

## The Bundok

About 3,000 words

### The Bundok

The new house had one wall covered in ivy and a fountain in a pebbled garden but it was broken.

When kindergarten started the sun shone the whole first week like a big smile.

The newness of the house, the broad shining kindergarten classroom floor, the untroubled, unpeopled lawns with no sidewalks crossing their fronts, all smiled.

The nighttime silence, broken only by the sounds of T.V. from Lil's parents' bedroom and from Mrs. Robby's bedroom, and the nighttime dark broken by almost nothing, no matter how long she stared into it and tried to find shadows, sometimes had bright smiling eyes that peeked out of the closet just before she fell asleep. Just to show her that at the new house the nighttime, too, could smile.

\*

## The Bundok

Mrs. Robby was *retiring*. All summer she'd played Slap Jack with Lil, made her hot dogs with mayonnaise and instant mashed potatoes on the side (even though there was chicken salad in the fridge so that no one would have to turn on the stove), and painted her nails frost-pink, which was Mrs. Robby's favorite nail polish color. Once kindergarten started, Mrs. Robby greeted Lil every afternoon with a stack of six Oreos and cold milk in the broad green glass that was good for dunking.

But one night when Lil went to Mrs. Robby's room, where Merv Griffin played on the black-and-white T.V. and the laughing and the bedside lamp let her evade the dark for awhile longer, Mrs. Robby scooped her into her soft, powdery lap and kissed her with powdery lips and said, "Well, Sister Superior, your Robby is getting old as old Charlie."

Lil had anticipated a story. Old Charlie was Mrs. Robby's old husband, who fell down the stairs and slept on the stoop; who fell asleep in the tub with the window open and got so wrinkled he had to go to the hospital. In the pictures from the hospital, old Charlie in his white gown had eyes as blue as the clear sky over Fifth Avenue last Easter with the sun making her Mary Janes flash. But it was true, he was as wrinkled as Cornelius, the oldest of all the elephants. Mrs. Robby was not as wrinkled, but also looked like Easter, soft and always dressed in pale, sugary colors.

"Charlie got old and went to heaven," Mrs. Robby said. "but your old Robby only gets second best—I'm going back to Brooklyn to stay."

"At your tall skinny house in Flatbush?" said Lil.

"Yes. Will you come visit me?"

## The Bundok

Lil nodded against Mrs. Robby's sugary-colored jacket and said, "Can I stay with you?"

Mrs. Robby's hands on her arm started to shake. Her voice came out high and wobbling. "Oh, my angels and saints," she said. "Be a good girl and make sure you learn to write real good so you can send me a postcard now and then."

Mrs. Robby's crying was quiet; Merv Griffin's laughing audience was loud. Lil had one eye shut against Mrs. Robby's shoulder and one eye open, blinking against the bedside lamplight. She did not weep tears, but felt them in her stomach, and that was the first time she began thinking in words like: "And the little girl wondered what on earth to do next."

\*

The books on the shelf were:

Two *Richard Scarry* books. Four books in a box called *The Nutshell Library*. Three *Babar* books. Five *Mr. Brothers* books. And many more that Lil forgot about as soon as they were shut.

The first day that Mrs. Robby retired, Lil found that she could read almost all of the books to herself, like:

Babar runs away because he  
is afraid of the hunter. After  
several days, very tired indeed,  
he comes to a town. . . .

And:

This is Busytown.  
My, what a nice town!

## The Bundok

What does your Daddy do?

What does your Mommy do?

And when there were pictures, she could make up the parts that got left out. One was Johnny who lived by himself with a book and a bowl of fruit and no school and the sound of traffic honking that came in the open window.

The *Mr. Brothers* books had chapters, which were not quick to read, but Lil could whiz through the stories on the back cover, like:

### **Mr. Brothers the Butler**

*“Why, oh why did we ever move to the General’s house?” Mother wailed.*

After the War, Daisy’s family leaves the Army base to live in the old General’s house in the Bundok. It is a dusty, mossy house with a water tank on the roof. At first, nothing seems to work. One day, Mr. Brothers arrives and fixes everything. But will he be able to fix Daisy’s appendix?

*“Mr. Brothers, will you be our butler?”*

And:

### **Mr. Brothers at the Zoo**

*“Daisy, where are you?” Mother cried.*

Daisy has run away! Mr. Brothers finds her in the monkey house at the zoo, but she doesn’t want to leave. “I make a very good monkey,” Daisy says. “People pay a lot of money to see me dance the sailor’s hornpipe.” Mr. Brothers can do anything . . . but how can he keep Daisy from losing her manners in a monkey house?

