

The Survival Book

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fiction



Our house was right on the shore, where the new bay has now swallowed the land. The tree in our front yard is still sticking out of the water, but the branches are grey and twisted. It looks funny, like the hair of some Grandpa just getting out of bed. Except his bed would have to be under the sea, and that wouldn't work, would it?

To see my old house, I climb up on the big rock behind the new house. It's slippery and steep and I could slide and get hurt for real, my dad says. I'm mostly worried about breaking my dad's binoculars. But when I'm bored and it isn't raining, I can't help myself. There isn't much to do here, except watch my dad and wait for something to happen.

Sometimes I bring the Survival Book and my pencils and notebook. My dad is supposed to make me do schoolwork, but he never remembers. He's got a lot on his mind, so I try to do it myself.

"If you're not part of the solution, you may end up being dissolved in it," I read from the book, then close it and try to write the same words. I write solution three times before I get it right.

"You should remember, we wrote that word last week," I scold myself. I try to sound like Ms. Solas when I do that. "Pollution, solution, once you've learned the ending, you can write them all."

Sometimes I sound just like her. "And revolution," I say in my normal, squeaky voice. I'm almost a man, my father says, but my voice doesn't agree. Even up on the mountain, eleven years can only get you so far.

If Ms. Solas was here, she'd make me write more, keep me at my desk until I'd finished the page. But I'm the kind of teacher that lets kids off easy. I let them draw and run around and do whatever they

want a lot of the time. As long as they're careful and don't waste too much notepaper. The notepaper will run out at some point, and that will be the end of school.

From the rock, I can see that the row of houses behind ours is gone too, and the row behind that again has water up to the roofs. Every roof except one is red. The blue one in the middle used to be Jacob's house, I think. It's hard to tell, though. Everything looks different from above. My dad tells me to stop looking and thinking about who used to live where. It doesn't matter anymore, and there's work to do here and now. My dad only has eyes for work. His hammer never takes a break.



"Jed," my dad yells, "I need a hand."

It's just the two of us here. There is no point in pretending I don't hear him. Except for a few birds, the other animals keep away from my dad's shotgun. We live off the land, and my dad isn't much of a farmer.

I sneak up on him.

"Boooh!" I bellow.

"Why do you have to do that every time," my dad yells.

There isn't much fun to be had, and watching my dad jump and drop his hammer is as close as it gets some days.

I help my dad pick up the nails he had in his mouth.

"What are you making," I say.

"What does it look like?" he replies.

It looks like a big, brown box. A brown box could mean anything around here.

"See these trays," my dad says, pulling out a thin tray from the short end of the box. "They're gonna keep thousands, millions of ants," he says proudly.

Math isn't his best subject, so I know he's just throwing out numbers.

"Why do you want to keep ants?" I ask.

"We've got to have an alternative source of protein for when food gets scarce."

I flinch. But there is no point talking to my dad.

Together we wax the wood panels and the trays. My dad says it's to keep the ants from eating those too.

At dinner that night, we eat the usual slab of deer meat, no potatoes, no ketchup.

I've picked some dandelions and clover. There are pictures of them in the Survival Book and they almost taste like real salad. But my dad doesn't touch that, even if we need vitamins. He does eat a few berries for dessert though.

"That was the best meat we've had in a long time," he says.

I pick up our plates and don't tell him it's the same meat we've been eating for the past month. It's good enough if you like deer. But different colors and shapes would be nice. Tacos. Baby carrots. Sometimes my dad pulls out the ketchup and we have a splash, each of us, and dinner feels almost like the ones we had before. We had ketchup every day during that month without sunshine, when the freezer stopped working because there was no power from the solar panel. But I don't know where he hides it, and my dad's rule is if there's fresh food, the ketchup's off the table.



In my dream, the ants get out of their box. They form a long line and start marching toward the house. One of the ants is their general—he's waving his front legs to direct them to our house. The whole army of ants seems to understand his signs. When they reach the edge of my bed, I scream *Mommy*, loudly, the way I used to when we first moved here. Dad comes to me from the other room.

"It's fine," he says, "I'm here."

Dad smells of tobacco. Mom had a different scent, salt and lemon. I tell my dad to leave me alone.



