



# SUMMERLAND

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*Summerland*

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# FIRST BASE

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# The Worst Ballplayer in the History of Clam Island, Washington

ETHAN SAID, "I hate baseball."

He said it as he followed his father out of the house, in his uniform and spikes. His jersey read ROOSTERS in curvy red script. On the back it said RUTH'S FLUFF 'N' FOLD.

"I hate it," he said again, knowing it was cruel. His father was a great lover of baseball.

But Mr. Feld didn't say anything in reply. He just locked the door, tried the knob, and then put his arm around Ethan's shoulders. They walked down the muddy path to the driveway and got into Mr. Feld's Saab station wagon. The car's name was Skidbladnir, but usually they just called her Skid. She was oranger than anything else within a five-hundred-mile radius of Clam Island, including traffic cones, U-Haul trailers, and a fair number of actual oranges. She was so old that, as she went along, she made squeaking and rattling noises that sounded more like the sounds of a horse buggy than of an automobile. Her gauges and knobs were all labelled in Swedish, which was not a language that either Mr. Feld or Ethan, or for that matter anyone in Ethan's family going back twenty generations on both sides, could speak. They rolled, squeaking and rattling, down from the little pink house where they lived, atop a small barren hill at the centre of the island, and headed west, towards Summerland.

"I made *three* errors in the last game," Ethan reminded his father, as they drove to pick up Jennifer T. Rideout, the Roosters' first baseman, who had called to say that she needed a ride. Ethan figured that his father was probably *not* going to let him out of playing in today's game against the Shopwax Angels; but you never knew. Ethan felt that he could make a pretty good case for his staying home, and Mr. Feld was always willing to listen to a good argument, backed up with sound evidence. "Dan Desjardins said that I directly caused four runs to score."

"Plenty of good ballplayers have made three errors in a game," Mr. Feld said, turning onto the Clam Island Highway, which ran from one end of the island to the other, and was not, as far as Ethan was concerned, a highway at all. It was an ordinary two-lane road, lumpy and devoid of cars like every other road on the lumpy, empty little island. "It happens all the time."

Mr. Feld was a large, stout man with a short but unruly beard like tangled black wool. He was both a recent widower and a designer of lighter-than-air dirigibles, neither a class of person known for paying a lot of attention to clothes. Mr. Feld never wore anything in the summer but a clean T-shirt and a ragged pair of patched blue jeans. In the wintertime he added a heavy sweater, and that was it. But on game days, like today, he proudly wore a Ruth's Fluff 'n' Fold Roosters T-shirt, size XXL, that he had bought from Ethan's coach, Mr. Perry Olafssen. None of the other Rooster fathers wore shirts that matched their sons'.

"I hate it that they even *count* errors," Ethan said, pressing on with his case. To show his father just how disgusted he was by the whole *idea* of counting errors, he threw his mitt against the dashboard of the car. It kicked up a cloud of infield dust. Ethan coughed energetically, hoping to suggest that the very atoms of dirt on which he would be standing when they got to Ian "Jock" MacDougal Regional Ball Field were noxious to him. "What kind of game is that? No other sport do they do that, Dad. There's no other sport where they put the errors on the freaking *scoreboard* for everybody to look at. They don't even *have* errors in other sports. They have *fouls*. They have

*penalties*. Those are things that players could get on purpose, you know. But in baseball they keep track of how many *accidents* you have.”

Mr. Feld smiled. Unlike Ethan, he was not a talkative fellow. But he always seemed to enjoy listening to his son rant and rave about one thing or another. His wife, the late Dr. Feld, had been prone to the same kind of verbal explosions. Mr. Feld didn't know that Ethan was only ever talkative around *him*.

“Ethan,” Mr. Feld said, shaking his head in sorrow. He reached over to put a hand on Ethan's shoulder. Skid lurched wildly to the left, springs squealing, creaking like a buckboard in an old western movie. Her noticeable colour and Mr. Feld's distracted style of driving had, in the short time that the Feld men had been living on Clam Island, made the car a well-known local road hazard. “Errors... Well, they are a part of life, Ethan,” he tried to explain. “Fouls and penalties, general speaking, are not. That's why baseball is more like life than other games. Sometimes I feel like that all I do in life, keep track of my errors.”

“But, Dad, you're a grown-up,” Ethan reminded him. “A kid's life isn't supposed to be that way. Dad—look out!”

Ethan slammed his hands against the dashboard, as if that would stop the car. There was a small animal, no bigger than a cat, in the westbound lane of Clam Island Highway – they were headed right at it. In another instant they would mash it under their wheels. But the animal just seemed to be standing there, an alert little creature, rusty as a pile of leaves, sharp-eared, peering directly at Ethan with its big, round, staring black eyes.

“Stop!” Ethan yelled.

Mr. Feld hit the brakes, and the tires burped against the blacktop. The car shuddered, and then the engine stalled and died. Their seat belts were made of some kind of thick Swedish webbing material that could probably stop bullets, and the buckles were like a couple of iron padlocks. So the Felds were all right. But Ethan's mitt flew out of his lap and banged into the glove compartment door. A huge cloud of dust from the mitt filled the car. Maps of Seattle, Colorado Springs, Philadelphia, and a very old one of Göteborg, Sweden, came tumbling out of the glove compartment, along with a Band-Aid can filled with quarters, and a Rodrigo Buendía baseball card.

“What is it? What was it?” said Mr. Feld, looking wildly around. He wiped the inside of the windshield with his forearm and peered out. There was nothing in the road at all now, and nothing moving in the trees on either side. Ethan had never seen anything emptier than the Clam Island Highway at that moment. The silence in the car, broken only by the chiming of Mr. Feld's key ring against the ignition, was like the sound of that emptiness. “Ethan, what did you see?”

“A fox,” Ethan said, though even as he said it he felt that he somehow had it wrong. The animal's head and snout had been like a fox's, and there had been the fat red brush of a tail, but somehow that well, the *posture* of the animal hadn't been—*vulpine*, was the word. Not foxlike. The thing had seemed to be standing, hunched over, on its hind legs, like a monkey, with its front paws scraping the ground.” I think it was a fox. Actually, come to think of it, it might have been a lemur.”

“A lemur,” Mr. Feld said. He restarted the car, rubbing at his shoulder where the seat belt had dug in. Ethan's shoulder was feeling a little sore, too.” On Clam Island.”

“Uh-huh. Or, no, actually I think it was a bushbaby.”

“A bushbaby.”

“Uh-huh. They live in Africa and feed on insects. They peel the bark from trees to find the tasty and nutritious gum underneath.” Ethan had recently seen an entire programme devoted to bushbabies on the Fauna Channel. “Maybe it escaped from a zoo. Maybe someone on the island kept

bushbabies.”

“Could be,” said Mr. Feld. “But it was probably a fox.”

They rode past the V.F.W. hall, and the obelisk-shaped monument to the Clam Island pioneers. They drove alongside the cemetery where the ancestors and loved ones of almost everyone now living on Clam Island, except for Ethan and his father, were buried. Ethan’s mother was buried in a cemetery in Colorado Springs, a thousand miles away. Ethan thought of that nearly every time they went past the Clam Island cemetery. He suspected that his father did, too. They always fell silent along that stretch of road.

“I really think it was a bushbaby,” Ethan said at last.

“Ethan Feld, if you say the word ‘bushbaby’ one more time...”

“Dad, I’m sorry, I know you’re mad at me, but I...” Ethan took a deep breath and held it for a few seconds. “I don’t think I want to play baseball anymore.”

Mr. Feld didn’t say anything at first. He just drove, watching the side of the road for the turn-off for the Rideout place.

Then he said, “I’m very sorry to hear that.”