## The Bundok

*“Would you like a banana with your tea, Miss Daisy?”*

In the pictures, Mr. Brothers was always doing something like climbing to the roof in a lightning storm or blasting off into space, but he never smiled or laughed. He never had straw in his hair, like Daisy always did after one of her mischiefs; his mouth was never an “O”, nor his eyebrows a “V”, like Daisy’s mother and father. He was too busy. Babar, too, never smiled. He studied himself in the mirror, wearing fine new clothes; he drove a spiffy red car; he married Celeste and danced in his kingly robes; but you could not see him smile. In the Busytown books, all the people smiled but they were not the important things. The three-story house, cut in half to show you the insides of rooms and the spaces in between filled up with pipes, was the important thing. Lil’s father, reading the paper and smelling of a fresh shave in the morning before leaving to do business, did not smile. Neither did her mother, before going to the operating room. They were busy. Their busy-ness was important. They did not feel like smiling. Lil decided: neither did she.

At kindergarten, Miss Fiske asked Lil, “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” said Lil, who had decided to stop smiling and stay busy. She was busy noticing for the first time that the floor was too big. Under the pale, even light from the rectangles in the ceiling, it was the same color that the elephants turned when they died: Babar’s mother, shot by a hunter, and the old elephant king, who ate a poisoned mushroom. *How interesting*, thought Lil, imagining the floor was a patch of giant elephant skin, hardened and polished with special wax that kept dead things dead.

## The Bundok

Harry told her, peering into her face, “You look weird. I never noticed, you’re colored. Are you colored? You look colored.”

“Dummy,” said Bridget, Lil’s bathroom buddy. “She’s *tan*.”

“*You’re* colored,” said Harry.

“You *know* it,” said Bridget, sticking out one hip and glowering at Harry. “Dumb white boy.”

“Naptime!” said Miss Fiske. She took Lil and Bridget by the hands and, as she led them to their mats, said, “Did Harry hurt your feelings?”

“No,” said Lil.

“No way,” said Bridget.

“Well. Naptime, then,” said Miss Fiske, and when she let go of their hands, they lay down on their mats and held each other’s hands instead.

“He’s stupid,” Bridget whispered to Lil. “Anyone can tell you’re not colored. You’re *tan*.”

Lil held her breath for a second, then decided to tell Bridget one of the things she had been busy thinking lately. “Like the people in the Mr. Brothers books, from the Bundok.”

Bridget giggled. “The *boondocks!*” she said.

“Girls,” Miss Fiske sang out. “Time to creep under our haystacks like Little Boy Blue!”

Lil nodded and closed her eyes and decided not to ask why the Bundok was so funny. She was busy noticing for the first time that nap mats smelled like the bottoms of shoes. *That’s gross*, she thought, *yet also quite interesting*. The mats, after all, might smell that way because of the

## The Bundok

floor. (Forever afterward, she would think that the bottoms of shoes smelled like dead elephant.) She was also busy thinking about books. When she got home, she would pull all of the books out of the bookshelf and fill up with the quiet of the words and the pictures, but most of all she would find her favorite picture from *Mr. Brothers the Butler*, with Mr. Brothers stepping out of the Bundok river, where he has just caught a whole lot of fish and Daisy and her parents are gathered around him with their mouths in perfect O's.

\*

In the living room of the new house there were a dark green Papa Bear chair and a pale green Mama Bear chair, but there had not been a wee just-right chair until Mrs. Robby brought one back in a taxi from Woolworth's. (Before she retired.) The wee chair was a polished wood rocking chair with a cushioned seat and a pillow for the back. The upholstery was cream-colored with green-lined pictures on it, pictures of old-timey people doing old-fashioned chores like: milking a cow. Pushing a plow. Churning butter. Feeding chickens. Lil had not known how much she wanted a chair like that until the wee chair came to the living room. Before Mrs. Robby retired, she would sit in the wee chair as Mrs. Robby in the kitchen boiled a hot dog and whipped instant mashed potatoes. After a morning outside, where Lil raced herself from the plum tree to the beech tree and back, counting to eleven the first time, ten the second, finally getting fast enough to have to count to only eight, sitting in the wee chair in the dim green living room felt so good.

## The Bundok

In the evening, when the Frank Sinatra records were put on, Lil sat in the wee chair with a cup of soda and did not have to go from her father's knee to her mother's and back, while they had cocktails.

Her mother said, "Mrs. Robby can't make the trip from Brooklyn anymore, pumpkin pie. Jusko, she's nearly seventy years old. It takes her two hours—"

"More! What, are you kidding?" said her father.

"—carrying her clothes and all her things on two buses and a taxi to the new house. And it will be even worse in the winter."

"With the weather!" said her father.

Her mother's voice was careful and her words precisely formed, not like her father or Mrs. Robby, who talked like New Yorkers. Lil loved to hear the different voices, and would ask any questions at all during cocktail time, just to hear her parents talk. But asking about Mrs. Robby had been a mistake. She could tell that her parents thought she was sad, and she didn't want to be sad—she just wanted Mrs. Robby to come back, maybe to visit. Lil didn't want to cry, neither in her eyes nor in her stomach. She didn't want to be sad, just because she had decided to stop smiling. She held her soda on her knee and busied herself looking at the floor, which was covered in her mother's old green Oriental rug from Brooklyn. She could see eyes and faces hiding in the pattern of vines and hoped she would forget them before bedtime.

