*The following is from Ottessa Moshfegh’s story collection,*Homesick for Another World*. Moshfegh is a fiction writer from Boston. She was awarded the Plimpton Prize for her stories in The Paris Review and granted a creative writing fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts. Her novel*Eileen *was published by Penguin Press in August 2015 and was shortlisted for the 2016 Man Booker Prize. She is currently a Wallace Stegner fellow at Stanford.*

**A Better Place**

I come from some other place. It’s not like a real place on Earth or something I could point to on a map, if I even had a map of this other place, which I don’t. There’s no map because the place isn’t a place like something to be near or in or at. It’s not somewhere or anywhere, but it’s not nowhere either. There is no *where*about it. I don’t know what it is. But it certainly isn’t this place, here on Earth, with all you silly people. I wish I knew what it was, not because I think it would be great to tell you about it; I just miss it so much. If I knew what it was, maybe I could make something like it here on Earth. Waldemar says it’s impossible. The only way to get there is to go.

“Waldemar,” I say to my brother. “How do we get back to the place, to the thing, whatever?”

“Oh, you have to die. Or you have to kill the right person.”

That’s his answer now. For a long time he thought only the first part was true, but over time he’s thought long and hard and figured out that there is a second way. The second way is much harder. I don’t know how he figured it out, but thank God for Waldemar, who is so much wiser than me, though only a day older. I took some extra time to come out of the woman. I had doubts, even so early on, about this place here on Earth with all the dumb things everywhere. It was Waldemar who persuaded me to come out finally. I could hear his cries and feel his little fists poking through the woman’s skin. He is my best friend. Everything he does, it seems, he does because he loves me. He is the best brother ever, of all brothers here on Earth. I love him so much.

“Well, I don’t want to die,” I tell him. “Not yet. Not here.”

We talk about this from time to time. It’s nothing new.

“Then you’ve got to find the right person to kill. Once you’ve killed the right person, a hole will open up in the Earth and you can just walk straight into the hole. It will lead you through a tunnel back to where we came from. But be careful. If you kill the wrong person, you’ll get into trouble here. It wouldn’t be good. I’d visit you in prison, but chances are slim that the right person will be sitting beside you in your prison cell. And the prisons they have for little girls are the worst. There, the only way to the place would be to die. So you’ve got to be really sure about the person to kill. It’s the hardest thing to do, to be so sure about something like that. I’ve never been sure enough, and that’s why I’m still here. That, and because I’d miss you and I’d worry if I left you all alone.”

“Maybe I’ll just die after all,” I say. I get so tired of it here, thinking of how much better it is back there, in the place we came from. I cry about it often. Waldemar always has to soothe me.

“I could kill you,” he offers. “But I’m not sure you’re the right person. But wouldn’t that be great? If you were?”

“That would be ideal!” I say.

I don’t know what I’d do without my brother. I’d probably cry even more than I do now, and take poisons that make my brain weak and my body tired so I wouldn’t even have the strength to think about the other place. I’d try to poison the place out of my mind. But I doubt that’s even possible. Some nights I hate it here so much I shake and sweat and my brother holds me down so I won’t start kicking the walls or breaking things. When I kick the walls, the woman gets angry. “What’s going on up there, children?” She thinks we’re fighting and threatens to separate us. She doesn’t know about the other place. She’s just a human woman, after all. She gives us food and clothes and everything, as human mothers like to do. My brother says he’s sure the woman is not the person he could kill to get back to the place. I’m not so sure she’s not my person. Sometimes I think she is. But if I killed her and I was wrong, I’d be sorry. Mostly I’d be sorry for Waldemar.

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One morning as we lie in our beds, I say to my brother, “Waldemar, I think I know who my person is.” I don’t really know. I am still sort of dreaming. But then I think up a name to say. “His name is Jarek Jaskolka and I’m going to find him and kill him, mark my words.”

“But are you sure?” my brother asks.

“I think so,” I say. And then, suddenly, I am sure. Jarek Jaskolka is the person I have to kill. I know it in my bones. I am as sure about Jarek Jaskolka as I am about the place, and me and Waldemar being from there.

“You must be completely sure,” my brother warns me. He rises from his bed and lifts the blanket over his head like an old lady going to the market. His face becomes dark and his voice suddenly low and frightening. “If you aren’t sure, you could get in trouble, you know.”