As Ethan had heard many times, the first scientific experiment that Mr. Feld had ever performed in his whole life, back when he was eight years old, in Philadelphia, PA, was to see if he could turn himself into a left-handed pitcher. He had read that a kid who could throw left-handed had a better chance of making it to the big leagues. He hung an old tyre from a tree in his grandmother’s backyard, and every day for a whole summer tried to throw a baseball through the tyre a hundred times with his left arm. Then, when he could throw it straight and hard, he taught himself to throw a knuckleball, a slow pitch that travels without spinning, and makes its way towards the hitter like a butterfly over a bed of flowers, fluttering. It was not a very good knuckleball, though, and when he tried to throw it in real games, the other boys jumped all over it. Yet its crazy motion interested him, and Mr. Feld had begun to wonder about the shapes of things, and about the way air went over and around something that was round and moving very fast. In the end he had given up baseball for aerodynamics. But he had never forgotten, to this day, the way it felt to stand on the top of that small, neat hill of brown dirt, in the middle of a green field, holding on to a little piece of something that could fly.

“Dad?”

“*Ethan?*” said Mr. Feld. Now he sounded a little annoyed. “If you don’t want to play anymore then that’s all right with me. Forget it. I understand. Nobody likes to lose every time.”

The Ruth’s Fluff ’n’ Fold Roosters had, as a matter of fact, lost all of their first seven games that season. In the opinion of most of the Roosters, and of their coach, Mr. Perry Olafssen, the presence of Ethan Feld on the team went a long way to explaining their troubles on the field. It was agreed by nearly everyone who watched him take the field that Ethan Feld was the least gifted ballplayer that Clam Island had ever seen. It was hard to decide, really, why this should be so. Ethan was a boy of average height, a little stocky, you might have said, but healthy and alert. He was not a terrible klutz, and he could run pretty well, if something worth running from, such as a bee, was after him. Yet every time he put on his uniform and stepped out onto the dusty grey dirt of Jock MacDougal Field, something seemed to go dreadfully wrong.

“But I’m afraid, son,” Mr. Feld continued, “you can’t just not show up for today’s game. The team is counting on you.”

“Yeah, right.”

“Mr. Olafssen is counting on you.”

“Counting on me to make three errors.”

They had reached the ramshackle assortment of roadside mailboxes that marked the entrance to the Rideout place. Ethan sensed that he was running out of time. Once Jennifer T. Rideout was in the car, there would be no hope of escape from today's game. Jennifer T. didn't have a whole lot of patience in general for listening to Ethan's arguments, however good they might be, or how solid his evidence. She just thought what she thought, and got on with it. But this was especially true when it came to baseball. Ethan was going to have to work fast.

"Baseball is a stupid game," he said, going for broke. "It's so *dull*."

"No, Ethan," his father said sadly, "it really, really isn't."

"I find it quite boring."

"Nothing is boring, son—" his father began.

"I know, I know," Ethan said. " 'Nothing is boring except to people who aren't really paying attention.' " This was something he had heard from his father many, many times. It was his father's motto. His mother's motto had been, "People could learn a lot from llamas." His mother was a veterinarian. When the Felds lived in Colorado Springs, she had specialised in caring for the vigilant, fierce, and intelligent guard llamas that Rocky Mountain sheep-herders use to protect their flocks from dogs and coyotes.

"That's right," his father said, nodding in agreement with his own familiar wisdom. He turned in the long, ruined gravel track that led to the tumbledown houses in the woods where all the Rideouts lived. "You have to pay attention, in life and in baseball."

"But nothing *happens*. It's so *slow*."

"Well, that's true," his father said. "Everything used to be slow. Now almost nothing is. But are you any happier, son?"

Ethan did not know how to answer this. When his father was at the controls of one of his big, slow sky-whales, sailing nowhere in particular at a top speed of thirty-five miles per hour, the smile never left his face. If he ever managed to sell the idea of the Zeppelina, the affordable family airship,\* it would be on the basis of that smile.

Mr. Feld pulled into a wash of gravel-streaked mud in front of the house where Jennifer T. lived with her twin brothers Darrin and Dirk, her grandmother Billy Ann, her two great aunts, and her uncle Mo. Everybody in the house was either very old or very young. Jennifer T.'s father did not seem to live anywhere at all – he just showed up, from time to time – and her mother had gone to Alaska to work for a summer, not long after the twins were born, and never come back. Ethan wasn't too sure who was living in any of the three other houses scattered like dice in the green clearing. But they were all Rideouts, too. There had been Rideouts on Clam Island for a very long time. They claimed to be descended from the original Indian inhabitants of the island, though in school Ethan had learned that when the first white settlers arrived on Clam Island, in 1872, there was no one living there at all, Indian or otherwise. When Mrs. Clutch, the social studies teacher, had informed them of this, Jennifer T. got so angry that she bit a pencil in half. Ethan had been very impressed by that. He was also impressed by Jennifer T.'s great-uncle Mo. Mo Rideout was the oldest man Ethan had ever seen. He was a full-blooded Salishan Indian, who, Jennifer T. said, had played in the Negro Leagues, and for three seasons with the Seattle Rainiers in the old Pacific Coast League, long, long ago.

Mr. Feld didn't need to honk; Jennifer T. was waiting for them on the sagging porch. She picked up her huge equipment bag and came down the porch steps, taking them two at a time. She could never seem to get away fast enough from her house. There had been times in Ethan's life – when his mother was dying inside it, for example – when Ethan had felt the same way about his own house.

As usual, Jennifer T.'s uniform was spotless. Her knit trousers, her jersey, her sanitary socks, were



always somehow whiter than anybody else's. (Jennifer T., as Mr. Feld never tired of reminding Ethan did all of her own washing.) She had tied her long blue-black hair in a ponytail that was pulled through the gap at the back of her ball cap, where you snapped the plastic strap.

She threw her bag onto the backseat and then climbed in beside it. She carried into the car the lingering stink of her grandmother's cigarettes and a strong odour of bubble gum – she chewed the shredded kind that pretended to be chewing tobacco in a pouch.

“Hey.”

“Hey.”

“Hello, Jennifer T.,” Mr. Feld said. “Buckle up and let me tell you what my son has been attempting to convince me to let him do.”

This was the moment that Ethan had been dreading.

“I saw a bushbaby,” he said quickly. “An African bushbaby, at first I thought it was a fox, but it walked like a monkey, and I—”

“Ethan says he wants to quit the team,” said Mr. Feld.

Jennifer T. snapped her gum a few times. She unzipped the ragged old equipment bag, patched with duct tape and stained by decades of grass and Gatorade. She took out her first-baseman's mitt, which she kept carefully oiled with a mysterious substance called neet's foot oil and wrapped in an Ace bandage, with a tennis ball tucked in the pocket to maintain its shape. The glove was much older than she was and had been printed with the signature of someone named Keith Hernandez. Jennifer unwound the bandage tenderly, filling the car with a pungent, farmyard kind of smell.

“I don't think so, Feld,” she said. She gave her gum another loud snap. “Not going to happen.”

And that was the end of the discussion.

CLAM ISLAND WAS a small, green, damp corner of the world. It was known, if at all, mostly for three things. First was its clams. Second was the collapse, in 1943, of the giant Clam Narrows Bridge. You might have seen an old film of that spectacular disaster, on TV: the long steel bridge-deck flapping and whipping around like a gigantic loose shoelace just before it falls to pieces and splashes into the chilly waters of Puget Sound. The Clam Islanders had never really taken to the bridge that connected them to the mainland, and they were not sorry to see it go. They went back to riding the Clam Island Ferry, which they greatly preferred. You could not get a cup of coffee or clam chowder, or hear a word about your neighbour's sick cousin or chicken, on the Clam Narrows Bridge. From time to time, there would be talk of rebuilding the span, but a lot of people seemed to feel that maybe there just ought not to be a bridge connecting Clam Island to the mainland. Islands have always been strange and magical places; crossing the water to reach them ought to be, even in a small way, an adventure.

