

KNOTS

Due to its sympathetic nature, the water mourns. Though no one alive and aware wants this for young Drew either, especially after Drew's mental health was making remarkable progress.

During particularly rainy summers, the kind that make frugal corn farmers sing God's praises and scientists worry about climate change, deep water stays in the ditch well after school resumes. A few frogs or even an exotic Wisconsin salamander pop up around the edges where the tree branches bow low, forming a temporary pond laboratory. The kids know it's useless to make a pet out of the new amphibian arrivals, but poking a frog's spots or daring one another to lick a salamander is an acceptable pastime when humidity makes their house walls bubble. Their parents, often in town enjoying a craft pour or a few streets back hustling cards with each other, don't care too much about the specific enrichment activities of the ditch environment; the good mothers simply tell their sons and daughters to leave animal carcasses alone, because a wisp of decency must prevail somewhere in town and it's not always happening from ma and pa.

Drew says it feels like an itch, a persistent tickle, at first camouflaged by his trademark silky hair. He went to bed the night before without any fuss, then reported the new sensation over breakfast. His mother, Susan, suggested allergies. His father lives in Vermont and hasn't suggested anything in years. His younger brother, Dean, noted a "weird thing" poking straight out from Drew's ear, a little white bit with a frayed end. "Maybe a rope," he guessed between peanut butter crackers. "Let's swing!"

Susan then revised her diagnosis to acne, or perhaps a temporary pore-clogging event “like a boil growing.” But the rope-zit-boil stayed put, never draining or changing. This caused Susan to frown and fret more than usual, and Drew’s mother already did a lot of both.

While Drew’s medical mystery carried on inside, much was unfolding outside. A group of middle school kids, ages eleven to fourteen, played in the neighborhood ditch every tolerable evening. In the early spring, the ditch is a long crooked stream filled with papery leaves and lightweight trash that blows away from gutter garbage over the winter. Drew’s house sits in the lowest part of town, so a lot of runoff slides down into the drainage ditch from higher points, especially after a bad storm or quick thaw. The kids prefer to play in the ditch in the summer when there’s just spongy moss and clean water to poke around in, after some church or service organization comes through with orange vests, black bags, and a sense of something bigger than itself.

Drew is the de facto leader of the ditch kids due to his yard having the closest proximity to the water. Dusk comes quickly in early March, sometimes before dinner is on the table. Their growing middle school bodies crouch low in the moving water when headlights crest the hill, used to hiding just in case someone’s older sibling is sent to collect his or her respective ditch kid. They call that soaring crest in the road “Dead Cat Hill” — cars come over the other side so fast that wandering felines who nap on the warm asphalt don’t stand a chance. Drew has only seen fatal damage once, but that was enough, and he was careful to make sure young Dean didn’t wander over to inspect the floppy, too-still body.

When it’s the right combination of conditions both outside and in, Drew’s hair is at its early GQ best. He has the distinctive hair of a kid who is both retro-cool and ahead of his time;

longer locks in back with a burst of curly bangs in the front, all impeccably styled via the atmosphere of his midwest town and his troubled mind. It's the kind of hair that sweeps over big ears beautifully, hiding a bit of twisted trouble quite well. There really aren't cool kids in Benton until high school, but Drew will be a hipster when his time arrives. He'll be on prom court with blue sneakers and will probably hook the lead in the school play, too — hopefully a moody David Rabe or August Wilson exposition to frame his future complexities. For now, Drew is a suburban, middle class, oldest child who delights every teacher he meets with his soft, polite manners and intellectual promise; he's certainly crafty enough to hide his mental health quirks.

Over a Saturday lunch of chicken wings and asparagus, Susan sees the thing in Drew's head loop out and dangle like an earring. Drew sits straight up and twists his back to her, stuffing the accessory back into his head.

After this, mother and son mutually agree that Drew would be best served by the health clinic on the east side of town.

“Have you tried pulling it? Maybe it's just a loose bit from *a shirt*,” the nurse cuts while taking Drew's vitals, stressing the last words hard enough to convey her disenchantment. She holds a pen beam of light against the side of his cheek. “Yeah, I'm pulling it,” she concludes. Drew's mother agrees, exchanging an embarrassed look with the nurse. Since his father's Vermont move, Drew is a well-documented patient here.

Largely stunned into an inactive state over his latest life trial, Drew simply shrugs. The nurse snaps on her blue gloves while Drew's little brother Dean grips the sides of his chair. Susan stays still, biting her lower lip and wondering about the copay for lint removal.