“You look like a witch, Waldemar. Don’t make me laugh at you,” I say. Waldemar doesn’t like to be ridiculed.

“If you kill the wrong person . . .” he begins.

But I am sure now. I can’t go back and pretend I’m not. I have to return to the place somehow. I miss it too much. My brain hurts and I cry all the time. I don’t want to be here on Earth for one moment longer.

“It’s that damned Jarek Jaskolka!” I cry. It is just a name I’ve made up, but it is the right name, that I am sure of. I jump from my bed. I pull the string to lift the curtains. The room where Waldemar and I sleep looks out into the forest. Outside, soft gray clouds hang between the trees. Some silly birds sing a few nice notes. I miss the other place so much, I want to cry. But I feel brave. “I will find you, Jarek,” I say to the window. “Wherever you are hiding!”

When I look at Waldemar, he has gone back under his covers. I can see his chest rising and falling. My brain hurts too much to try to comfort him. And anyway, there is no comfort here on Earth. There is pretending, there are words, but there is no peace. Nothing is good here. Nothing. Every place you go on Earth, there is more nonsense.

For breakfast the woman gives us bowls of warm fresh yogurt and warm fresh bread and tea with sugar and lemon, and for Waldemar a slice of onion cooked in honey because he has been coughing.

“Jarek Jaskolka,” I whisper to remind myself that I will soon be far away from this place and all its horrors. Every time I say the name out loud, my head feels a little better. “Jarek Jaskolka,” I say to Waldemar. He smiles sadly.

The woman, hearing me say Jarek Jaskolka’s name, drops her long wooden spoon. It skitters across the kitchen floor, dripping with the tasty yogurt. She comes at me.

“Urszula,” she says. “How do you know this name? Where did you hear it? What have you done?” She isn’t angry, as she so often is. Her face looks white and her eyes are wide. She holds her lips tight and frowns, holding me by the shoulders. She is scared.

“Oh, he is just some person,” I say, batting my eyes so she cannot see the murder in them.

“Jarek Jaskolka is a bad, bad man,” the woman says, shak‐ ing me. I stop blinking. “If you see him on the street, you run away. You hide from him. Jarek Jaskolka likes to do bad things. I know because he lived on Grjicheva, next door to my house before they tore it down for the tramway when I was little. Many girls came away from his house black and blue and bloodied. You have seen my marks?”

“Oh no, Mother!” cries Waldemar. “Don’t show her those!”

But it is too late. The woman pulls her skirt up past one knee and points. There they are, marks like swollen earthworms, enough of them to make a lump from the side, the poor woman.

“Jarek Jaskolka will do the same to you,” she says. “Now go to school and don’t be stupid. And if you meet that bad man on the street, run away like a good girl. And you, too, Waldemar. Who knows what Jarek Jaskolka is up to now?”

It is usual for the woman to get in the way of good things I want to do.

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“Jarek Jaskolka made those marks on the woman, but so what?” I ask Waldemar on the walk to school. “What’s so bad about some measly marks?”

“You don’t want those marks,” Waldemar answers. “You’ll end up like Mother, always angry. She only has bad dreams.”

“But I have bad dreams already,” I say. “All my dreams are about this place here and all the boring, stupid things and people.”

“You take it too hard,” Waldemar says. “Things here aren’t so bad. Anyway, what if the other place is no better? You could go back there and be just as troubled.”

“Impossible,” I say. But I wonder. “What do you think Jarek Jaskolka did to the woman? How did the marks get there?”

“There are things men do. Nobody knows. It’s like a magic act. Nobody can solve it.”

It doesn’t sound so bad to me. Magic acts are easy to solve. There is an old man in the town square who eats fire and makes the crows that mill under the big tree there disappear in a puff of smoke. Any fool can see that they’ve just flown up into the branches to hide.

“Will you help me find Jarek Jaskolka?” I ask Waldemar. “I really want to get out of here. Even though I’ll miss you when I’m gone.”

“I’ll try,” he answers and frowns. He is angry at me, I can tell. When my brother is angry, he plucks the poison berries from the bushes on the road and puts them up his nose. Everybody knows that’s where the brain is, up the nose there. Waldemar likes to poison his brain that way. It makes him feel better to do that. I myself like to swallow the poison berries like tablets. So because Waldemar is plucking berries, I pluck berries, too, and swallow them one by one. They are soft and cold. If I snag one on my fang, goop spills out and tastes bitter, like the poison that it is.

