now of course. Lovely, tall, handsome," she says. "He builds them if you can believe it. Isn't that a kick?"

“Builds what?” asks SquidToad.

“Boats,” the old woman says emphatically, as if she’d told him a hundred times already. She bundles the hem of her robe, clutching loose threads in her fist, varicose veins pulsing purple and red. “Not those sea monsters you see in the marina belonging to billionaires. No, he makes the real thing,” she says. “Fishing boats. You ever been on a fishing boat before?”

SquidToad stole a tackle box and rod once. Squid promised she would string and rig it so they could catch great whites together. Toad warned he’d hook their lips if they wasted any of the bait. Everything was gone the next day.

“My son’s name is Jacob,” the old woman says. “And my wife’s name...no, sorry, *his* wife’s name...”

“It’s okay,” SquidToad says. “He sounds nice. They both do.”

“What about you, mister postman?” she asks. “You have a name?”

“SquidToad,” he tells her. The empty milk bottle sits on the table between them, untouched.

“I’m Ms. Meriam,” the old woman says. “Pour yourself a glass, SquidToad.” She nods in the direction of the bottle, oblivious to its emptiness, gesturing with a weak flourish at something — cups that don’t exist, a pot of honey that was never there. “You look like you could use it.”

SquidToad reaches for the bottle. He passes it between one hand and the other, unsure what to do. Ms. Meriam’s eyes widen in response.

“What kind of a name is SquidToad?”

It was forcibly applied. Older boys at the trailer park teased him for always being around Squid, clinging to her like driftwood in open water. They called him Mini Squid until Toad showed up. No one could believe he wasn’t SquidToad’s real dad: same blue eyes, same buzzed

black hair, same dimples. They even spoke similarly, SquidToad's voice unusually gritty for his age. And so the name SquidToad was born.

He tells her something, but Ms. Meriam isn't listening. She stares at the notebook, blinking as if just having woken. When she looks back up, there is something there that was missing before. She flexes her finger joints against the table's boundary. "They've been talking in the local news about houses getting burgled," she says. "Know anything about that?"

SquidToad stands.

"Easy now, I'm not accusing you of anything," she says. "But" — she pauses to clear her throat — "I have a deal for you. If you help me get out of this place, I'll pretend we never saw each other. You can even keep those pills you stole."

SquidToad puts the pills on the table, backpedaling. He knocks into the television set. It's one of those you never see anymore, heavy as an anvil with antennas sticking out the top. Its frame and screen are plastic and wobble on impact.

Ms. Meriam says, "They call this place a home and make it look like one, but it's not." She closes the notebook. "I've tried to sneak out before, but I lose track of what I'm doing," she says. "This notebook has everything outlined to get me on a bus to Boston. All I need is someone to help me, in case I...get confused."

"I—"

"If you get me to Jacob," she says, "I can forget all about you breaking in. I'm good at forgetting."

"I can't," SquidToad says.

"Don't you take things that aren't yours somewhere else?" Ms. Meriam says. "That's all I'm asking. Just take me to the bus terminal."

There's a long pause. Behind her is a picture of a lighthouse, its gilt frame the only embellishment on a wall otherwise cracked and empty.

South of Popponeset Creek and the Nantucket Sound, away from neighborhoods both rich and poor, there is a private beach. It was originally owned by a real estate developer before he lost everything in the recession. The beachfront resort stopped construction, leaving behind a skeleton of softwood and pink fiberglass that became a popular haunt for addicts. Eventually, someone got shot in the driveway, making it impossible to sell. The property is abandoned now, though the sign for Sunrise Beach still remains.

Squid claims she found Sunrise Beach first, but Toad says different. Before, they lived in a trailer park over by Bass River. It was there that Squid taught SquidToad how to slip into other trailers unnoticed, how to find things of value quickly, and how to take without guilt. "It's not like stealing or whatever," Squid would insist after bedtime prayer, when she would paint her nails neon green, the smell of acetone sharp and heady. "They just got what we need."

Toad did the fencing. He'd been to prison a few times and wasn't allowed to leave the state or drive a car. He looked the same as most of the men in the trailer park, with squinting eyes and a gut able to table three beers at once. There was nothing fun about Toad. He spoke little, swung often, and lived for money, which he never seemed to have.

No doing this. Watch out for that. SquidToad learned the rules of survival not in the homes of others, but his own trailer. For every night lying with Squid in their twin-sized bed guessing at Jeopardy, there was a night that Toad got too fucked up. Whenever that happened, SquidToad added to his list. Before rules became rules, they were lessons.