The nurse gives the white thing a swift yank. Drew's well-heeled mother lets out an unusual "holy shit!" while an arm's length of thread whirs out of Drew's head like cheap drugstore floss. Drew's eyes flutter and he pleads for the nurse to stop, slapping his hands against his skull.

Picking up her surgical scissors, the nurse is taken aback but also irritated by her frequent flier. She gives the string a snip before dropping the collected contents of Drew's head into a specimen jar. "I think there's a lot more in there," she says, signing off on a lab order. "We'll get this tested."

"Tested for what?" Drew asks.

"For bacteria. For an infection. Foreign objects don't belong in your ears, Drew."

As they buckle back into the car, young Dean leans over to look inside Drew's ear again. To him, it looks like just enough string to fly a kite.

The ditch kids are nearly done tying together a milk jug raft, lovingly crafted from rescued plastic. No one's older brother or sister wanted to drive the kids around to the town's dumpsters, so the seven ditch kids pulled a convoy of wagons over Dead Cat Hill, around the elementary school lot, and to the loading dock where the sanitation trucks park. The kids stacked and fashioned the freshly collected trash with stolen neck ties and garage jump ropes before parading their ship back to the ditch. "I think this milk jug came from my house," one of the kids decides, rubbing his thumb over the 2% label. "How funny."

The kids know the raft isn't sturdy enough to transport anyone anywhere, but it's cool to load it up with pop tops and dandelions and pebbles and watch it float down the slow moving stream for a while, catching up to their curious boat just before it tips over in a current.

"Do you think the lab called your house yet?" Sam asks Drew. Sam is a ginger with a six-pack, cut and lithe from his many days of roaming back and forth between Benton's boundaries like a stray Irish Setter.

Maisy perks up at this question, squinting at the cotton ball shoved inside Drew's ear. "Did it hurt when the nurse pulled?"

Drew tickles the water's surface. At the clinic, he could *hear* the string moving inside his head. He is sure yards remain. He is probably growing more string somehow, the way toenails and hair grow.

He answers, "They're looking for an infection. I don't know how long that takes." As the water caresses his fingertips, he suddenly recoils, splashing out of the ditch and back to the grassy bank.

His friends stand motionless, worrying for their friend and his strange episodes.

"It's from the water," Drew says. "The ditch is making me sick."

The water shifts uncomfortably.

Susan rinses spaghetti noodles for dinner. They eat a lot of pasta; she can afford spiral ham or baked turkey each night, but she likes using the pretty teal colander Drew bought her for Christmas. Drew pops out of the craft room next to the kitchen to cozy up beside her, twirling steamy noodles right out of the colander. Growing boys can smell noodles. He finishes half of his supper before he even sits down, washing it away with a large glass of ice water from the tap.

Susan is thinking about Drew's clinic appointment when her son offers, "I got this way from the ditch."

"What way?" Susan asks quietly, being careful to speak in a relaxed tone. He is getting better at sensing anxiety, and accusations.

Her son crunches an ice cube between molars before continuing. "My *sick* way. The water gets really gross. Everyone is always trying to clean it up. I bet all kinds of stuff is growing in me. Probably cancer. I probably have all sorts of sick junk in my body. I'm polluted now."

Susan listens to her son's word choices carefully, trying to determine if his hypochondriac tendencies are getting more dramatic.

Her son throws down his glass onto the tile kitchen floor, tap water and shards spraying between their feet. "This water," he says. "Our water."

Divorced. Susan feels the most responsible for the illness in Drew's head.

Eleven P.M. Susan listens outside of Dean's door. She can hear his electric sound machine making soft machine-waves, but she can not hear her youngest son breathing, or snoring, or stirring. She can not hear anything, which means he may not even be alive, but the stillness is satisfactory enough for her to move to Drew's door. Here, she grips the knob tightly and turns fast, avoiding that known *click* if you move the silver too slowly.

Inside, Drew is just a silhouette, the hallway light catching his flannel pajamas just enough to make him glow like the radioactive chemicals he thinks are everywhere: in his house, in his body, at his school, in his food, in his oxygen.

This is the time of night for her secret routine. Susan slips on her gray athletic shoes, zips up her jacket, and slides out the patio door. Only porch lights are awake in her neighborhood of

long driveways, red brick houses and daisy gardens. Her streets are a perfect blend of family living with enough elbow room for privacy. She fought hard to keep her house in the settlement; it took three snappily-dressed lawyers from Madison to stay tucked into her cul-de-sac.