At school we sit at different tables. At chorus I can see Waldemar’s mouth moving, but I know he isn’t singing the song. When we file out of the big stone church, I ask Waldemar again. “Will you help me find him? Not just for me, but for the woman. Maybe if I kill him, the woman won’t be so angry all the time. It seems she holds quite a grudge.”

“I won’t help you,” says Waldemar. “And don’t try to cheer me up. You’d better think of a way to kill him when you find him. I’m not going to help you do that.”

Waldemar is right. I’ll need some kind of knife to kill Jarek Jaskolka with. I’ll need the sharpest knife I can find. And I’ll need poison. The poison berries from the bush make our brains just a little sleepy, but that is all they do. If I make Jarek Jaskolka eat many poison berries, maybe he will fall asleep, and then I can kill him with the knife, step into the hole, and go back to the place at last. This is my plan.

On the walk home with Waldemar that day after school, I fill my skirt with poison berries. I look like a farmer girl holding my skirt up like that. I tell Waldemar to fill his pockets with berries, but he says they will get squished, and anyway, I have picked enough to kill Jarek Jaskolka already.

“Really? This is enough to kill him?” I ask my brother.

“Oh, I don’t know. Don’t ask me.” Waldemar is still so angry. I don’t blame him. I try to sing a funny song as we turn the corner and cross the town square, but Waldemar covers his ears.

“Sorry, Waldemar,” I say. But I don’t feel sorry. Sometimes Waldemar loves me too much. He thinks it is better I stay with him on Earth, rather than be happy in the other place without him. “When you die, we’ll be together again,” I say, trying to console him. “Or maybe you’ll find your person to kill. Don’t give up.” My legs are cold as we walk the rest of the way home. But I have so many poison berries. 28N

I am happy. “I’ll make poison berry jam,” I say. “I’ve seen the woman do it with cherries.”

“She will never let you use her pot,” Waldemar says. He looks at me. I know I could persuade Waldemar to help me make the jam, but I don’t want to. When he is angry with me, I feel he loves me even more, and that feels good to me, even though it also feels so bad.

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When we get home, the woman is outside hanging wet clothes on the line of rope between the trees. I imagine the marks on her thighs again. They are like welts, like slugs crawling up her leg. My thighs are like my arms. They are just skin and flesh with no marks. They are clean blank skin and flesh. Nothing is ever going to crawl up them, not ever, I decide. I’d die before I let anyone give me marks like the woman’s, I decide. Even if they are just marks of magic. I hide my skirt of poison berries behind Waldemar as we pass and wave to the woman. We go inside the house. I pull a big black pot from the cupboard and fill it with the poison berries.

“How do you make jam, Waldemar?” I ask my brother.

“Add sugar and cook it for a long time.”
“Oh, I love sugar,” I say. “I’ll do it tonight while the woman is sleeping.”
“You better not taste too much of it. Don’t forget, when you cook it, the poison gets stronger.”
“Will you help me remember, Waldemar?”

“No,” he says and puts a few more poison berries up his nose. “I have to sleep at night. If I don’t sleep, I feel sick during the day. I don’t like feeling sick at school.”

“Oh, poor little Waldemar,” I say, mocking him. I swallow a few of the berries and drag the pot into our bedroom and hide it in the closet.

When the woman comes back in from hanging the clothes, she says, “Go play outdoors, children. Waldemar, go run around while the sun is still shining. Urszula, go and be energetic. You look so serious. You look like an old lady. Go out and have fun. It’s good for you.”

“I don’t like fun,” I say.

Waldemar snorts and goes outside to play. I want to play with Waldemar, but I have to stay in my room to guard my pot of poison berries in the closet. If the woman finds it, she’ll start asking questions. She’ll get in the way of my killing Jarek Jaskolka, and then I’ll be stuck here on Earth with her forever. I can imagine what she’ll say if she discovers my plan. “There is something wrong with you, Urszula.”

“No,” I will tell her. “There is something wrong with this place. There is something wrong with you and everybody here. There is nothing, nothing, nothing wrong with me.”

And anyway, I still have to find Jarek Jaskolka. I can’t kill him if I don’t know where he is, after all. While Waldemar is still outside playing, I go to the kitchen. It smells like cooking rice and parsley.