SquidToad stole constantly. When he came back empty-handed, he was called a liability, an unnecessary burden that was “anchoring everyone down.” As if SquidToad was the one who would shoot bottles off the park’s storage lockers. As if SquidToad stayed up all night doing whippets in lawn chairs. As if SquidToad smashed their neighbor’s head in, causing them to have to leave Bass River for good. In the end, it made no difference what SquidToad came back with. He was jetsam either way.

When the three of them fled to Sunrise Beach, the trailer got left behind, its aluminum shell traded for open air. At night, the beach came alive. The moon and stars spangled, the current crawling the shoreline, froth sticking to the seaweed like spit. Everything was in motion, the wind, the sea. Even the dunes seemed active, shrugging their crests into different shapes when no one was looking.

Squid stole a boat from the nearest marina. When she brought it back to the beach, Toad swam out and climbed aboard, taking the wheel and steering the runabout ashore. It crashed into the sand at full speed, as if he wanted to get stuck. But Squid said he didn’t mean for it. At the end of the day, Squid said, Toad was just high.

SquidToad doesn’t get back to Sunrise Beach until morning. He’s has nothing to show for his trouble but the towel Ms. Meriam gave him. When he climbs the surrounding dunes, the beach is empty. They’ve been living out of the boat for over a year and it has never been taken to water. Not even when high tide creeps up the shoreline. The towel blows away as his feet sink under the sand.

There isn’t much left behind. A couple toilet paper rolls. A Diet Coke can missing its pull tab. And a Bruins beanie Squid used to wear when it rained. SquidToad puts it on. Pebbles rub against his buzzed scalp, but he yanks it down anyway. There’s a hole in the sand from where the

boat once was. It's rimmed with toxic green kelp and a collection of shells, one of which is moving. SquidToad watches the hermit crab scuttle towards the stagnant remains of a wave. The water gets clearer as it ebbs, leaving nothing but wet sand to prove it was ever there at all.

By noon, SquidToad walks to an open-air shopping center. There's a Vineyard Vines and L.L. Bean and Williams Sonoma all painted white to match the beach-town aesthetic. Everything is clean. Cars are plugged into Tesla charging stations while people wander store to store with their pumpkin spice lattes.

SquidToad hasn't eaten for over a day. His stomach twists and screams. He waits by a garbage can for an hour before a couple walks out of a Mexican restaurant. They throw away a half-eaten burrito, its tin foil wrap like fish scales. SquidToad dives inside and retrieves it, stuffing his face as onlookers shake their heads. Someone is on their cellphone, watching him pointedly, so he takes off before he can finish.

SquidToad doesn't mind it so much, trekking long distances. But his slippers are barely staying on his feet, the upper vamps torn to shreds, the midsoles split from their binding tape. He throws them in a roadside ditch and cuts across a golf course, careful to keep out of sight from a cluster of carts.

When he finally gets to Bass River, it's obvious Squid and Toad aren't there. The spot where their trailer used to be is empty, replaced by a trash heap. There's a baby stroller on its side, a pair of discarded flip flops, and a rusty keg with what looks suspiciously like a knife stuck in its center. A car with no doors or tires has been left abandoned. SquidToad puts on the flip flops and crawls inside. He scavenges a bottle of water with gum in it.

“Hey!” shouts a man, approaching the car, where SquidToad is sitting in the driver’s seat.

“You’re that pickpocket.”

“No,” says SquidToad.

“Like Hell you aren’t,” the man says, his voice rising with operatic insistence. He straightens a John Deere hat and wipes his hands on a pair of blue jeans. “You and your parents are pond scum. Hear me?” He looks around. “Where are they, huh? Your dad owes me money.”

“Toad’s not my dad,” SquidToad says.

There’s no steering wheel left on the dash, only a metal shaft where it used to attach. SquidToad pretends to wrap his hands around the wheel, turning as if in hot pursuit, driving away from the man and Bass River, into the ocean, where he can float until he finds an island with enough fruit and water that he won’t ever have to steal again, can just pick the trees and drink out of crystal blue pools, no more trash cans and gum-tinged backwash. On the island, he can’t be left behind, or be seen when he wants to stay hidden. He can live without rules.

“I’m calling the park manager,” the man says.