The boys never saw their father again.

At the top of the hill, Susan has to make her nightly decision. Here she stretches a while, the last place to lunge and bend with the house still in view, the last point where she still feels like a decent, watchful mother. The top of the hill is also her last position until freedom; once she crosses over, she is technically abandoning her sleeping children.

With one last look at her house before sought-after empty streets, she goes. The night air pops open her community and she takes note of everything, the only time she doesn't have to focus on keeping two kids safely in front of everything else. Now she can see the exact height of each taupe, cinnamon, and navy blue mailbox; the particular way — sometimes graceful, other times sharply — front yards slope toward the curb for rain and grass fertilizer to dump into the sewer grates; the thickness of bumpy tree trunks; and the way no two nights smell the same. Soon she has run all the way to the school buildings, two miles past the neighborhood bus stop, her breathing more jagged now but her senses ever-sharpening. Here there are yellow parking lines, evenly spaced metal windows, a faint buzz from something large behind a utility fence, and the smell of oily tortillas. It was taco day at school, she remembers, as she hairpins back toward home to add another \$100 to Drew's lunch account.

Familiar guilt returns as she ascends the back side of her street's hill, realizing that young Dean will basically need to raise himself with all the attention that Drew requires. She read picture books to Drew, always, every day. Practiced addition with Drew. Took him to museums.

Took him to the theater. Took him to interesting places, special places, with the mission of making fresh mother-son memories, *only* mother-son memories. There was hot fudge sundae outings, splash pad romps, and carousel rides at the zoo. If Drew is already this damaged when she tried so hard, what will become of Dean?

Seeing her house again from the top of the hill always provides relief. Nothing to feel guilty about, just out for some air. Everything is normal. Nothing happened. No flames or tornadoes took the house and her sleeping sons away.

But instead of jogging down the incline and back up her driveway, Susan makes a hard left to visit the drainage ditch the neighborhood kids are always poking around in. To her, this little watering hole always seemed like a harmless way for Drew to get in some social time — heck, even better without screens and with the full disposal of nature, right? How very traditional, how creative and quaint, how circa 1950s, Susan used to think, craning her head out a window to watch the big kids throw rocks and mud into the current.

The ditch is pretty wide this time of year; lots of extra water from the spring rains and the last of the melting snow piles further north. She fishes her cell phone from her pocket, tapping on the digital flashlight. The water is dark but alive under the glow, moving faster than she realized. Swirling water patterns skim the surface with tiny gnat-clouds dancing on top. It won't be long until the mosquitoes hatch and Drew comes home with red dots he'll insist are burst capillaries or the start of dengue fever. She crouches low, wondering how deep the middle is, wondering what the kids really do out here in those distinct two hours after school before parents are home, when America's youth population is largely unsupervised and feral.

She wonders if she should call the other mothers and fathers to ask if any of their children seem sick. But no, she decides, it's just her weirdo kid.

Susan lets her fingers fall into the water. The current moves around her slender hand, making a soft little gurgle when it hits her just right. The water is colder than she expected, like a real stream instead of the town's nasty overflow. Like a lake, like an ocean. Maybe there are fish in here. Maybe there are eels, and crocodiles, and manta rays. She cups her hand and brings it to her mouth, taking a small sip. She pauses, waiting to turn green, waiting to self-diagnose the freshly arriving cancer like Drew would. Nothing happens. She smirks and takes another sip. Then another, and another, before she has waded right into the water, running pants and jacket and all, to splash up big scoopfuls of water, now drinking so much water she is choking and coughing, then laughing at her foolishness. She noisily flops onto her back in a star-shape, floating away like one of the child's twigs, squinting her eyes until she sees reassuring Mars in the night sky.

She is still here.

Inside the house, Drew slips into the silent craft room. There are machines here that could make noise — an embroidery machine, a sewing machine — but nothing has been plugged in and running for years. There is a particularly loud laminating machine that his younger brother Dean, who is still developing his language skills, named “the lamenter.”

The house was built in the early '90s and sold as an “executive home,” but this designated office space was earmarked for domestic affairs at the start of escrow. Drew's mother talks about a “grand garage sale” as often as she speaks of returning to her former hobbies, but only Drew's hands work this room now.