“Hello,” I say to the woman. “Jarek Jaskolka, does he still live on Grjicheva?”

“Of course not. Unless he lives in a hole in the ground. All the houses got torn down there. I hope he moved very far away. His sister is the lady in the library.”

“That big fatso?”

“Don’t be cruel.”

“I think I need a book to read,” I say.

“Then go, go,” the woman says angrily. “I don’t know what you’re up to, but remember what I said about Jarek Jaskolka. Remember the marks. But go, do what you want, as if I care.”

“You’re angry at me now because I want to read a book?”

“Urszula is Urszula,” is all she says. She leaves the kitchen, wiping her hands on her apron, and goes outside to watch Waldemar build a tower of pinecones. The woman is mean and stupid, I think. The entire world is stupid. I find a sharp butcher knife in the drawer and take it to my room and hide it in my satchel. I kick at the walls for a while. Then I start off for the library to find the fat sister of the man I am going to kill.

\* \* \* \*

“Jaskolka?” the fat woman asks. “I don’t use that name anymore. What do you want? Why are you asking?”

“I’m just curious. What happened when they tore your house down for the tramway? My mother lived on Grjicheva once, too.”

“Whose daughter are you?” the fat lady asks.

“My name is Urszula” is all I say.

“Those houses on Grjicheva were all poor and ugly and it’s a good thing they’re gone now or else they’d just crumble down over our heads and kill us.”

“Kill you?” I ask.

“We moved to a small apartment near the river, if you must know.”

“You and your family? And your brother?”

She puts down the rubber stamp in her hand and closes the book on the counter. The sunlight through the windows falls on her face as she leans toward me.

“What do you know about my brother? What is it? Why are you asking me these questions?”

“I’m looking for Jarek Jaskolka,” I say. The lady is so fat and lazy looking, it seems not to matter what I tell her. “I have to kill him.”

The lady laughs and picks up her rubber stamp again. “Go right ahead,” she says. “He lives up the street in the house across from the cemetery. He’ll be pleased to have a visitor. You can’t imagine how pleased he’ll be.”

“I’m going to kill him,” I tell the lady. She just laughs.

“Good luck. And don’t come running back here full of tears,” she says. “Curious girls get what they deserve.”

“What do you mean?”

“Don’t listen to me.”

“I will kill him dead, you know,” I say. “That’s why I’m curious.”

“Do what you can,” she says. “Now be quiet. People are trying to read.”

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On my way home, I walk through the cemetery, past my father’s grave, and I look through the windows of what I guess is Jarek Jaskolka’s house. The sun is setting, and the sky is beautiful colors and I wish Waldemar were there with me, holding my hand. “Why is it, Waldemar,” I would ask him, “that when something here is so beautiful, I just want to die?”

“Because it reminds you of the other place,” Waldemar would say to me. “The most beautiful place of all.”

Jarek Jaskolka’s house is clapboard painted cloudy green like pond water, and the windows facing the road are covered by a dark curtain. The front steps are missing, and in place of the steps there are big broken pieces of cement piled on top of one another. There are dry bushes around the house full of orange meadowlarks. I pick up a little rock and throw it at Jarek Jaskolka’s window, but the glass doesn’t break. The rock just makes a little *ding*sound against the glass. The meadowlarks start to chirp at me, whining like babies crying. I don’t care. I could throw rocks at them if I wanted. I could crush them with the heel of my shoe. I wait, hiding in the bushes, waiting to see if anything will happen. Then I throw another rock. This time, Jarek Jaskolka comes to the window. I watch him pull the curtain back. His big wrinkled hand grips the dark cloth, and just for a moment, I see his face. He looks like any normal grandfather, eyes drooping, white beard, wrinkled cheeks, and a nose like a melted candle. When he moves away from the window, his fingernails tap against the glass. They are long and yellow like an ogre’s. But it’s clear he’s just a feeble old man. It will be easy to feed him the jam, then hack him up with a knife, I figure. Old men are easy to hack. Their flesh is like an old limp carrot. But if Waldemar is right about the black hole opening up, and if Jarek Jaskolka is really my right person, then I don’t have to worry about hacking him up all the way. Maybe one hack will be enough to kill him and I can just jump down into the hole and go back to the other place.

