

LBRIS

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The Vaster Wilds

LAUREN GROFF BRAWLER

HUTCHINSON
HEINEMANN

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BRAWLER

The Wind

Pretend, the mother had said when she crept to her daughter's room in the night, that tomorrow is just an ordinary day.

So the daughter had risen as usual and washed and made toast and warm milk for her brothers, and while they were eating she emptied their schoolbags into the toy chest and filled them with clothes, a toothbrush, one book for comfort. The children moved silently through the black morning, put on their shoes outside on the porch. The dog thumped his tail against the doghouse in the cold yard but was old and did not get up. The children's breath hovered low and white as they walked down to the bus stop, a strange presence trailing them in the road.

WHEN THEY STOPPED by the mailbox, the younger brother said in a very small voice, Is she dead?

The older boy hissed, Shut up, you'll wake him, and all three looked at the house hunched up on the hill in the chilly dark, the green siding half installed last summer, the broken front window covered with cardboard.

The sister touched the little one's head and said, whispering, No, no, don't worry, she's alive. I heard her go out to feed the sheep, and then she left for work. The boy leaned like a cat into her hand.

He was six, his brother was nine, and the girl was twelve. These were my uncles and my mother as children.

MUCH LATER, she would tell me the story of this day at those times when it seemed as if her limbs were too heavy to move and she stood staring into the refrigerator for long spells, unable to decide what to make for dinner. Or when the sun would cycle into one window and out the other and she would sit on her bed unable to do anything other than breathe. Then I would sit quietly beside her, and she would tell the story the same

way every time, as if ripping out something that had worked its roots deep inside her.

It was bitterly cold that day and the wind was supposed to rise, but for now all was airless, waiting. After some time, the older brother said, Kids are going to make fun of you, your face all mashed up like that.

My mother touched her eye and winced at the pain there, then shrugged.

They were so far out in the country, the bus came for them first, and the ride to town was long. At last it showed itself, yellow as sunrise, at the end of the road. Its slowness as it pulled up was agonizing. My mother's heart began to beat fast. She let her brothers get on before her and told them to sit in the front seats. Mrs. Palmer, the driver, was a stout lady who played the organ at church, and whose voice when she shouted at the naughty boys in the back was high like soprano singing. She looked at my mother as she shut the bus door, then said in her singsong voice, You got yourself a shiner there, Michelle.

The bus hissed up from its crouch and lumbered off. I know, my mother said. Listen, we need your help.

And when Mrs. Palmer considered her, then nodded, my mother asked quickly if she could please drop the three of them off when she picked up the Yoder

kids. Their mother would be waiting there for them. Please, she said quietly.

The boys' faces were startled, they hadn't known, then an awful acceptance moved across them.

There was a silence before Mrs. Palmer said, Oh, honey, of course, and she shuffled her eyes back to the road. And I won't mark on the sheet that you were missing, neither. So they won't get it together to call your house until second period or so, give you a little time. She looked into the mirror at the boys and said cheerfully, I got a blueberry muffin. Anyone want a blueberry muffin?

We're OK, thanks, my mother said, and sat beside her younger brother, who rested his head on her arm. The fields spun by, lightening to gray, the faintest of gold at the tops of the trees. Just before the bus slowed to meet the cluster of small Yoders, yawning, shifting from foot to foot, my mother saw the old Dodge tucked into a shallow ditch, headlights off.

Thank you, she said to Mrs. Palmer as they got off, and Mrs. Palmer said, No thanks needed, only decent thing to do. I'll pray for you, honey. I'll pray for all of you. We're all sinners who yearn for salvation. For the first time since she rose that morning, my mother was glad, because a person as full of music as the bus driver surely had the ear of god.

The three children ran through the exhaust from the bus as it rose and roared off.

They slid into the warm car, where their mother clutched the steering wheel. She was very pale, but her hair was in its familiar small bouffant. My mother thought of the pain it must have cost my grandmother to do up her hair in the mirror so early in the morning, and felt ill.

YOU DID GOOD, babies, my grandmother said as well as she could, her mouth as smashed as it was. She turned the car. A calf galloped beside them for a few steps in the paddock by the road, and my younger uncle laughed and pressed his hand to the glass.

This is not the time for laughing, my uncle Joseph said sternly. He would grow up to be a grave man, living in an obsessively clean, bare efficiency, teaching mathematics at a community college.

Leave him be, Joey, my mother said. She said in a lower voice to her mother, Poor Ralphie thought you were dead.

Not dead yet, my grandmother said. By the skin of my teeth. She tried to smile at the boys in the mirror.

Where we going? Ralphie said. I didn't know we were going anywhere.

To see my friend in the city, my grandmother said. We'll call when we find a phone out of town. She put a cigarette in her mouth but fumbled with the lighter in her shaky hands until my mother took it and struck the flame for her.

They were going the long way so they wouldn't have to drive past the house again, and my mother watched the minute hand of the clock on the dash, feeling each second pulling her tighter inside.

Faster, Mama, she said quietly, and her mother said without looking at her, Last thing we need's being stopped by one of his buddies. I got to pick up my pay first.

The hospital loomed on the hill beside the river, elegant in its stone facade, and my grandmother parked around back, by the dumpster. Can't risk leaving you, she said. Come with, and bring your stuff. But when she began to walk she could only mince a little at a time, and my mother moved close so she could lean on her, and together they went faster.

