October was in the chair, so it was chilly that evening, and the leaves were red and orange and tumbled from the trees that circled the grove. The twelve of them sat around a campfire roasting huge sausages on sticks, which spat and crackled as the fat dripped onto the burning applewood, and drinking fresh apple cider, tangy and tart in their mouths.

April took a dainty bite from her sausage, which burst open as she bit into it, spilling hot juice down her chin. “Beshrew and suck-ordure on it,” she said.

Squat March, sitting next to her, laughed, low and dirty, and then pulled out a huge, filthy handkerchief. “Here you go,” he said.

April wiped her chin. “Thanks,” she said. “The cursed bag-of-innards burned me. I’ll have a blister there tomorrow.”

September yawned. “You are such a hypochondriac,” he said, across the fire. “And such language.” He had a pencil-thin mustache and was balding in the front, which made his forehead seem high and wise.

“Lay off her,” said May. Her dark hair was cropped short against her skull, and she wore sensible boots. She smoked a small brown cigarillo that smelled heavily of cloves. “She’s sensitive.”

“Oh puhlease,” said September. “Spare me.”

October, conscious of his position in the chair, sipped his apple cider, cleared his throat, and said, “Okay. Who wants to begin?” The chair he sat in was carved from one large block of oakwood, inlaid with ash, with cedar, and with cherrywood. The other eleven sat on tree stumps equally spaced about the small bonfire. The tree stumps had been worn smooth and comfortable by years of use.

“What about the minutes?” asked January. “We always do minutes when I’m in the chair.”

“But you aren’t in the chair now, are you, dear?” said September, an elegant creature of mock solicitude.

“What about the minutes?” repeated January. “You can’t ignore them.”

“Let the little buggers take care of themselves,” said April, one hand running through her long blonde hair. “And I think September should go first.”

September preened and nodded. “Delighted,” he said.

“Hey,” said February. “Hey-hey-hey-hey-hey-hey-ey. I didn’t hear the chairman ratify that. Nobody starts till October says who starts, and then nobody else talks. Can we have maybe the tiniest semblance of order here?” He peered at them, small, pale, dressed entirely in blues and grays.

“It’s fine,” said October. His beard was all colors, a grove of trees in autumn, deep brown and fire-orange and wine-red, an untrimmed tangle across the lower half of his face. His cheeks were apple-red. He looked like a friend; like someone you had known all your life. “September can go first. Let’s just get it rolling.”

September placed the end of his sausage into his mouth, chewed daintily, and drained his cider mug. Then he stood up and bowed to the company and began to speak.

“Laurent DeLisle was the finest chef in all of Seattle, at least, Laurent DeLisle thought so, and the Michelin stars on his door confirmed him in his opinion. He was a remarkable chef, it is
true—his minced lamb brioche had won several awards; his smoked quail and white truffle ravioli had been described in the *Gastronome* as ‘the tenth wonder of the world.’ But it was his wine cellar...ah, his wine cellar...that was his source of pride and his passion.

“I understand that. The last of the white grapes are harvested in me, and the bulk of the reds: I appreciate fine wines, the aroma, the taste, the aftertaste as well.

Laurent DeLisle bought his wines at auctions, from private wine lovers, from reputable dealers: he would insist on a pedigree for each wine, for wine frauds are, alas, too common, when the bottle is selling for perhaps five, ten, a hundred thousand dollars, or pounds, or euros.

“The treasure—the jewel—the rarest of the rare and the *ne plus ultra* of his temperature-controlled wine cellar was a bottle of 1902 Château Lafitte. It was on the wine list at one hundred and twenty thousand dollars, although it was, in true terms, priceless, for it was the last bottle of its kind.”

“Excuse me,” said August, politely. He was the fattest of them all, his thin hair combed in golden wisps across his pink pate.

September glared down at his neighbor. “Yes?”

“Is this the one where some rich dude buys the wine to go with the dinner, and the chef decides that the dinner the rich dude ordered isn’t good enough for the wine, so he sends out a different dinner, and the guy takes one mouthful, and he’s got, like, some rare allergy and he just dies like that, and the wine never gets drunk after all?”