SquidToad tries to get out of the car, but the man is blocking his path. He stretches out broad, flabby arms — “forget it” — but SquidToad has been penned in before, has evaded the flying fists of Toad in tighter corners than this. Looking up, the moonroof has been smashed out. He grabs the frame above his head and pulls himself free faster than the man can stop him.

Don’t get caught, he tells himself as he disappears into the surrounding woods. Don’t get caught, don’t get caught, don’t get caught.

Popponeset Island has a copse of pine trees that feed the ocean. Some are rooted further inland, while others are already on the beach, dry and toppled. They don't have leaves and look more like day-old chicken bones.

"They're called woodfalls," Squid told SquidToad when he asked about them. "They sink to the bottom of the ocean after the trees get knocked over by storms. They're basically like mini-houses," she explained. "Deep sea animals live on them and eat the wood for food."

SquidToad had asked if the animals were stealing from the forest, but Squid shook her head. "Stealing is only stealing if you don't need what you take."

But he doesn't need the iPhone he stole, or the Red Sox hat, or pill bottles, those fancy watches. What he needs are things that can't be taken, like in the houses with Christmas lights. Things only she can provide. To him, she is the boat on Sunrise Beach, or a tree waiting to get washed out to sea. SquidToad sees her face everywhere.

It's around dinnertime when SquidToad gets back to the building on Popponeset Island. He knows the hour because the sun has set, and his stomach is frustrated again. There are clods of dirt stuck between his toes from hiding in bushes. Instead of going in through the back, SquidToad tries the front entrance.

He arrives in a reception area. By the door is a table with pamphlets for Popponeset Assisted Living, with a picture of the facility on a sunny day. A helix-shaped light fixture hangs over the front desk. There is a flatscreen TV that flashes a message: WE ARE HERE BECAUSE WE CARE. On a swivel seat at the desk sits a man in blue scrubs typing away on a laptop, the clack of keys syncopating with wind chimes SquidToad cannot place.

"Excuse me," SquidToad says.

The man pulls headphones from his ears and looks up. "Can I help you?"

“Yes,” SquidToad says, feeling compelled by the nice furniture and clean floors not to say *yeah*. “I’m here to see Ms. Meriam.”

“Oh!”

Out comes a clipboard with a form pinned beneath the clamp. A pen is thrust into SquidToad’s hand eagerly. “Great — this is great! She, ah, doesn’t get visitors often. I didn’t know she had a grandson.”

SquidToad tries to say that they aren’t related, but the man is already out of his seat, talking about how important it is for visitors to come regularly, how Popponeset Assisted Living, or PAL as he calls it, gets more people through the door than the last home he worked at, but it’s never really enough. Ms. Meriam deserves the attention, he says. She’s a sweetheart, an arrowhead, a genius, a little devil.

The man adjusts the nametag on his shirt inscribed: Jacob. “Don’t tell her I talked her up,” he says hurriedly. “She’s mad at me for taking poker night away this week. You know how she can be.”

“And also,” Jacob goes on, “don’t take it personal if she doesn’t recognize you.” Coming around from behind the desk, he leans in. “Your granny is my favorite, but she doesn’t take care. You know what I mean when I say *take care*?”

Jacob doesn’t wait for a response.

“Just too wild sometimes,” he says. “At first I thought her plan to sneak out was funny. Gave her something to do.” He rubs his sole patch listlessly. “I even got her a notebook so she could map out her escape like a...whatchamacallit...like in that Shawshank movie!” He laughs. “Your granny is so funny,” he says. “But sometimes she goes too far. She doesn’t understand how old eighty-nine is. She thinks she’s a young girl.”

It's only then that Jacob pauses, looking at SquidToad as if seeing him for the first time. He sniffs. "You need a shower, kid."

The residential hall is more active than before. There are old people out on their lawns, reading on park benches, playing checkers. Under a fake blue sky are the same miniature suburban houses, fit with white picket fences and slatted porticos. The street and grass look no less real by day. SquidToad and Jacob walk past octogenarians whistling to bird chirps, but like the wind chimes, there are no birds to be seen.

They stop at a familiar door. Of all the houses, this is perhaps the least convincing. Someone knocked a hole in the front window since SquidToad was last here. There's an odor of turpentine and wax coming from within. Toad stinks the boat up with a similar smell when he cleans his guns.

Jacob taps the door. Pushing it open ever so slightly, he whispers — Ms. Meriam, Ms. Meriam — to no response. He looks back to SquidToad before flicking on the light. The table is situated in the middle of the thinly carpeted floor, the fabric too frail to mask concrete underneath. Ms. Meriam is sat in the same place as earlier. There is shoe polish on the table. A dirty rag in her hand.