They went up the steps through the back door into the kitchen. A man in a ridiculous hairnet like a green mushroom was carrying a pan of peeled potatoes in a bath of water. Without looking he barked, You're late, Ruby. But then the children caught his eye, and he saw the state of them, and he put the potatoes down and

reached out and touched my mother's face gently with his hot rough hand. Lord. She get it, too? he said. She's just a kid.

My mother told herself not to cry; she always cried when strangers were tender with her.

Put herself between us. She's a good girl, my grandmother said.

I'll kill the bastard myself, the man said. I'll strangle him if you want me to. Just say the word.

No need, my grandmother said. We're going. But I got to have my check, Dougie. All we got is four dollars and half a tank of gas, and I don't know what I'm going to do if that's all we got to live on.

Can't. No way, Dougie said. Check gets sent to the house, you know this. You filled the form. You checked the box.

My grandmother looked him directly in the face, perhaps for the first time, because she was a timid woman whose voice was low, who made herself a shadow in the world. He sighed and said, See what I can manage, then he disappeared into the office.

Now through the door of the cafeteria there came two women moving fast. One was a plump pretty teenager chewing gum, the cashier, and the other was Doris, my grandmother's friend, freckled and squat and blunt. For extra money, she made exquisite cakes, with

flowers like irises and delphiniums in frosting. It was hard to believe a woman as tough as she was could hold such delicacy inside her.

Oh, Ruby, Doris said. It got even worse, huh. Jesus, take a look at you.

Shoved his gun in my mouth this time, my grandmother said. She didn't bother to whisper, because the kids had been there, they had seen it. Thought I was going to be shot. But, no, he just knocked out a few teeth. My grandmother gingerly lifted her lip with a finger to show her swollen bloodied gums. When Doris stepped forward to hug her, my grandmother winced away from her touch, and Doris took the hem of her shirt and lifted it, and said, Oh, shit, when she saw the bruises marbling my grandmother's stomach and ribs.

Better go up and get looked at by a doctor, the cashier said, her damp pink mouth hanging open. That looks real ugly.

No time, my grandmother said. It's already too dangerous to show up here.

In silence, Doris took her cracked leather purse from the hook and put all the cash in her wallet in my mother's hand. The cashier blew a bubble, considering, then sighed and pulled down her own purse and did the same.

Bless you, ladies, my grandmother said. Then she took a shuddering breath and said, In a way, it was my fault. I thought I'd stay until we finished the shearing. You know he's rough with the sheep. I wanted to save them some blood.

Mama? my younger uncle said by the door.

No, don't you do that nonsense, you know that's not right, Doris said, fiercely. It's his fault. Nobody else but his.

Mama? Ralphie said again, louder. It's him, he's here. He pointed out the window, where they could see the nose of the cruiser coming to a stop behind my grandmother's Dodge.

GET DOWN, DORIS SAID, and they all crouched on the tile. They heard a car door slam. Doris, moving faster than seemed possible, went to the door and locked it. Half a second later the knob was rattled, and then there was a pounding, and then my mother couldn't hear for the blood rushing in her ears.

Doris picked up the pan of potatoes and came to the window wearing a furious face. What in hell you want? she shouted. Dare to show your face here.

There was a murmuring, then Doris shouted down

through the glass, Not here, up in the ER getting looked at. Quite a number you done on her. Couldn't hardly walk. She said this nastily, glowering. Then she turned her back on the window and went to the stainless steel table in the middle of the room, where the cashier watched out the window over Doris's shoulder.

They heard an engine starting up, and at last the cashier said in a thick voice, OK, he got in and now he's driving around. But, like, when he figures out you're not up in the ER he's gonna just come into the kitchen through the cafeteria, you know. Like, there's no lock on that door and we can't stop him.

Doris called for Dougie in a sharp voice, and Dougie hurried out of the office with an envelope, looking flushed, a little shamefaced. He had been hiding in there, my mother understood.

I won't forget your kindness, all of you, my grandmother said, but my mother had to take the paycheck because my grandmother's hands were shaking too much.

Send us a postcard when you make it, Doris said. Get a move on.

My grandmother leaned on my mother again and they went out to the car as fast as they could, and it started, and slid the back way, down by the green bridge over the river. When they had twisted out of

sight of the hospital, my grandmother stopped the car, opened her door, and vomited on the road.

She shut the door. All right, she said, wiping her mouth gingerly with a finger, and started the car up again.

My mother saw on the dashboard clock that it was just past eight. The teachers were doing roll call right now. Soon a girl would collect the sheets and take them to the office, where someone, thinking they were doing the right thing, would notice that all three of the kids were gone, and call their absence in, first to the house, where the phone would ring and ring. But then, getting hold of nobody, they would call it in to the station, and it would be radioed out immediately to him. And he would know that not only was his wife gone but his kids were gone with her. They had an hour, maybe a bit more, my mother calculated. An hour could maybe take them out of his jurisdiction. She told her mother this, pressing her foot on an imaginary accelerator. My grandmother did drive faster now through the back roads. Gusts of sharp wind pressed the car.

For some time, they were strung into their separate thoughts. My mother counted the cash. A hundred and twenty-three, she said with surprise.

Doris's grocery money, I bet, my grandmother said. Bless her.