The last thing that Clam Island was known for, along with its excellent clams (if you liked clam chowder) and its falling-down bridge, was its rain. Even in a part of the world where the people were accustomed to drizzles and downpours, Clam Island was considered uncommonly damp. It was said that at least once a day, on Clam Island, in winter or summer, it rained for at least twenty minutes. People said this about Clam Island on Orcas Island, and on San Juan Island, and down in Tacoma and Seattle. But the people of Clam Island knew that this saying was not entirely true. They knew – it was one of the first things they learned as children about their home – that at the westernmost tip of the island, in the summertime, it *never* rained. Not even for a minute and a half. A tiny, freak weather system ensured that this zone of the island, perhaps a square mile in all, knew a June, July, and August that were perfectly dry and sunny.

Clam Island, seen on a map, looked like a boar that was running west. It had a big snout – called

the West End – tipped with a single long jagged tusk. Most of the locals called this westernmost sp where it never rained in the summer the Boar Tooth, or the West Tooth, or just the Tooth; to others was always known as Summerland. The Tooth was where the island’s young people went to whi away their long vacations, where the club picnics, league barbecues, and summer weddings were p on, and, above all, it was where the islanders went to play baseball.

They had been playing there since shortly after the arrival of the Clam Island pioneers in 1872. A the back of Hurley’s Hardware, in town, there was a photograph of a bunch of tough-looking logge and fishermen, in old-time flannels and moustaches, posing with their bats in the shade of a spreadi madrona tree. The picture was captioned CLAM ISLAND NINE, SUMMERLAND, 1883.

For a long time – so long that men were born, grew up, and died in the arms of the game – baseba flourished on Clam Island. There were a dozen different leagues, made up of players of all ages, bo male and female. Times had been better on Clam Island in those days. People were once more parti to eating raw shellfish than they are now. An ordinary American working man, not so long ag thought nothing of tossing back three or four dozen salty, slippery bivalves at lunch. The Clam Boo and the universal love of baseball had gone hand in hand for many years. Now the clam beds had be mostly spoiled by plankton blooms and pollution, and as for the young people of Clam Island, eve though some of them could hit, run, and catch the ball, the sad truth was that none of them really care for baseball very much. Many preferred basketball, and others preferred riding dirt bicycles, and som just liked to watch sports on television. By the time of the season I want to tell you about, the Cla Island Mustang League was home to just four teams. There were the Shopway Angels, the Dic Helsing Realty Reds, the Bigfoot Tavern Bigfoots – and the Roosters, who had, as has already be mentioned, lost all of their first seven games. In the grand scheme of the universe, losing the fir seven games of the season is nothing too grave, but to the Roosters it felt awful. Ethan was not th only one who had contemplated quitting the team.

“Now, listen, you kids,” Mr. Olafssen said, that afternoon, gathering the Roosters around hi before the game. Mr. Olafssen was a very tall, thin man with hair the colour of yellowed newspape and a sad expression. He’d had the expression even before the season began, so Ethan knew that it w not his fault that Mr. Olafssen looked so sad, but nevertheless whenever he looked at his coach, Etha felt guilty. Kyle Olafssen, Mr. Olafssen’s son, played third base, and he was also the Roosters second-best pitcher after Danny Desjardins. He could throw pretty hard for a kid, but without muc control, and since he was always in a bad mood the kids on the other teams were a little afraid of hi That was probably the best thing that Kyle had going for himself as a pitcher – he was a sourpuss, an wild.

“I know some of you left the last game feeling a little down,” Mr. Olafssen continued. “And it wa a tough loss.” Ethan could feel, like a kind of magnetic force acting on the fillings of his teeth something, how hard Mr. Olafssen was trying not to look at him, and his three errors, with those sa pale eyes. Ethan was grateful to Mr. Olafssen – nothing made Ethan Feld happier than the knowledg that nobody was looking at him – but he blushed all the same. “Now, you look at our record, you se oh and seven, I know it’s hard not to feel a little down. But what is a record? It’s just some number on a piece of paper. It doesn’t reflect who we are as people, and it doesn’t reflect who we are as team.”

“Actually,” said a deep voice, “if you had enough data, you could reduce every human being to series of numbers and coordinates on a piece of paper.”

The Roosters, who had been listening to Mr. Olafssen with a certain amount of trust, hope, an willingness to believe him, now burst into derisive laughter. Mr. Olafssen frowned as his point wa

spoiled. He turned, looking very annoyed, towards Thor Wignutt, who stood, as ever, just outside the circle of kids.

Though he was the same age as all of them, Thor towered over the other Roosters and was, in fact, the tallest eleven-year-old on Clam Island, as he had been the tallest nine-year-old, and the tallest five-year-old, and the tallest toddler, too. The top of Thor's head reached almost to the base of Mr. Olafssen's throat, and he was, if anything, broader in the shoulders. Thor was a kind of prodigy of growth in every way. He had a voice like stones rolling in a metal drum, and dark hair on his lips and cheek. He wore heavy black glasses and was generally regarded as smart, but unfortunately he was under the impression – most of the time – that he was a synthetic humanoid named TW03. TW03, Thor never tired of explaining, was the most sophisticated and marvellous piece of machinery in the history of the universe. But of course like all synthetic humanoids, for some reason he wanted nothing more than to be human. Thinking of himself as somebody who was not human, but was trying very hard, as you might imagine, often got in the way of Thor's relations with other kids his age. With his big arms and shoulders, he looked like he would be a fabulous power hitter, but usually he was out of three pitches.

"Thor," Mr. Olafssen said. "What have I told you about interrupting me to make these ridiculous statements of yours without offering the slightest shred of evidence to back them up?"

During the last game, Thor had distracted everyone with his theory that there was an active underground volcano directly beneath the Tooth that was responsible for keeping the place dry in the summertime. He claimed to be able to detect seismic disturbances with his "logical sensor array." His constant reiteration of "one of these days that thing is going to blow this entire quadrant to atoms" had irritated Mr. Olafssen nearly as much as Ethan's poor play in the field.

"Can you prove it, Thor?" Mr. Olafssen wanted to know. "Have you *got* a piece of paper with *it* written on it?"

Thor blinked. He was standing right behind Jennifer T., who was the only person on the team, and perhaps on the entire island, who ever bothered to treat Thor like a more or less normal person. She had even been over to his house, where, it was said, Mrs. Wignutt, immensely fat, lived inside a clear plastic tent breathing air out of a tank. According to Jennifer T., however, there had been no sign of any tent, or of Thor's gigantic mother, for that matter.

"It's true," Thor insisted finally. He was very stubborn in his ideas, which Ethan supposed was the case with synthetic humanoids, given the fact that they were, well, *programmed*. Ethan was probably the person, after Jennifer T., who was the friendliest with Thor, but he never treated Thor like a more or less normal person. It was clear to Ethan that Thor was not.

"Have you brought us any charts, Thor?" Mr. Olafssen pressed on. He seemed determined to be Thor at his own game. "Do you have any proof at all?"

Thor hesitated, then shook his head.

"Then I'll thank you to keep your chipset occupied with solving calculations involving balls and bats."

"Yes, sir," Thor said.

"Now, then," Mr. Olafssen began, glancing across the field at the Angels, whose coach, Mr. Gans was passing out a pair of wristbands, in the Angels colours of red and blue, to each of the boys on his team. The Angels had told everyone about the wristbands that they would be receiving that afternoon as their reward for having *won* all of their first seven games that season. They were each ornamented with a picture of the great Rodrigo Buendía, the star slugger for the big-league Angels, in Anaheim. "Here is what I would like us to do this afternoon. I want us to focus—"

“Dad?”

“Quiet, Kyle. Now. The focus for the game today is going to be on—”

“Dad!”

“Kyle, darn it, if you don’t let me talk—”

“We just want to know something.” Danny Desjardins and Tucker Corr, who were standing on either side of Kyle, looked at Ethan, who froze. He could feel the question that was coming like a trapdoor opening at the bottom of his stomach.

“What is it, Kyle?”

“Are you going to play Feld today?”