When the curtain falls back across the window, I run away, back through the cemetery, kicking at the stones that mark whatever silly people have come and gone, and I wonder where they’ve gone off to, if there are other places for each of us, and whether my father is really, as the woman has always told us, in a better place than this.

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That night the woman is angry at me again. She wants to know what I was reading at the library. “I hope you didn’t get some book that’s going to fill you up with crazy notions.”

“I didn’t find any good books at the library,” I say. “They were all boring. They were all dumb.”

“Ach, Urszula,” the woman says. “You think you’re smarter than all the rest.”

“But aren’t I? Who is smarter than me? Show me the person. Don’t you always say—” The woman has always said not to mind other children at school when they tease me, and that I am the smartest, and the best, forever and ever, amen.

“Forget what I always say,” says the woman. “You need to learn respect.”

“Respect for what? For you?”

“God forbid!” She turns her back and hacks at a loaf of bread with a butcher knife. It isn’t as big as the butcher knife I’ve stolen, though. I can’t wait to kill Jarek Jaskolka and leave this place, I think. Again I wish that the woman would be my person to kill. But she isn’t. I am pretty sure of that by now.

“And you, Waldemar,” the woman says when she turns around. “Who stole your candy? Why are you frowning like a lost little child?”

Waldemar looks sad with his soupspoon in his fist. He won’t look at me. He takes a chunk of bread from the woman and doesn’t answer.

“Did you do something?” the woman asks me. “Did you hurt my special boy?”

“I would never do anything to hurt Waldemar. Why would I? I love him the most.”

“Sometimes you can be rough, Urszula. You don’t show love the best way. When was the last time you did something nice for me? When was the last time you said ‘thank you’?”

Waldemar stands and leaves the table.

“Waldemar, come back, please. Your soup will get cold,” the woman says gently.

“Let him go,” I tell her. “He’s crying because of those marks you showed us. He thinks it’s his fault. But it’s yours.”

I really think I am just so smart.

The woman sits and lowers her face so that it is dark and sad and I can see her spirit rise up a little from her body, like it doesn’t want to be here either, like it has some better place to go.

“Jarek Jaskolka,” I say softly, reaching my hand out to touch the woman’s soft knee under the table.

“Ach!” she says, flinching. The legs of her chair scrape on the floor as she pushes herself away. “Pest,” she calls me and stands up and goes around the kitchen, opening and closing cabinets. I think she might be looking for the iron pot I’ve hidden in the closet. But she doesn’t ask if I’ve taken it. Nor does she notice her big butcher knife is gone. She puts the bread in the bread box and takes my bowl of soup away, spills it in the sink, unties her apron, and goes and stands by the window, staring out at nothing, it seems, just the darkness between the trees.

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That night I have a dream about the old magician in the town square. He is showing me his tricks. “Like so,” he grumbles and shakes into my hand a pile of little pellets. When I drop them on the ground, they explode into puffs of smoke. “These are made from moonstones,” he says. He points up into the dark night sky. “You see that darkness? And you see the moonlight? There isn’t one without the other.” I guess I say something to show an interest in how his magic is possible, even though I know it’s just a sham. “You’re just a little child,” he says. “Why are you so concerned with what you don’t yet know?”

I wake up, and there is Waldemar sleeping in his bed beside me. It is very dark and quiet in the room. The woman is asleep in her bed on the other side of the wall. I can hear her snoring. At night, the noise from her nose is like a loco‐ motive chugging. We are used to it. I think the noise from her nose is so enormous because her brain wants to take a train far away from here. I know she isn’t happy. She likes Waldemar but she doesn’t like me. It seems well enough that I leave this place. It will make her happy, I feel, if I leave. But it will make Waldemar so sad.