Jacob excuses himself.

"Hello," says Ms. Meriam. The nightgown has been replaced with a ruffled shirt. "What would you like?"

SquidToad takes a seat at the table. He stays where he is for a while, considering himself, the scratches on his arms, cuts on his feet. His tank top is in tatters, gym shorts torn. Jacob was right — he stinks.

"I'm here to break you out," says SquidToad.

“It’s a lovely night,” says Ms. Meriam. She speaks forcefully, drawing out her words.

SquidToad can sense an imbalance but doesn’t know what to make of it. Instead, he tries again. “You wanted me to get you out of here,” he says.

Ms. Meriam asks, “Do I know you?”

SquidToad starts to cry.

The room is beaten up. The lighthouse picture has been yanked to the floor, and the television is off its stand, antennas snapped and scattered. Ms. Meriam reaches for her notebook but doesn’t open it. “My son Jacob is on his way,” she says. “He’s going to take me to Boston on his fishing boat. A real one, with a big ice box and radar. You’re welcome to come if you’d like.”

“I used to live on a boat,” SquidToad says. He wipes snot with his hand, but it sticks to him. “It’s gone now.”

“Don’t worry about it,” she says. “A house is temporary. Seasonal for lots of people in the Cape. We build them, we break them. Sometimes the ocean even takes them away. When the weather’s bad, waves pull them right off the beach.”

“Do they ever come back?” SquidToad asks.

Ms. Meriam pantomimes taking out a cigarette. There is nothing between her index and middle finger, but she holds them to her mouth regardless, igniting the empty space between with a nonexistent lighter. “Not usually,” she says.

SquidToad tries to tell her there is nothing there, but his throat is closed, and his heart is pounding like a shutter in wind. His chest tightens. His vision blurs.

The room fills with smoke. It becomes so thick he can barely see Ms. Meriam at the table. She is unaffected, her voice growing louder with every puff. The rules circle his mind: watch out

for pets, watch out for alarms. No talking, no houses with the lights on or TV playing. And most important of all — don't get caught. Don't get caught, don't get caught, don't get caught.

SquidToad tries to run, but the chair bottom is stuck to him. He struggles, reaching out for the bottle of milk, suddenly reappearing. It falls when he touches it, spilling endlessly over the table and floor. He tries to twist free as the milk fills the room past his knees, then chest, its form no different than the swimming pool, thick and gelatinous.

Toad appears. He floats comfortably, buoyed by his beer belly. SquidToad is barely able to keep his head above the rising milk, bobbing in and out, screaming for help. "Nothing valuable underwater," Toad says. SquidToad's arms have turned into anchors. They drag him down until he can no longer see the surface. There is only Toad looming over the abyss.

Without warning, everything is back. His panic attack eases, slowly at first, and then completely. There is no milk bottle and no Toad. Only two people in an empty room. SquidToad goes to the lighthouse painting and puts it back on the wall. He lifts the broken TV and sets it upright.

"Thank you," Ms. Meriam says. "You shouldn't bother though. Jacob will be here any minute. He doesn't mind picking up."

"No problem," says SquidToad. He goes over to her side of the table, and when she is not looking, takes the notebook, its delusions a constant reminder of what will never be. She is not so different from himself, SquidToad realizes. They are both weathering storms, hoping high winds uproot them to a better place. As he slips the notebook under the band of his shorts, he promises himself it is the last thing he will steal.

Sunrise Beach is quiet that night. A light breeze blows east, gulls squawking across the shadow of a settled sun. SquidToad climbs the dunes on his hand and knees. When he reaches the top, he pushes away a curtain of beachgrass. Stars across the night sky bounce their rays off the sand.

The boat has returned. It's grounded well into the backshore, still wet from its time in the water. The deck is lined by a series of wires leading to the old generator Toad had previously sold. He is nowhere to be seen.

Around the opposite side of the boat, Squid emerges. She is wrapped in a puffy jacket and moves with a limp. As she goes, a coil of Christmas lights unfurls, whites and reds and greens twinkling across the hull. SquidToad can make out a crab as it shimmies from the dune toward a stranded piece of woodfall. The rising tide laps the lumber. SquidToad slides down the dune and picks up the crab, cupping it in his hand delicately to ensure it reaches home before being carried out to sea.