Mr. Olafssen could prevent it no longer. His sorry gaze wavered, then swung around and fastened with a snap that you could almost hear, on Ethan. He ran the tip of his tongue around his lips. Ethan could feel all the other kids on the team watching him, hoping and praying with all of their might, that Ethan would be benched. And the worst of it was that Ethan too prayed that Mr. Olafssen would say *Well, no, he sort of thought maybe Ethan had better sit this one out.* Ethan hated himself for hoping for this. He glanced over to the bleachers, where his father sat, in his size XXL Roosters jersey, among the other fathers and mothers. Mr. Feld noticed Ethan looking at him, and raised one hand in a fist, as if to say *Go get 'em, Slugger,* or something doofusy like that, and smiled a great big, horrible, hopeless smile. Ethan looked away.

“I think you’d better shut your mouth, Kyle Olafssen,” Mr. Olafssen finally said. “Before I bench your narrow behind.”

The Angels took the field. The Roosters came together and built a tower of their hands, slapping them, one by one, into a pile. Then they yelled, all together, “Break!” They did this before every game; Ethan had no idea why. But he figured that everybody else must know, and he was too embarrassed to ask. He had missed the first five minutes of the first day of practice and assumed that it had been explained then.

All the Roosters sat down, except for Jennifer T., who batted lead-off, and Kris Langenfelter, the shortstop, who was on deck. Ethan found a spot at the very end of the bench and waited, cap in his lap, to learn his fate.

Things got off to a good start, at least from his craven and shameful point of view, when the Roosters proved unable to score Jennifer T., who led off the game with a signature double, a seed that squirted off her bat over the shortstop’s head and into left field. Then in the bottom of the first, the Angels got on the scoreboard right away with a pair of runs. Ethan relaxed a little, secure in the knowledge that Mr. Olafssen would never risk dropping further behind by putting him in. He sat back on the bench, folded his hands behind his head, and looked up at the blue Summerland sky. Over the rest of Clam Island the sky, as usual during the summer months, was more pearly than blue, grey blue, full of light, as though a thin cotton bandage had been stretched across the sun. Here in Summerland however, the sky was cloudless and a rich, dark, blue, almost ultramarine. The air was fragrant with the beach smell of drying seaweed and the tang of the grey-green water that surrounded the Tooth on three sides. The sun felt warm on Ethan’s cheeks. He half closed his eyes. Maybe, he thought, baseball was a sport best enjoyed from the bench.

“You better be ready, kid,” said a voice just behind him. “Pretty soon now you going to get the call.”

Ethan looked behind him. On the other side of the low chain-link fence that separated the ball field from the spectator area, leaned a dark little man with bright green eyes. He was an old man, with white hair pulled back into a ponytail and a big, intelligent nose. His skin was the colour of a well-oiled

baseball glove. The expression on his face was half mocking and half annoyed, as if he had been disappointed to catch Ethan napping, but not surprised. There was something in his face that said he knew Ethan Feld.

“Do you know that guy?” Ethan asked Thor in a low voice.

“Negative.”

“He’s looking at me.”

“He does appear to be observing you, Captain.”

“Excuse me, sir?” Ethan said to the old man with the ponytail. “What did you just say?”

“I was merely observatin’, young man, that sooner than you think you goin’ to find yourself in the game.”

Ethan decided that the old guy was joking, or thought that he was. An informal survey that Ethan had once conducted seemed to indicate that fully seventy-three per cent of the things that adults said to him in the course of a day were intended to be jokes. But there was something in the man’s tone that worried him. So he adopted his usual strategy with adult humour, and pretended that he hadn’t heard.

In the top of the fourth, Jennifer T. came up to bat again. She carried her slim blond bat over her shoulder like a fishing pole. She stepped up to home plate with her gaze at her shoetops. You could tell that she was thinking, and that what she was thinking about was getting a hit. Jennifer T. was the only member of the Roosters – maybe the only kid on the whole Island of Clam – who truly loved baseball. She loved to wear a bright smear of green grass on her uniform pants and to hear her bat ringing in her hands like a bell. She could hit for average and with power, turn a double play all by herself, stretch a base hit into a triple and a triple into an inside-the-park home run. She never bragged about how good she was, or did anything to try to make the other players look bad. She did, however, insist that you call her “Jennifer T.”, and not just “Jennifer” or, worst of all, “Jenny”.

Bobby Bladen, the Angels’ pitcher, came in low and outside to Jennifer T. Jennifer T. had long arms, and she liked her pitches outside. She reached out with her slim bat and once again sent the ball slicing over the shortstop’s head and into left field. The left fielder had a good arm, and he got the ball right in to the second baseman, but when the dust settled Jennifer T. was safe with another double.

“Here it come, kid,” said the old man. “Get ready.”

Ethan turned to give this annoying elderly person a dirty look, but to his surprise he found that there was nobody there. Then he heard the crack of a bat, and the Roosters and all their parents cheering. Sure enough, Jennifer T. had started something. Troy Knadel singled, scoring Jennifer T. and after that, as Mr. Feld later put it, the wheels came off Bobby Bladen. The Roosters batted all the way around the order. The next time that she came up that inning, Jennifer T. drew a walk and stole second. When Kyle Olafssen finally made the third out, the Roosters had taken a 7–2 lead.

“Mr. Wignutt,” barked Mr. Olafssen. His face was all red and his pale eyes were just a little crazed looking. Five runs was the biggest lead the Roosters had had all season. “Take third.”

“But, Dad,” said Kyle Olafssen. “I’m third.”

“You’re third something, all right,” said Mr. Olafssen. “Third *what*, I have no idea. Have a season, you’re out of the game. Wignutt, get your synthetic hiney out onto the field.” He started to give Thor’s shoulder a shove in the direction of third base but then glanced at Ethan, and hesitated. “Oh and, uh, upload your, uh, your infielding software.”

Thor leapt instantly to his feet. “Yes, *sir*.”

Ethan’s heart began to pound. What if the Roosters were able to hold the lead? What if they added a few more runs? If Mr. Olafssen felt comfortable putting Thor into the game with a five-run lead

how many runs would the Roosters need before he would consider putting Ethan in? Ethan had not the slightest doubt in his ability to erase a six-, seven-, even an eight-run lead, single-handedly.

Every time he looked over towards the bleachers and saw his father sitting there, squinting, with that big carnation of a smile wilting on his face, the feeling of dread grew stronger. Then, in their half of the fifth, the Roosters added two more runs, and Ethan really began to panic. Mr. Olafssen kept glancing his way, and there were only two innings left to go after this one. The Angels put in a new pitcher, and Jennifer T. came to the plate again. This time she hit a soft line drive deep into the grass of left-centre and lighted out for second. There were two men on: that made it 11-2. Ethan stole another look at his father and saw that the strange little old man had reappeared and was sitting right beside Mr. Feld now, and staring, not at the action on the field, like the normal people in the bleachers, but *right at Ethan*. The old man nodded, then fit his fists together as if they were stacked up on the handle of a bat, and swung. He pointed at Ethan, and grinned. Ethan looked away. His gaze travelled around the field, towards the parking lot, then out beyond that to the edge of the woods. There, atop a fallen birch, he caught a glimpse of something quick and ruddy, with a luxuriant tail.

That was when Ethan did something that surprised him. He got up from the bench, muttered something to no one in particular about needing to pee really bad. He didn't stop to think, and he didn't look back. He just took off into the woods after the bushbaby.

Jock MacDougal Field occupied only the lower portion of the Tooth – the part where it met the boar's jaw. The rest of the long, jagged spit was all forest, five hundred acres of tall white trees. They were paper birches, according to Mr. Feld. He had told Ethan that they were also called "candle birches" because the Indians had once used the inner bark for boat building as they had used the outer bark, like a peeling pale wrapper, for writing and painting on. On a rainy day in winter, when the birches stood huddled, bare and ghostly, the birch forest at the very end of Clam Island could look extremely eerie and cold. Even on a bright summery afternoon, like today, when they were thick with green leaves, there was something mysterious about the tall, pale, whispering trees. They surrounded the ball field, and the parking lot, and the grassy slope with the flagpole where the wedding receptions were held. They stood, pressed together like spectators, just on the other side of the green outfield fence. Any ball hit into the birch wood was a home run, and lost forever.