He sits at the laminator, holding up smooth clear sheets of fall leaves that he carefully pressed, arranged, and preserved for Dean. He picks up scissors to cut around the edges of a yellow aspen leaf, speckled with brown decay marks that Dean calls “freckles.” Trapped, flawed, and flattened in its sticky condition, the small heart-shaped leaf cannot die further. Stopping the dying process was relieving to Drew, who thinks the cutout would make a fine Christmas ornament if hung using green, healthy yarn. The red maple leaf is still brilliant and perfect, too nice to see for but one season. This leaf will be a bookmark for Drew, who is starting to page through early readers with pictures of barn animals and house cats. The orange oak leaf is probably the flashiest, having absorbed extra water from skimming the drainage ditch on its droopy branch. It was an easy one for Dean to pluck, who leaned over to grab “the nicest leaf on the whole tree.” This one will be a sun catcher, thinks Drew, taking a seat at a cutting mat.

But this is enough science for one day.

Drew pulls open a metal desk draw filled with spools of thread, all arranged by color in a pleasing ombre effect. It’s time to refill the tiny spool in his head. Looking down at the preserved leaves for inspiration, he wants to choose orange, but is always drawn to the purity of white, deciding it’s a cleaner choice to go inside his body.

He snips off a long piece and delicately practices his old Boy Scout knots first, not that he can really see the knots on such thin material. Stretched leather is the preferred choice for making knots, but that’d be far too bulky to shove inside his head. Although, leather could really block sounds — never hearing others talk, never having to respond at all. The final memories Drew made with his father were going to Boy Scout meetings together around town, making knots just like this.

Drew makes the tiniest knot he can with the thinnest white thread he can find, and winds it onto the tiniest bobbin his mother owns, the one made for ornate machine work. This bobbin will sit at the entrance to his brain. He loves keeping his hands busy: winding, winding, winding. The spool fills up, nice and snug, with just a bit of string hanging out. He should probably learn to crochet or knit, something productive, something valued. He could be the cool boy who makes rainbow scarves with tassels, or in Harry Potter house colors, for the long winters of Benton that pull down the soul.

He often wonders if his dad really left, or if that's been fabricated, too.

Drew yanks his sore earlobe and shoves the bobbin inside, wincing at the resistance.

Come morning, Susan smiles and cereal, packing her briefcase and Dean's little backpack. She asks Drew about everything familiar and fine while the sun rises: homework, sports tryouts, weekend plans, chore lists. She is unaware that while she is out running in the dark, he is inside sewing his head.

After Susan arrives at work, the nurse finally calls with the lab report. "It's just string. It's not infected. It's not anything, it's just string. His ear is probably full of string."

It's not anything. There's a bit of back and forth before she thanks the nurse and immediately opens her tracking spreadsheet to add this incident for the therapist's records. A tear falls onto her desk while she stands to look out an office window, her usual remedy after disturbing news about Drew.

Mark from the company's IT department approaches a few minutes later. "Can I refill your coffee?" he asks. Susan has been candid about her life over the years here, her work being

the only comforting constant in the last decade. Everyone responds warmly and surprisingly authentically, but midwest values are still a thing in small Wisconsin towns.

She politely declines the coffee, so Mark takes to staring out the window with her. There are still a lot of things going right, she faithfully reminds herself. Money isn't a problem. Both kids have friends. They are curious, and kind. The house is in good shape. Haven't needed any major repairs yet.

"Is it self-harm?" Mark asks quietly. "Sorry, couldn't help but hear a bit of that phone call. My nephew cuts himself. If you want, I could put you in touch with my sister."

Susan leaves work early.

As she drives across town, crisscrossing over her running path, she knows the ditch kids are out. The sun is warm. The clouds are few. The yellow daffodils and purple tulips have returned. Who wouldn't be outside? It's like the most perfect Easter day. It's like the most perfect setting for a suburban childhood, which Drew can't enjoy because of his affliction. Because of her choices.

She toys with the idea of picking up Dean from daycare an hour early, but instead merely lingers in the facility's parking lot, watching him out at recess like a distant voyeur. She stands on a concrete square, her light spring pea coat flapping at the ends while he bounces in and out of sight. The children's voices and laughter carry to her, hitting her cheeks and ears and skin with happiness, real happiness, as their sounds soar back from the big metal slides. The chirps from her own son find her first, a little beacon blinking back to her. He is content. She is sure.

A moment later, the car is in reverse and she is gone, the seats around her empty.

Just driving up the backside of her street's "freedom hill" provokes the same feelings of guilt and excitement as running down it when the kids are asleep. Drew and his friends immediately pop into view as she crests, their little bodies crouched low along the ditch, growing bigger and more defined as she pulls off to the side.