As quietly as I can, I drag the big pot of berries from the closet and take it to the kitchen. I light a fire on the stove and set the pot on the flame and drag a chair to the stove so I can stand on it and stir the berries. I pour a cup of sugar in and stir and listen to the berries singe and steam. The only light comes from a few lone stars through the darkened windows and the blue fire from the burner. “Jarek, this is for you,” I say under my breath and inhale the poison‐berry smell. My brain is comforted a little by the smell. My eyes are drowsy. But I keep stirring. I feel sad there all alone in the dark kitchen. I wish Waldemar were here to help me. This is my last night on Earth, I think to myself. And here I am, toiling over the stove like the woman does all day. “Ha.” I laugh. Because my cooking seems funny suddenly, like I am making fun of the woman and her stupid life. I keep stirring. When the berries are all melted and smashed and mixed with the sugar, I spoon them up into one of the old glass jars the woman keeps on the shelf for her own jams and jellies. I switch off the stove, put the chair back by the kitchen table, take my jar in one hand, and drag the dirty pot back to my room, where Waldemar is still sleeping. In all that ruckus, nothing can be heard in the house but the locomotive engine, the woman snoring her way far away from here. I hide the dirty pot in the closet again. The jar of poison jam in my hands is hot. I get back into bed and let the jar cool on my nightstand. I sleep a little, but I don’t have any more dreams.

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In the morning, I put the jar of poison jam in my satchel. I act like everything is normal.

“Good morning, Waldemar,” I say. I try to pretend I am normal, but Waldemar knows that I am not.

“What is it? What’s that smile for?”

“Oh, nothing, just that I’m going to kill Jarek Jaskolka today and go back to the other place. Sorry you can’t come with me.” I try to sound cheerful, like I don’t know that Waldemar’s heart is broken. He can see right through me. He has that ability, as my brother.

“I don’t like this idea, Urszula. I think Jarek Jaskolka won’t eat the jam. I think he’ll hurt you instead. You’ll get those marks like Mother, and turn into an angry woman just like her.”

“But I’m angry already,” I say. “Marks or no marks, it makes no difference. I need to get out of here. And if I go through the hole and arrive back to the other place, whatever that is, what will I care if my legs are full of worms?”

“Worms?”

“Worms.”

My thoughts go suddenly to the cemetery, the rich black dirt that was dug up to make room for our father to be buried in. I wonder, once I go through the hole back to the place, will my body be left behind? Later, will Waldemar stand in the cemetery and watch the dirt get dug up for me to be buried in? Will worms want to eat my flesh? Will they chew my flesh and spit out mud, which the teacher says is good for planting things? I can’t discuss this with Waldemar now. It would upset him too much to answer such questions. We get dressed for school and go to the kitchen for breakfast. The woman is slicing an onion, crying. I can’t look at her. I am worried she can tell I’ve used the stove the night before. The air, I worry, still smells like poison jam.

“You look tired, Urszula,” she says. “You look sick. Maybe you should stay home today. Maybe you’re getting Waldemar’s cough.”

“Yes,” Waldemar says. “You should stay home. Don’t go anywhere. Just stay in bed and read a book. I’ll bring your schoolwork home for you. Don’t go doing anything crazy.”

“You sound just like the woman,” I say to Waldemar.

“Call me Mother,” the woman says.

The woman gives us our bread and yogurt, Waldemar’s onion cooked in honey, and one for me, too.

“Thank you, Mother,” Waldemar says.

I roll my eyes.

We eat in silence, Waldemar sniffling and clearing his throat. I keep my eyes on the worn wooden floor. “Good‐bye, stupid floor,” I say to myself. “Good‐bye, ugly, stupid, old wood floor.” But what do I care about that floor? A house can be full of life one day, then torn down into rubble the next. Tramways can be laid out. Millions of silly people can walk across a bit of Earth and never know what was once built on that place. We don’t even know who’s buried beneath our feet. So many people have come and gone, and where are they now? I think of the better place. “Jarek Jaskolka,” I say to myself, but not out loud. I don’t want Waldemar or the woman to hear me. I don’t want any more trouble. I feel that I am ready to leave them both behind.

My satchel is heavy now, the jar of poison jam and butcher knife sagging down under my schoolbooks. Waldemar offers to carry my satchel for me.

“You look tired,” he says. “Why not let me take that off your back?”

“Oh, you think you can solve things? You’re just a little boy. You might have more muscles than me, but you’re only a day older. You think you’re smarter than me for that? You think you have all the answers, do you?”

Waldemar doesn’t say anything. I am very excited with the thought that very soon, I’ll be gone. I’m finally going home, I think to myself. I try to hate Waldemar, but I can’t. I try not to think about how much I really love him. It is hard to do.