Ethan ran across the parking lot and up over the log where he had caught a flash of bushy red tail. He found a clear trail leading away from there to the north side of the Tooth. At first he ran along the trail, hoping to catch sight of the bushbaby as it skittered through the woods. But, after a while, the dim heavy light filtering through the green leaves of the birch trees seemed to weigh him down, or to hold him up in shadows. He slowed to a trot, and then just walked along the path, listening for something he kept thinking that he heard, a sound that was rhythmic and soft. He told himself that it was just the sound of his own breathing. Then he realised that it must be the waves, slapping against the beach at Summerland. That was where this particular trail headed: to Hotel Beach. Hotel Beach was popular with teenagers, mostly, but Ethan and his father had been there once. During the Clam Boom there had been some kind of resort, called the Summerland. You could still see the ruins of some cabins, a collapsed dance hall, the bones of an old pier.

Just now it seemed like an inviting kind of place to go and feel ashamed. He would sit there for a couple of hours, hating himself, and then by the time the police found him, his father would be so worried that he would have forgotten and forgiven Ethan's cowardice, and his failure as a ballplayer. He would see how upset and afraid Little League was making Ethan. "What was I thinking?" he would say. "Of course you can quit the team, son. I only want what's best for you."

By the time Ethan reached Hotel Beach, he was feeling almost happy in his sadness, and had

forgotten all about the bushbaby. He came out of the woods onto the sand and stood for a moment. Then he walked out onto the beach. The sand was dense and crunchy under his shoes. He sat down on the great gnarled log of driftwood where he and his father had sat to eat their lunch the day they visited. It was a real grandfather log, the wreck of some enormous old tree, spiked with snapped branches. He had just noticed the strange, cold sting of the wind, and the grey clouds that were blowing in from the Olympic range, when he heard voices nearby. He ducked back into the trees listening. They were the voices of men, and there was a raucous note in them that struck Ethan as harsh and somehow hostile. Carefully, keeping low, he inched his way towards the ruined cabins.

A big Range Rover was parked in the clearing beside the dance hall. The words TRANSFORM PROPERTIES were written on the side of the car. Four men in suits stood around the front of the car looking over some plans that they had unrolled across the hood. Although the day was perfectly dry, all four men were wearing bright yellow raincoats over their suits, and big rubberised leather rain boots, the kind that had steel toes. He did not know why – it was just four guys with neckties and raincoats – but he felt as if they had come here to do something very bad.

The men seemed to be disagreeing about something. One pointed at the ground, threw up his hands, and walked around to the back of the car. He opened the hatch and took out a heavy shovel. With a stern look at the three other men, he walked several paces up away from the beach, towards the dance hall that for the last forty years had been sinking back into the woods. The man pointed again at the ground, as if to suggest that whatever he found here was going to prove whatever point he had been trying to make. Then he raised his shovel, and the blade bit into the carpet of weeds and yellow flowers at his feet.

Someone at Ethan's elbow sighed. It was a bitter, long, weary sigh, the way someone sighs when the thing she has most dreaded finally comes to pass. It was right in his ear, unmistakable and clear. Ethan turned to see who had sighed, but there was nobody there. The hair on his arms and the back of his neck stood on end. The breeze was cold, and as sharp as the tooth of a shovel. Ethan shivered. Then the man with the shovel cried out. He reached up and slapped the back of his neck. Something – looked like a little stone – went skipping off into the grass behind him. Ethan looked up and saw, among the branches of a nearby birch, the little red animal with the mocking eyes. It was much more like a fox, he saw, than a bushbaby. But it was not a fox, either. It had hands, for one thing, sharp-looking little raccoon hands, one of which was holding on to a forked slingshot. And apart from its pointed snout it had a human face, whiskered and long-eared and just now wrinkled in amused satisfaction. It saw Ethan, and seemed to raise the slingshot in a kind of salute. Then, solemn-faced again, it scurried straight down the tree and took off into the woods.

Ethan must have made some kind of a noise of surprise, because all four of the men looked up at him. He froze, and his heart kicked and thudded so hard he could hear it in his teeth. Their eyes were concealed by narrow sunglasses, and their mouths were thin and nearly lipless. They were going to come after him. He turned to run back into the woods, and immediately crashed into the old man with the Indian ponytail. For a little old guy he felt amazingly solid. Ethan fell backwards and landed on his back behind. The old man just stood there, nodding his head.

“Told you,” he said.

“Do I—is it my turn? Did they put me in the game?”

“They sure would like to,” the old man said. “If you willin’.”

Ethan just wanted to get away from the Transform Properties men.

“I don't blame you for that,” said the old man, and it is a measure of just how spooked Ethan was that it did not occur to him until much later that the old man had read his thoughts. “Come on, best g

out of here.”

“Who are they?” Ethan asked, following along behind the old man, who was dressed in a suit, to but a baggy woollen one cut from a weird orange plaid that would not have looked out of place upholstering one of the old couches on the Rideouts’ front porch.

“They the worst men in the world,” the old man said. “My name is Chiron Brown, by the way. When I pitched for the Homestead Greys, they called me ‘Ringfinger’.”

“Do you have a big ring finger?” Ethan reasoned.

“No,” the old man said, raising his leathery right hand. “I doesn’t have no ring finger at all. You would not believe what kind of crazy motion I could put on a baseball without no ring finger.”

“Did they send you to come get me?” Ethan said, as they approached the parking lot. He could already hear the shouting of parents, the shrill mocking voices of boys, the raspy pleading of Coach Olafssen.

“As a matter of fact, they did,” said Ringfinger Brown. “A long time ago.”

IT WAS THE strangest moment in what had so far been a fairly strange morning. When Ethan got back to the bench, nobody turned around, or even seemed to notice that he had ever left. But the very instant his butt touched the smooth pine surface of the bench, Mr. Olafssen looked over at him, and gave him a big fatal wink.

“All right, Ethan. Big Ethan. Let’s get you in the game.”

Things, it turned out, were no longer quite so rosy for the Roosters as when Ethan had left. The Angels had managed to come back with six more runs, and now the score was 11–8. But it was the top of the seventh and final inning, and Mr. Olafssen was pretty much obliged, by the laws of decency, fair play, and the Clam Island Mustang League, to play every able-bodied kid on the team for at least half an inning of every game. There were two out, two on, and no runs in, and it was going to be up to Ethan to pad the Roosters’ lead.

“Get in there, now,” Mr. Olafssen said, just the way he always did. “Get in there and take your hacks.”

Ethan, however, did not want any hacks. Usually, when he came to the plate, Ethan Feld tried to swing his bat as little as possible. He just kept the bat on his shoulder, hoping for a walk. The truth is he was afraid of trying to accomplish anything more, at the plate, than a walk. And he was afraid of being hit by the ball. But mostly he was mortally afraid of striking out swinging. Was there any worse kind of failure than that? *Striking out*. It was the way you described it when you failed at anything else in life, the symbol of every other kind of thing a person could possibly get wrong. Often enough, though, opposing pitching was not too good in the Mustang League. Ethan’s strategy of just standing there waiting for four bad pitches to come across the plate before three good ones did, frequently worked. But it was a strategy that was not at all respected by the other players. Ethan’s nickname in the Mustang League, in fact, was “Dog Boy,” because of the way he was always hoping for a walk.

He trudged up to the plate, dragging his bat behind him like a caveman in the cartoons dragging his club. He hoisted the bat to his shoulder – it was still sore from when his father had stopped short to avoid hitting the little fox-monkey thing – and looked over at his father, who gave him a big thumbs up. Then Ethan stared out at Per Davis, who had taken over the pitching for the Angels. Per looked almost sorry to see Ethan. He winced a little bit, then sighed, and went into his stretch. A moment later something troubled the air around Ethan’s hands.