There is a tree next to this house as well. I've tied a rope to it to make a swing, like the one by the old house. But the branches on this tree are all wrong, and there's a rock blocking me when I pick up speed. I still use it. Sometimes with the wind in my face, I can smell the ocean. My dad tells me I'm too old for this, and I should help him instead. There is much to do before we're prepared for what's to come. But he lets me play most of the day. I think he likes to be on his own, just like me. We don't need anyone else. I like doing my own thing without anyone asking what I'm up to.

I miss Jacob, though. He wasn't like the other kids. We could build Legos for hours without saying much. I miss Legos.



Some days I say too much.

"Why didn't Mom come with us," I ask one day when I help my dad over at the beehive.

"We don't talk about your mom up here," he says.

He's right in a way. Mom doesn't belong here. She wouldn't have liked this new house. She'd hate the outhouse. We used to go camping before the ocean took our house, and she didn't even like that.

But when I start talking, my words turn into an army of little ants. They just march out of my mouth and there's no stopping them.

I say, "But I'm sure she could have helped us make this place much better. Cozier. She could have made tacos and darned my socks. You just didn't want her here, that's what it is. It's all your fault!"

He doesn't answer but walks around the beehive and kicks one of its legs to see if it's sturdy. The bees increase their hum. They sound angry. To them anything can be an attack. They're always ready. My dad would be a good bee.



Our new house is really just a cottage. It only has two rooms. There is a kitchen and living room all in one, where we cook and eat and sit in the evenings. Sometimes, when we feel like it, we also shower there, in a big tub with my dad's shower contraption mounted on a pole, drizzling water from a bucket full of holes. The other room is our bedroom. Outside there is an outhouse, which is really a shack with a thunder box inside. When it rains, we stay inside. Sometimes my dad brings one of his projects in and tells me to read one of the five books we brought while he fiddles with his knife. Most of them are boring and only talk about how to make stuff with things you find in the woods. Sometimes we just play cards and that's when we really have fun. I brought the deck in my coat pocket when we ran, and even though one card is missing, I could play all night. My dad makes faces when he loses and pretends he's angry with me. Sometimes I think I hear my mom laugh too..



“What do you think?” my dad says.

“About what?” I reply.

“My new project,” he says.

We haven’t talked much lately. When I know I’ve said too much, I keep out of his sight for a while. My dad has been working harder than ever, even if the house is done and the bees are buzzing and he’s given up on the potatoes and vegetables. He hasn’t asked me to help, and I haven’t offered.

“Is it a new house? Why do we need a new house?” I say.

“It’s our life-insurance,” my dad says. He is so proud he snorts when he laughs.

“Insurance?” I say, “Isn’t insurance useless since they didn’t pay for our house?”

“Exactly,” my dad says. “We’re making our own. We don’t need paper insurance if we have our own boat.”

It doesn’t look like a boat at all, more like the rib cage of one of the deer my dad has killed. The rounded bones pointing up to the sky. The wind blowing through the gaps. There’s a pile of blonde wood by the carcass. Each board is just like the next, much too even to be my dad’s work.

He must have been down to the valley where the others built their new houses and probably stores too. So that’s what he does when I’m not watching. Liar! My head is burning even if there is a breeze. The nerve he has! He’ll deny it if I ask him, but I know. How many times has he been down there?

The Survival Book tells us to wean ourselves off civilization quickly, otherwise it won’t work. My dad has made me read that many times. He’s explained what “wean” and “civilization” means. I want to punch something but there is only my dad and I, so I keep my fists in my pockets and just kick the ground until my big toe hurts. I wonder where his secret path is, who he meets. I wonder if someone’s asked him about me. But I can’t ask.

He just talks and talks about the boat that can fit everything we need if the water should start creeping up the valley and the foothills and reach all the way up to where we are. He doesn’t see me at all with all the big words coming out of his mouth. And when he is done, he smiles. His smile is even stupider than normal.

“Why do we need a boat on a mountain?” I say. “Remember, we moved away from the sea.”

“The sea has moved before,” my dad says.

Mom would know how to respond. “Just take a step back, Abe, think about what you’re doing,” she would say. Or “Don’t you think we should talk this through together?”