We continue on our way up the road. I am breathing like a crazy person breathes. My heart is beating like a crazy person’s heart beats. “Don’t do anything crazy,” Waldemar had warned me. What is crazy about what I’m doing? What does “crazy” even mean? There is one person everyone calls “crazy.” She is an old lady who lives between the cans of garbage behind the market. She covers herself in cabbage leaves and fronds from carrot tops and old wax paper smeared with animal fat, and she talks to herself and smokes the dirty tips of cigarettes men toss to her where she lies during the day, basking in the sunshine, underneath the monument to the martyrs in the town square. But even she doesn’t seem so crazy. She is probably just sad, like me, and from another place entirely. She seems to be making the most of her time on Earth, though, doing as she pleases. She doesn’t work or have a crying baby to tend to. Nobody is going to get near her. Nobody is going to make her black and blue and bloody. She smells like so many toilets. But she does as she pleases. She is a grown woman. If I can’t kill Jarek Jaskolka, I think to myself, I’ll be like that crazy lady and cover myself in garbage.

“Are you mad?” Waldemar asks, kicking a little rock across the road.

“I’m sorry,” I say. “I didn’t sleep well. I’m all testy. My brain is like a bug bite I scratched bloody. Sorry,” I say again.

Waldemar puts his arm around my shoulder, plucks some berries from the bush as we walk past. He puts one up his nose and hands me the rest.

“Thanks,” I tell him, but I don’t swallow any berries. I don’t want to be poisoned anymore. I want to be awake and ready to jump and dive down into the hole when it opens up for me. I don’t want to be sleepy and miss my chance, in case the hole is only open for a second. And I want to be on my toes for when I kill Jarek Jaskolka. Waldemar puts another berry up his nose. I feel I have more courage than Waldemar now. He seems like the sad lost child the woman had said he’d looked like the day before. I let the poison berries in my hand drop to the ground. When we reach the square, I turn in the direction of the cemetery. Waldemar turns to the road that leads to school. We stop and look at each other.

“Are you really doing it?” Waldemar asks.

“It’s worth a try,” I shrug. I am just pretending to be easygoing. Inside, I am determined.

“I’ll come with you,” Waldemar says. “I mean that I’ll walk to Jarek Jaskolka’s house with you, just to see what happens. If he is really your person, and you kill him and the hole opens up, maybe I can jump through with you.”

Somehow I don’t believe what Waldemar is saying. I feel like he’s just giving an excuse to follow me. I worry that he might sabotage my plans. But then I look into his eyes. No. He won’t get in my way. He is my brother. He will never keep me from being happy.

So I allow Waldemar to follow me on the road to the cemetery. We are quiet as we walk. I don’t ask what he’s thinking. I don’t want to know. When we get to Jarek Jaskolka’s house, we stand and watch the dark, curtained windows for a while. A meadlowlark comes and taps its beak on the glass and hovers. Then another comes and flies right into the glass and breaks its neck. Its body falls to the ground. The first meadlowlark flies away. This seems like a good omen.

The sun comes out from behind a cloud. The shadows of my body and Waldemar’s body lie out in front of us like holes in the ground. I carefully lay my satchel down and put my arms around my brother.

“I’m sorry,” I say. “I have to go in there alone. You know the hole will only be big enough for one. You know that, right?” I ask.

Waldemar nods. All our lives, we’ve understood each other. Even when we are angry, there is too much love to pretend to think that what we know to be true is only a made‐up story. That’s the cruel way of all those silly people: they tell you that what you believe is just some silly story. That’s why I hate it here. Everybody thinks that I am crazy. I let go of Waldemar and pick up my satchel and start up the big broken concrete slabs to the door of Jarek Jaskolka’s house.

“Will you come back for me?” my sweet brother asks. There are tears in his eyes. He looks so small and lost and sad from where I stand up high above him. I tell him I wish I could stay with him, but not here, not on Earth. Earth is the wrong place for me, always was and will be until the day I die.

“Just try, if you can, to send me a letter from the place. And if there’s some way you can come back, come get me.”

“Okay, Waldemar. I’ll try,” I say, but I will never come back. Even if I can come back, I won’t. I drop my satchel down into the dirt below. The books land hard like the sound of “good‐bye.” I hold my arms behind my back, and with the butcher knife in one hand, the jar of poison jam in the other, I kick on Jarek Jaskolka’s door. Waldemar cries and hides against the wall of the house, holding the dead meadlowlark in his hands. He pinches his eyes closed.

“I’ll miss you, Waldemar!” I whisper.

I wait for the bad man to let me in.