“Her-ite one!” cried out the umpire, Mr. Arch Brody of Brody’s Drug. Mr. Brody prided himself on the authentic-sounding way he called the balls and strikes.



“Come on, Dog Boy,” called Kyle. “Get that bat off your shoulder.”

“Come on, Dog!” called the other boys.

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Ethan let another blur colour the air between him and Per Davis.

“Her-ite TWO!” Mr. Arch Brody yelled.

Ethan heard the gravelly voice of Ringfinger Brown.

“When the time come,” the old man said, “you best be ready to swing.”

Ethan searched the crowd but could not find the old man anywhere, though the voice had sounded as if it were just at his elbow. But he saw that Jennifer T. was looking right at him.

“Breathe,” she suggested, moving her lips without speaking. Ethan realised that he had been holding his breath from the moment Mr. Olafssen had looked his way.

He stepped out, took a breath, then stepped back in, resolved at last to take a hack. Playing the odds was one thing when the count was even at 0; with two strikes on him, maybe it made more sense to swing. When Per Davis reared back to let fly, Ethan wiggled his fingers on the shaft of the bat, and worked his shoulders up and down. Then, unfortunately, just before he swung the bat he did something kind of questionable. He closed his eyes.

“Her-ite her-REE!” shouted Mr. Brody, sealing Ethan’s doom.

“That’s all right,” Jennifer T. told him as they walked out to the field. “We’ll hold ’em. At least you took a hack.”

“Yeah.”

“It was a nice-looking swing.”

“Yeah.”

“Just a little early, is all.”

“I shut my eyes,” Ethan said.

Jennifer T. stopped at first base, which was hers. She shook her head, not bothering to conceal her exasperation with Ethan, and then turned towards home plate.

“Well, try to keep them open in the field, huh?”

In the field – Coach Olafssen always stuck Ethan out in right, a region of the diamond to which boys who prefer to remain invisible have been sent since baseball was invented – the situation was, anything, even worse. Forget about catching the ball; Ethan never seemed to see it when it was headed towards him. Even after a fly ball landed in the grass, and went skipping happily along towards the outfield fence for a triple at least, Ethan often took quite a while to find it. And then, when, finding it at last, he threw the ball in! Oy! An entire row of fathers, watching from behind the backstop, would smack their foreheads in despair. Ethan never remembered to throw to the cut-off man, who stood waiting, halfway between Ethan and home, to relay the throw to the catcher. No, he just let loose, eyes screwed tight shut: a big, wild windmill of a throw that ended up nowhere near home plate, but in the parking lot behind third base, or, once, on the hindquarters of a sleeping Labrador retriever.

Ethan wandered into right, hoping with all his heart that nothing would happen while he stood there. His hand felt sweaty and numb inside his big, stiff new fielder’s mitt. The chill wind he had felt at Hotel Beach was blowing across the ball field now, and clouds were covering the sun. The grey light made Ethan squint. It gave him a headache. An echo of the old man’s voice lingered in his mind in a way that he found quite irritating. He puzzled for a while over the question of whether there was really any difference, as far as your brain was concerned, between hearing something and remembering how something sounded. Then he worked for a while on possible theories to account for the presence of Clam Island of a rare African primate. His thoughts, in other words, were far removed from baseball. He was dimly aware of the other players chattering, pounding their gloves, teasing or encouraging

each other, but he felt very far away from it all. He felt like the one balloon at a birthday party that comes loose from a lawn chair and floats off into the sky.

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A baseball landed nearby, and rolled away towards the fence at the edge of the field, as if it had some place important to get to.

Later it turned out that Ethan was supposed to have caught that ball. Four runs scored, making the final total Angels 12, Roosters 11. In other words, eight losses in a row. The Angel who hit the ball that Ethan was supposed to have caught, Tommy Bluefield, was angry at Ethan, because even though his hit had brought in all three baserunners and himself, it did not count as a grand slam home run since Ethan had committed an error. He ought to have caught the ball.

“You stink,” Tommy Bluefield told him.

The magnitude of Ethan’s failure, the shame that he had brought down on himself, ought to have been the focus of everyone’s thoughts, just then, as Ethan dragged his sorry self off the field to the bleachers, where his father was waiting with the crumpled flower of his smile. His teammates ought to have lined up on either side of him and beaten him with their mitts as he was made to run a gauntlet. They ought to have ripped the patch from his uniform shoulder, broken his bat, and uninvited him to come have post-game pizza in Clam Centre with everybody else. Instead they seemed quickly to lose interest in the shameful saga of Ethan Feld, and to turn their wondering faces to the sky. On Joe MacDougal Field, at the Tooth, where every summer for as long as white men could remember there had been an endless supply of blue sky and sunshine, it had started to rain.

\*“The Darndest Way of Getting from Here to There” – slogan, Feld Airship, Inc.

## A Hot Prospect

THE NEXT MORNING Ethan awoke from dreams of freakish versions of baseball where there were seven bases, two pitchers, and outfielders beyond outfielders reaching into infinity, to find the little red fox-monkey sitting on his chest. Its thick fur was neatly combed and braided, and the braids on its head were tied with bright blue ribbons. And it was smoking a pipe. Ethan opened his mouth to scream but no sound emerged. The creature weighed heavily on his chest, like a sack of nails. Whoever had bathed it and tied its hair in bows had also doused it in rosewater, but underneath the perfume it stank like a fox, a rank smell of meat and mud. Its snout quivered with intelligence and its gleaming black eyes peered curiously at Ethan. It looked a little dubious about what it saw. Ethan opened and closed his mouth, gasping like a fish on a dock, trying to cry out for his father.

“Calm, piglet,” said the fox-monkey. “Breathe.” Its voice was small and raspy. It sounded like an old recording, coming through a gramophone bell. “Yes, yes,” it went on, soothingly. “Just take a breath and never be afraid of old Mr. C., for he isn’t going to hurt not the tiniest hair of your poor hairless piglet self.”

“What—?” Ethan managed. “What—?”

“My name is Cutbelly. I am a werefox. I am seven hundred and sixty-five years old. I have been sent to offer you everlasting fame and a fantastic destiny.” He scratched with a black fingernail at an itch in the dazzling white fur of his chest. “Go ahead,” he said. He pointed at Ethan with the stem of his pipe. “Take a few deep breaths.”

“Sitting...” Ethan tried. “On... my... chest.”

“Oh! Ha-ha!” The werefox tumbled backwards off of Ethan, exposing him to the startling sight of its private parts and furry behind. For Cutbelly was quite naked. This had not struck Ethan as odd when he was under the impression that he (Cutbelly was definitely a he) was an animal, but now Ethan sort of wished that Cutbelly would at least wear some pants. After completing his back flip, Cutbelly landed on his long bony back paws. The feet were much foxier than the quick black hands. “My apologies.”

Ethan sat up and tried to catch his breath. He looked at the clock on his nightstand: 7:23 A.M. His father might walk in at any moment and find him talking to this smelly red-brown thing. His eyes strayed to the door of his bedroom, and Cutbelly noticed.

“Not to worry about your pa,” he said. “The Neighbours worked me a sleeping grammer. Your pa would not hear the crack of Ragged Rock.”

“Ragged Rock? Where is that?”

“It isn’t a place,” Cutbelly said, relighting his pipe. It had been worked from a piece of boned Ethan thought: *Human bone*. On the bowl was carved the bearded likeness of Abraham Lincoln, of a few things. “It’s a *time*. A day, to be precise. A day to wake anybody who might be sleeping, including the dead themselves. But not your pa. No, even come Ragged Rock he will sleep, until you return safe from speaking with the Neighbours, and I tuck your little piglet self snug back into your bed.”

In a book or a movie, when strange things begin to happen, somebody will often say, “I must be dreaming”. But in dreams nothing is strange. Ethan thought that he might be dreaming not because

nude werefox had shown up making wild claims and smoking a pipe that was definitely not filled with tobacco, but because none of these things struck him as particularly unexpected or odd.