But I’m not my mom. Every word I say just feeds his rants. It’s useless to talk, and all I can do is run and get away from him for a while.

That afternoon, I climb up on the rock to try to scope how much land is under water. The tree where my swing used to be is still visible, but only barely. The branches seem to be breaking off. And the blue roof is still there. There may be a little more water, but nothing much has changed. I wonder if my mom was right, that my dad exaggerates, that he should just calm down. That he can’t bring us with him into his crazy fantasies. I remember her shouting the night we escaped. My dad was running with me in his arms and my mom was just standing there, yelling at him. You can’t yell if you want people to calm down, she should have known that. She knew what he was like. She knew he had a gun.



For more than a week, I stay away all day and just show up at dusk to eat and go to sleep. When my dad asks me something, I shrug or shake my head. I look at my plate or at a point above his head. I roam farther away from the house than I have before. I don’t even miss the rock behind the cottage or my swing. I make a slingshot and practice my aim on random trees. Maybe I’m becoming a man.

I catch glimpses of deer and hear the rustling of something big that I hope isn’t a bear. I make loud noises to scare the deer away. My dad’s gun will get them eventually, but at least I’m buying them some time.

It is windy the day I see the first dead bird. It just falls out of the sky and lands right in front of me. It’s a crow. I use a stick to move it and cover it with heather. The next day, there are three more. That afternoon I return early. Maybe my dad is right about some things.



The Survival Book has two chapters about bees. One is about how to build the hive, keep the bees healthy, and extract the honey. The other one is the one I like. It talks about humans and bees: how they have helped each other for thousands of years, how bees can teach us all sorts of things. The honeycomb is perfect for learning math. “Exact hexagons,” it says. I like that word. It’s a word my mother would have liked, too—she was a word person.

In the beehive everybody works except the queen, and still, without the queen, they are lost. They leave the hive to look for a new one. Without the queen there is no meaning to what they do.

I try to remember how many sides a hexagon has while I watch my dad circle around the beehive. He’s covered in mosquito netting and looks like a ghost.

“Don’t stand too close,” he says. “I know what to do, but I’ve never done it alone before, so stay off.”

I watch him pull out a frame of honeycomb, slowly, slowly to keep the bees calm. His hands are shaking. He must have forgotten one of the sections in the beekeeping chapter because he looks like he doesn’t have a clue what comes next.

I run over to him with the honey jar we’ve prepared, but the opening is narrow so there is as much honey running down the outside as the inside of the jar. My hands are all gooey when Dad puts the honeycomb frame back in its slot and takes off his netting garb.

“Isn’t this the best food in the world?” he says while we lick and scoop up the honey on the outside of the jar.

“Ummmm,” I say.

For a while we don’t say anything, just feel the stickiness and softness and sweetness in our mouths. The Survival Book says honey is *liquid gold*, and I feel my tongue aglow.

We have golden tongues, both Dad and I, but we still don’t know what to say.

“If the water rises and we have to use the boat, will we take the bees with us?” I ask after a long time.

“Of course,” he says, “Without bees there is no point. You know that.”

I do know that. He’s made me read that part over and over. *If bees were to die out, mankind would not survive more than four years.*

He licks his hand to get the last bit of honey off his pinkie. I look at him. He looks happy. He looks like he could jump and shout and throw his fist in the air and yell, *I'm the best—I did it.*

It's not a good time to tell him, but there's just the two of us and someone has to. I clear my throat of the honey.

When I finally say it, my voice sounds different—deeper—from all the honey.

“So on the boat the bees will have their queen, but what will we have if we're the only ones with insurance?”

And I watch him open his mouth, but he is still sticky with sweet goo, so he swallows again and again and then he lifts his chin to help clear the passage for his speech. His lips open and close like a beak. For a moment, he looks just like the seagulls on the beach by our old house when they chewed over something too big.

I almost feel sorry for him, but I look down at my own feet. My pant legs only reach mid-calf now. My legs have started to compensate by growing dark hair. I'm beginning to look like him.

I think about my slingshot, the one he doesn't know I have. But he should know you can't just kidnap people and not have a plan. He should know you can't lie to people and expect nothing to happen.