September said nothing. He looked a great deal.

“Because if it is, you told it before. Years ago. Dumb story then. Dumb story now.”

August smiled. His pink cheeks shone in the firelight.

September said, “Obviously pathos and culture are not to everyone’s taste. Some people prefer their barbecues and beer, and some of us like—”

February said, “Well, I hate to say this, but he kind of does have a point. It has to be a new story.”

September raised an eyebrow and pursed his lips. “I’m done,” he said, abruptly. He sat down on his stump.

They looked at one another across the fire, the months of the year.

June, hesitant and clean, raised her hand and said, “I have one about a guard on the X-ray machines at LaGuardia Airport, who could read all about people from the outlines of their luggage on the screen, and one day she saw a luggage X-ray so beautiful that she fell in love with the person, and she had to figure out which person in the line it was, and she couldn’t, and she pined for months and months. And when the person came through again she knew it this time, and it was the man, and he was a wizened old Indian man and she was pretty and black and, like, twenty-five, and she knew it would never work out and she let him go, because she could also see from the shapes of his bags on the screen that he was going to die soon.”

October said, “Fair enough, young June. Tell that one.”

June stared at him, like a spooked animal. “I just did,” she said.

October nodded. “So you did,” he said, before any of the others could say anything. And then he said, “Shall we proceed to my story, then?”

February sniffed. “Out of order there, big fella. The man in the chair only tells his story when the rest of us are through. Can’t go straight to the main event.”
May was placing a dozen chestnuts on the grate above the fire, deploying them into patterns with her tongs. “Let him tell his story if he wants to,” she said. “God knows it can’t be worse than the one about the wine. And I have things to be getting back to. Flowers don’t bloom by themselves. All in favor?”

“You’re taking this to a formal vote?” February said. “I cannot believe this. I cannot believe this is happening.” He mopped his brow with a handful of tissues, which he pulled from his sleeve.

Seven hands were raised. Four people kept their hands down—February, September, January, and July. (“I don’t have anything personal on this,” said July, apologetically. “It’s purely procedural. We shouldn’t be setting precedents.”)

“It’s settled then,” said October. “Is there anything anyone would like to say before I begin?”

“Um. Yes. Sometimes,” said June, “sometimes I think somebody’s watching us from the woods, and then I look and there isn’t anybody there. But I still think it.”

April said, “That’s because you’re crazy.”

“Mm,” said September to everybody. “That’s our April. She’s sensitive, but she’s still the cruelest.”

“Enough,” said October. He stretched in his chair. He cracked a cobnut with his teeth, pulled out the kernel, and threw the fragments of shell into the fire, where they hissed and spat and popped, and he began.

There was a boy, October said, who was miserable at home, although they did not beat him. He did not fit well, not his family, his town, nor even his life. He had two older brothers, who were twins, older than he was, and who hurt him or ignored him, and were popular. They played football: some games one twin would score more and be the hero, and some games the other would. Their little brother did not play football. They had a name for their brother. They called him the Runt.

They had called him the Runt since he was a baby, and at first their mother and father had chided them for it.

The twins said, “But he is the runt of the litter. Look at him. Look at us.” The boys were six when they said this. Their parents thought it was cute. A name like the Runt can be infectious, so pretty soon the only person who called him Donald was his grandmother, when she telephoned him on his birthday, and people who did not know him.

Now, perhaps because names have power, he was a runt: skinny and small and nervous. He had been born with a runny nose, and it had not stopped running in a decade. At mealtimes, if the twins liked the food, they would steal his; if they did not, they would contrive to place their food on his plate and he would find himself in trouble for leaving good food uneaten.

Their father never missed a football game, and would buy an ice cream afterward for the twin who had scored the most, and a consolation ice cream for the other twin, who hadn’t. Their mother described herself as a newspaperwoman, although she mostly sold advertising space and subscriptions: she had gone back to work full-time once the twins were capable of taking care of themselves.