“What kind of a fantastic destiny?” he said. He did not know why, but he had a sudden flash that somehow it was going to involve baseball.

Cutbelly stood up and jammed his pipe between his teeth, looking very foxy.

“Aye, you’d like to know, wouldn’t you?” he said. “It’s a rare chance you’re to be offered. A first-rate education.”

“Tell me!” Ethan said.

“I will,” Cutbelly said. “On the way through.” He blew a long steady jet of foul smoke. It smelled like burning upholstery. Cutbelly sprang down from the bed and crept with his peculiar swaggering gait towards the window. He reached up with his long arms and dragged himself up onto the sill.

“Wear a sweater,” he said. “Scampering is cold work.”

“*Scampering?*”

“Along the Tree.”

“The Tree?” Ethan said, grabbing a hooded sweatshirt from the back of his desk chair. “What Tree?”

“The Tree of Worlds,” Cutbelly said impatiently. “Whatever do they teach you in school?”

WEREOFEXES HAVE LONG been known for their teacherly natures. As they started down the drive from the Feld house, Cutbelly lectured Ethan on the true nature of the universe. It was one of his favourite subjects.

“Can you imagine an infinite tree?” Cutbelly said. They turned left at the mailbox that read Feld Airship, Inc., ducked under a wire fence, skirted the property line that separated the Felds from the Jungermans, and wandered west a little ways. “A tree whose roots snake down all the way to the bottommost bottom of everything? And whose outermost tippity fingers stretch as far as anything can possibly reach?”

“I can imagine anything,” Ethan said, quoting Mr. Feld, “except having no imagination.”

“Big talk. Well, then do so. Now, if you’ve ever looked at a tree, you’ve seen how its trunk divides into great limbs, which divide again into lesser limbs, which in turn divide into boughs, which divide yet again into branches, which divide into twigs, which divide into twiglings. The whole mess splaying out in all directions, jutting and twisting and zigzagging. At the tips of the tips you might have a million million tiny green shoots, scattered like the sparks of an exploding skyrocket. But if you followed your way back from the thousand billion green fingertips, down the twigs, to the branches, to the boughs, to the lesser limbs, you would arrive at a point – the technical term is the ax point – where you would see that the whole lacy spreading mass was really only four great limbs branching off from the main trunk.”

“OK,” Ethan said.

“Now, let’s say the tree is invisible. Immaterial. You can’t touch it.”

“OK.”

“The only part of it that’s visible, that’s the leaves.”

“The leaves are visible.”

“The leaves of this enormous tree, those are the million million places where life lives and things happen and stories and creatures come and go.”

Ethan thought this over.

“So Clam Island is like a leaf?”

“It isn’t *like* a leaf. It *is* a leaf. This tree is not some fancy metaphor, piglet. It’s *real*. It’s there. It’s holding us all up right now, you and me and Bulgaria and Pluto and everything else. Just because something is invisible and immaterial doesn’t mean it isn’t really there.”

“Sorry,” Ethan said.

“Now. Those four limbs, the four great limbs, each with its great tangle of branches and leaves—those are the four Worlds.”

“There are four Worlds.”

“And all the twigs and boughs are the myriad ways among the leaves, the paths and roads, the rambles and routes among the stars. But there are some of us who can, you know, leap, from leaf to leaf, and branch to branch. Shadowtails, such creatures are called, and I myself am one of them. When you travel *along* a branch, that’s called scampering. We’re doing it right now. You can’t go very far—it’s too tiring—but you can go very *quickly*.”

The werefox scabbled up a low bank, in a spray of dead leaves and pebbles, then leapt through blackberry bramble headfirst. Ethan had no choice but to follow. It was briefly very dark inside the bramble, and cold, too, a dank chill, as if they had leapt not through a blackberry bramble but into the mouth of a deep cave. There was a soft tinkling like the sound of the wind through icy pine needles. Then somehow or other he landed, without a scratch on him, at the edge of a familiar meadow, beyond which lay the white mystery of the birches.

“Hey. How’d we—? Is this—?”

They had been walking for a few minutes at most. Now, Ethan had done a fair amount of ranging alone through the woods and along the gravel roads of Clam Island. But he had never considered trying to walk all the way from his house to the Tooth. It was just too far. You would have to walk, he would have said, for more than an hour. And yet here they were, or seemed to be. The broad sunlit meadow, the birch trees, the brackish green Sound that he could smell just beyond them.

“Now, there’s one last thing I want you to imagine,” Cutbelly said. “And it’s that because of all the crazy bends and hairpin turns, because of all the zigs and zags in the limbs and boughs and branches of this Tree I’m telling you about, it so happens that two leaves can end up lying right beside each other, separated by what amounts, for a gifted shadowtail like myself, to a single bound. And yet, if you were to follow your way back along the twigs and branches, back to the trunk, you would find that these two leaves actually grow from two separate great limbs of the Tree. Though near neighbours, they lie in two totally different Worlds. Can you picture that, piglet? Can you see how the four Worlds are all tangled up in each other like the forking, twisting branches of a tree?”

“You’re saying you can *scamper* from one world to another?”

“No, I can leap. And take you with me into the bargain,” said the werefox. “And the name of this World is the Summerlands.”

It was the Summerland Ethan knew; yet it was different, too. The plain metal bleachers and chain-link fences of Jock MacDougal Field at the far side of the meadow had been replaced with an elegant structure, at once sturdy and ornate, carved from a pale yellow, almost white substance that Ethan could not at first identify. It was a neat little box of a building, with long arched galleries through which he could see that it was open to the sky. It looked a little like the Taj Mahal, and a little like the big old Florida hotel, towers and grandstands and pavilions. There was an onion-shaped turret at each corner, and along the tops of the galleries rows of long snaky pennants snapped in the breeze.

“It’s a ballpark,” Ethan said. “A tiny one.” It was no bigger than a Burger King restaurant.

“The Neighbours are not a large people,” Cutbelly said. “As you will soon see.”

“The Neighbours,” Ethan said. “Are they human?”

“The Neighbours? No, sir. Not in the least. A separate creation, same as me.”

“They aren’t *aliens*?” Ethan was looking around for possible explanations for Cutbelly. It had occurred to him that his new friend might have evolved on some distant world of grass where it might behoove you to work your way up from something like a fox.

“And what is an alien, tell me that?”

“A creature from another world. You know, from outer space.”

“As I thought I had made clear, there are but four Worlds,” Cutbelly said. “Though one of them, should mention, is lost to us for ever. Sealed off by a trick of Coyote. Yours, including everything that you and your kind call ‘the universe,’ is just one of the three remaining ones, though if I may say, it is my personal favourite of the lot. Just now you and I are crossing into another one, the Summerland. And this is where the Neighbours most definitely dwell. Now as I was saying, they are not very grand. In fact they are quite literally Little People.”

“*Little People*?” Ethan said. “Wait. OK. The Neighbours. They are. Aren’t they? They’re fair—”

“Fair *Folk*!” Cutbelly cut him off. “Yes, indeed, that is an old name for them. *Ferishers* is the name they give themselves, or rather the name that they’ll consent to have you call them.”

“And they play baseball.”

“Endlessly.” With a roll of his eyes, Cutbelly threw himself down in the grass and weeds, of which he began gathering great handfuls and stuffing them into the bowl of his pipe.

“In that little building over there?”

“Thunderbird Park,” Cutbelly said. “‘The Jewel of the Chinook League’. When there was a league. It’s a drafty old barracks, if you ask me.”

“What is it... what is it, uh, made of?” Even as he said it the thought strayed once more into his mind: *human bones*.

“Ivory,” Cutbelly said.

“Whale?”

“Not whale.”

“Walrus?”

“Nor walrus, besides.”

“*Elephant*?”

“And where would anyone get hold of that much elephant ivory around here? No, that ballpark piglet, was carved from *giant’s* ivory. From the bones of Skookum John, who made the mistake of trying to raid this neighbourhood one day back about 1743.” He sighed, and took a contemplative puff on his pipe. “Ah, me,” he said. “Might as well have a seat, piglet. They know we’re here. A moment will bring them along.”