The night Mrs. Robby said she was going back to Brooklyn to stay, Lil had waited and waited for Mrs. Robby to stop crying. Mrs. Robby was still crying when she put Lil back to bed. She gave her one last kiss and rustled out, patting her curlers into place, and left her door open so



## The Bundok

that Lil could hear Merv Griffin and see the gray light flickering in the hall. The room next door was empty now.

\*

Later that night while Lil stared into the dark, avoiding the smiling eyes in her closet and pretending that the bedside lamp and the T.V. were on in the room next door, a storm broke over the roof, and broke against the windows—and this was much less scary than just staring into the dark. The rain made Lil think of Daisy’s umbrella. In a picture from *Mr. Brothers and the Monsoon*, Mr. Brothers was on the roof fixing a hole, with only Daisy’s umbrella for protection. If Mr. Brothers were real, and if he lived in the room next door, Lil thought, he might awaken right now and find an umbrella for her to use in the morning.

Lil got up. The umbrellas were in the basement. Her father had put them by the door to the garage, instead of in the umbrella stand by the front door. The basement stairs were carpeted in hot-orange, but the floor was half-covered in the same cold shiny tiles (dead elephant) as the kindergarten, the other half plain cement. The cement half was always wet. There were puddles on the floor sometimes, when it rained—like tonight.

“Be careful, Miss, your toes,” said Lil aloud, in Mr. Brothers’s voice, which sounded like her mother’s precise voice, except a bit English, as all butlers must sound. She padded along the very edge of the puddle to the umbrellas leaning into the corner by the door and took the blue frilled umbrella with the polka-dots, from when she turned five over the summer, which she had never gotten to use. There was no walking around outside in the rain at the new house, because there were no sidewalks. When it rained and you had to get somewhere, you went in the car.

## The Bundok

“Will this be sufficient?” she asked herself, in Mr. Brothers’ voice.

“Why, yes, Mr. Brothers. Thank you,” she answered herself, and padded back to the stairs, remembering to turn off the light behind her.

She put the umbrella into the stand by the front door, went back up the hot-orange stairs in the dark with the storm still breaking all over the house, and fell right asleep.

At breakfast time, her father was making soft-boiled eggs and toast. Lil did not go to breakfast, but ran to the front hall and peered out the door.

“This rain is most inconvenient,” she said, then—

“Why, look!” hoisting the umbrella. “How thoughtful of Mr. Brothers!”

Lil’s mother had just emerged from her room dressed for work in a suit and high heels, her makeup perfect and her perfume fresh; long after dark, she would come home smelling of the operating room with her face sweated clean. The coffee, very black and hot, with the milk alongside steaming through its gluey skin, waited for her with half of the newspaper. “Mr. Brothers?” said Lil’s mother. “Mr. Brothers, the butler from the bundok?”

Lil’s mother didn’t say *boon-docks*, like Bridget did. A long time ago in Brooklyn, her mother had read *Mr. Brothers the Butler* to her, and the way her mother read words was never wrong. *Bundok* was right, even if no one, maybe not even Mrs. Robby, would ever think so.

“Yes,” said Lil. “He anticipates my every need.”

“Listen to her!” said her father from behind his half of the newspaper. “Where do you learn those big words? What did you say? *Anthripicates?*”

## The Bundok

“Anticipates,” she repeated. Her father liked her to repeat words to him because, he said, he didn’t learn to talk from a book. In Mr. Brothers’ voice, she added, “Sir,” bowing over her umbrella.

“Don’t open that in the house,” said her mother. “Jusko, anak.” The last two words were in her mother’s language, not in the language of butlers, but because her mother spoke them in her usual beautiful voice Lil forgot, for a second, what Mr. Brothers was supposed to sound like.

Just to hear what he *was* supposed to sound like again, Lil said in his voice, “Certainly, Miss, one mustn’t open umbrellas in the house. It’s bad luck.”

And then in her own voice, “Of course not. I wouldn’t dream of it.”

Her mother was already absorbed in the newspaper, and didn’t respond. Her mother’s spoon and her father’s spoon went clink-clink in their coffees and soft-boiled eggs. Her father had put Lil’s egg into one of the cups that made it stand up; she was supposed to tear her toast into soldiers to dip into the yolk. But she wasn’t hungry. The odors of hot milk and coffee and egg, her mother’s perfume and her father’s aftershave, overwhelmed Lil’s appetite. Last night’s rain was still murmuring and she imagined Mr. Brothers standing expectant at her side.

She escaped the press of smells out to the tiled porch and the slick stairs. She stepped delicately down to the driveway, letting the gravel stick to her bare feet, to hear the rain on her umbrella. “Mr. Brothers,” she said, “do leave my slippers in the hall this afternoon. I’m sure it will be lovely to get into them directly after a long, wet day.”

“Yes, Miss, precisely so. And will it be six Oreos, as usual? The milk quite cold, in the green glass?”

## The Bundok

“Quite. So long as someone has remembered to purchase Oreos.”

“Quite.”

Behind her, through the rain, Lil heard the sounds of the washing-up, someone’s hands clinking together the white china cups and steel spoons.