The sound of her car door shutting snaps seven small heads up in unison like the start of a choreographed dance routine. All of the kids stay low except Drew, who grows tall, the lead in this new stage production.

"You're home early," he says. "Is Dean sick?"

Susan steps closer, close enough to hear the little splashes from the stream's current. She looks down at the water, remembering how easily she floated, glad that little Dean hasn't been attracted to the ditch yet. Her eyes go from Drew's wet shoes to his face.

"Can you hear me alright?"

Drew's face scrunches up. The other kids are still squatting, perhaps scared of Susan, perhaps just weirded out and trying to stay invisible, hoping she'll leave soon and they can get back to their stories and plans.

"I said, can you hear me alright?" Susan yells, leaning forward across the ditch with her fists curled.

"Yeah, stop it. What do you want?" Drew says, reacting to his mother's tension with more edge.

Susan splashes across their boundary in her good work heels, stockings soaked. "Just making sure you can hear me," she screams, "With all that goddamn sewing thread shoved inside

your head. Do I need to start locking all the doors? Do I need to hide the scissors and needles, too?”

The ditch kids run home.

It's the right time of night again. She knows by the way the light changes inside the house, a smoky navy now, like the sky is suffocating. The space around her was always this shade of navy as he arrived home from work — much too late for arriving anywhere, the light gripping around her throat.

This time, Susan doesn't stop in front of bedroom doors to listen for breaths, to hope the faint sounds of a pleasant in-progress dream reassuringly part the air. She has rearranged all of her justifications for leaving the kids lately, settling on the positive “self-care” women's awakening movement, but really, it's because she wants to be alone. Solitude is healing.

Is it possible for a new season to arrive in a day? It's nearly midnight, but rabbits are out chewing iris stems, and a rogue peeper frog is working on his tenor line. Susan decides to run up the hill, to feel her chest ache immediately, at the forefront. She accelerates so fast down the other side that her calves shake. Only minutes into her run, she is already limping, injured and frustrated but thrilled to be loose. She arm-pumps right past a stop sign, right through an intersection, never looking left or right, not caring about cars or people or the new pain.

She stops when her own son walks out from behind a utility pole. Her acceleration halts so abruptly that her sneakers squeak like the asphalt of Main Street has become a basketball court.

Mom is playing defense. They are inches apart, son only a bit shorter than mother. He'll probably surpass her before high school, a new teenager, lanky and lean. Despite the navy sky,

despite muted features, their hearts recognize one another's. Drew's heart is more like her ex-husband's, tender at its core but hard for outsiders, and especially hard for insiders, to read and to live beside.

"You left Dean alone?" they say in unison, even on the same pitches with the same swell in dynamics at the end, their genetics finally finding some common ground. *Alone?*

Drew is frustrated, but his mother is enraged. "You get back to the house *now*," she seethes, winded and pissed.

Her son's eyebrows have a particular way of furrowing that resembles only one other person in their lineage, now only comparable through photographs of early birthdays and preschool graduation. "Did Dad leave us, or did you leave him?" Drew asks.

Susan has always wondered how much of Drew's mind is still occupied with his father. Is he a man Drew only knows through annual traditions — through popsicle Christmas ornaments and a trip to see a live nativity on Main Street — or does Drew walk beside his father each day, each hour, opaque but still touchable, just off to the left side of his brain? Is Drew different now because of his father, or because he has no father? Does the navy night suffocate him, too?

On the other side of all of this, of this fleeting season, of this unfolding night, the last clump of snow will melt into the creek and the steadfast sun will burn through and sterilize the ache. Susan realizes that this could be the closure Drew needs to move forward, to grow. Maybe even to sterilize his sickness, his sadness, too. Her fists uncurl, her lungs fall inward.

"He left us, Drew. He didn't want a family, but I do."

Drew also has his father's crooked chin, now softening, and his father's forehead, now relaxing its crimp. "He's not coming back?" he wants to know, the first time he's asked aloud.

Susan moves her ringless finger to touch Drew's hair, tucking back his trademark waves to find the end of the white thread. Her fingernail slides just far enough into Drew's ear to snap out the plastic spool, which releases with a satisfying pop before softly clinking to the street.

“No, Drew. He's not coming back. But I'm staying.”

As they turn to walk up the hill toward home, Susan finally senses something fresh from her son, a boy so knotted up with anxiety and dread, so messy and tangled.

Relief.