Ethan sat down beside Cutbelly in the grassy meadow. The sun was high and the tall green grass was vibrant with bees. It might have been the loveliest summer day in the history of Ethan Feld. The birch forest was loud with birds. The smell of smoke from Cutbelly’s pipe was pungent but not unpleasant. Ethan suddenly remembered a similar afternoon, bees and blue skies, long ago, somewhere... at the edge of a country road, beside a grassy bank that ran down to a stagnant pond. He must have been at his grandparents’ house, in South Fallsburg, New York, which he had heard his mother speak of but, until now, never remembered. The country house had been sold when he was still a very little boy. His mother crouched down behind him, one slender hand on his shoulder. With the other she pointed to the murky black water of the pond. There, hovering just a few inches above the water, hung a tiny white woman, her hummingbird wings all a-whir.

“That was a pixie, actually,” Cutbelly said, sounding more melancholy than ever. This time Ethan

noticed that his thoughts had been read. “And you were lucky to see one. There aren’t too many of them left. They got the grey crinkles worse than any of them.”

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“The grey crinkles?”

In the trees to their left there was a sudden flutter, like the rustle of a curtain or a flag. A huge crow took to the sky with a raucous laugh and what Ethan would have sworn was a backwards glance at him and Cutbelly.

“It’s a great plague of the Summerlands,” Cutbelly said, his bright black eyes watching the crow as it flew off. “More of Coyote’s mischief. It’s horrible to see.”

Cutbelly puffed dourly on his pipe. It was clear that he didn’t care to say anything more on the subject of the vanishing pixies and the dreadful plague that had carried them off.

As is so often the case when one is in the presence of a truly gifted teacher, Cutbelly’s explanations had left Ethan with so many questions that he didn’t know where to begin. What happened when you got the grey crinkles? What did coyotes have to do with it?

“What’s the difference?” Ethan began. “I mean, between a pixie and a fair—a ferisher?”

Cutbelly clambered abruptly to his feet. The plug of charred weeds tumbled from the bowl of his shinbone pipe, and Ethan’s nostrils were soon tinged by the smell of burning fur.

“See for yourself,” Cutbelly said. “Hear for yourself, too.”

They travelled, like the ball clubs of old, in buses – only these buses could fly. They came tearing out of the birch forest in ragged formation, seven of them, trying to keep abreast of one another but continually dashing ahead of or dropping behind. They were shaped more or less like the Greyhound coaches you saw in old movies, at once bulbous and sleek. But they were much smaller than an ordinary bus – no bigger than an old station wagon. They were made not of steel or aluminium, but of gold wire, striped fabric, some strange, pearly silver glass, and all kinds of other substances and objects – clamshells and feathers, marbles and pennies and pencils. They were *wild* buses, somehow the small, savage cousins of their domesticated kin. They dipped and rolled and swooped along the grass, bearing down on Ethan and Cutbelly. As they drew nearer, Ethan could hear the sound of laughter and curses and shouts. They were having a race, flying across the great sunny meadow towards their ramshackle golden buses.

“Everything is a race or a contest, with the Neighbours,” Cutbelly said, sounding fairly fed up with them. “Somebody always has to lose, or they aren’t happy.”

At last one of the buses broke free of the pack for good. It shot across the diminishing space between it and Ethan’s head and then came, with a terrific screech of tyres against thin air, to a stop. There was a loud cheer from within, and then the other buses came squealing up. Immediately six or seven dozen very small people piled out of the doors and began shouting and arguing and trying to drown each other out. They snatched leather purses from their belts and waved them around. After a moment great stacks of gold coins began to change hands. At last most of them looked pleased or at least satisfied with the outcome of the race, and turned to Cutbelly and Ethan, jostling and elbowing one another to get a better look at the intruder.

Ethan stared back. They looked like a bunch of tiny Indians out of some old film or museum diorama. They were dressed in trousers and dresses of skin, dyed and beaded. They were laden with shells and feathers and glinting bits of gold. Their skins were the colour of cherry wood. Some were armed with bows and quivers of arrows. The idea of a lost tribe of pygmy Indians living in the woods of Clam Island made a brief appearance in Ethan’s mind before being laughed right out again. These creatures could never be mistaken for human. For one thing, though they were clearly adults, women had breasts, men had beards and moustaches, none stood much taller than a human infant. Their eyes

were the colour of cider and beer, the pupils rectangular black slits like the pupils of goats. But it was more than their size or the strangeness of their pale gold eyes. Looking at them – just *looking* at them – raised the hair on the back of Ethan's neck. On this dazzling summer day, he shuddered, from the inside out, as if he had a fever. His jaw trembled and he heard his teeth clicking against each other. His toes in his sneakers curled and uncurled.

"You'll get used to seeing them in time," Cutbelly whispered.

One of the ferishers, a little taller than the others, broke away from the troop. He was dressed in a pair of feathered trousers, a shirt of hide with horn buttons, and a green jacket with long orchestral leader tails. On his head there was a high-crowned baseball cap, red with a black bill and a big silver ornament on the crown, and on his feet a tiny pair of black spikes, the old-fashioned kind such as you might have seen on the feet of Ty Cobb in an old photograph. He was as handsome as the king on a playing card, with the same unimpressed expression.

"A eleven-year-old boy," he said, peering up at Ethan. "These is shrunken times indeed."

"He goin' to do fine," said a familiar voice, creaky and scuffed-up as an old leather mitt. Ethan turned to find old Ringfinger Brown standing behind him. Today the old man's suit was as pink as lipstick, except for the vest, which was exactly the colour of the Felds' station wagon.

"He'll hafta," said the ferisher. "The Rade has come, just like Johnny Speakwater done foretold. An' they brought their pruning shears, if ya know what I mean."

"Yeah, we saw 'em, din't we, boy?" Ringfinger said to Ethan. "Comin' in with their shovels and their trucks and their steel-toe boots to do their rotten work."

"I'm Cinquefoil," the ferisher told Ethan. "Chief o' this mob. And starting first baseman."

Ethan noticed now that there was some murmuring among the ferishers. He looked inquiringly at Mr. Brown, who gestured towards the ground with his fingers. Ethan didn't understand.

"You in the presence of royalty, son," Mr. Brown said. "You ought to bow down when you meetin' a chief, or a king, or some other type of top man or potentate. Not to mention the Home Run King of three worlds, Cinquefoil of the Boar Tooth mob."

"Oh, my gosh," Ethan said. He was very embarrassed, and felt that a simple bow would somehow not be enough to make up for his rudeness. So he got down on one knee, and lowered his head. If he had been wearing a hat, he would have doffed it. It was one of those things that you have seen done in movies a hundred times, but rarely get the chance to try. He must have looked pretty silly. The ferishers all burst out laughing, Cinquefoil loudest of all.

"That's the way, little reuben," he said.

Ethan waited for what he hoped was a respectful amount of time. Then he got back to his feet.

"How many home runs did you hit?" he asked.

Cinquefoil shrugged modestly. "Seventy-two thousand nine hundred and fifty-four," he said. "He hit that very number just last night." He pounded his mitt, which was about the size and colour of a Nilsson wafer. "Catch."

A small white sphere, stitched in red but no bigger than a gumball, came at Ethan. The air seemed to waver around it and it came faster than he expected. He got his hands up, just, and clutched them hopefully at the air in front of his face. The ball stung him on the shoulder and then dropped with an embarrassing plop to the grass. All the ferishers let out their breath at once in a long deflated hiss. The ball rolled back towards Cinquefoil's black spikes. He looked at it, then up at Ethan. Then with a sigh he bent down and flicked it back into his mitt.

"A hot prospect indeed," said Cinquefoil to Ringfinger Brown. This time Mr. Brown didn't try to stick up for Ethan. "Well, we got no choice, an' that's a fact. The Rade has showed up, years before v



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