The other kids in the boy’s class admired the twins. They had called him Donald for several weeks in first grade, until the word trickled down that his brothers called him the Runt.
His teachers rarely called him anything at all, although among themselves they could sometimes be heard to say that it was a pity the youngest Covay boy didn’t have the pluck or the imagination or the life of his brothers.

The Runt could not have told you when he first decided to run away, nor when his daydreams crossed the border and became plans. By the time that he admitted to himself he was leaving he had a large Tupperware container hidden beneath a plastic sheet behind the garage containing three Mars bars, two Milky Ways, a bag of nuts, a small bag of licorice, a flashlight, several comics, an unopened packet of beef jerky, and thirty-seven dollars, most of it in quarters. He did not like the taste of beef jerky, but he had read that explorers had survived for weeks on nothing else; and it was when he put the packet of beef jerky into the Tupperware box and pressed the lid down with a pop that he knew he was going to have to run away.

He had read books, newspapers, and magazines. He knew that if you ran away you sometimes met bad people who did bad things to you; but he had also read fairy tales, so he knew that there were kind people out there, side by side with the monsters.

The Runt was a thin ten-year-old, small, with a runny nose and a blank expression. If you were to try and pick him out of a group of boys, you’d be wrong. He’d be the other one. Over at the side. The one your eye slipped over.

All through September he put off leaving. It took a really bad Friday, during the course of which both of his brothers sat on him (and the one who sat on his face broke wind and laughed uproariously), for him to decide that whatever monsters were waiting out in the world would be bearable, perhaps even preferable.

Saturday, his brothers were meant to be looking after him, but soon they went into town to see a girl they liked. The Runt went around the back of the garage and took the Tupperware container out from beneath the plastic sheeting. He took it up to his bedroom. He emptied his schoolbag onto his bed, filled it with his candies and comics and quarters and the beef jerky. He filled an empty soda bottle with water.

The Runt walked into town and got on the bus. He rode west, ten-dollars-in-quarters’ worth of west, to a place he didn’t know, which he thought was a good start, then he got off the bus and walked. There was no sidewalk now, so when cars came past he would edge over into the ditch, to safety.

The sun was high. He was hungry, so he rummaged in his bag and pulled out a Mars bar. After he ate it he found he was thirsty, and he drank almost half of the water from his soda bottle before he realized he was going to have to ration it. He had thought that once he got out of the town he would see springs of fresh water everywhere, but there were none to be found. There was a river, though, that ran beneath a wide bridge.

The Runt stopped halfway across the bridge to stare down at the brown water. He remembered something he had been told in school: that, in the end, all rivers flowed into the sea. He had never been to the seashore. He clambered down the bank and followed the river. There was a muddy path along the side of the riverbank, and an occasional beer can or plastic snack packet to show that people had been that way before, but he saw no one as he walked.

He finished his water.

He wondered if they were looking for him yet. He imagined police cars and helicopters and dogs, all trying to find him. He would evade them. He would make it to the sea.
The river ran over some rocks, and it splashed. He saw a blue heron, its wings wide, glide past him, and he saw solitary end-of-season dragonflies, and sometimes small clusters of midges, enjoying the Indian Summer. The blue sky became dusk-gray, and a bat swung down to snatch insects from the air. The Runt wondered where he would sleep that night.

Soon the path divided, and he took the branch that led away from the river, hoping it would lead to a house or to a farm with an empty barn. He walked for some time, as the dusk deepened, until at the end of the path he found a farmhouse, half tumbled-down and unpleasant-looking. The Runt walked around it, becoming increasingly certain as he walked that nothing could make him go inside, and then he climbed over a broken fence to an abandoned pasture, and settled down to sleep in the long grass with his schoolbag for his pillow.

He lay on his back, fully dressed, staring up at the sky. He was not in the slightest bit sleepy.

“They’ll be missing me by now,” he told himself. “They’ll be worried.”

He imagined himself coming home in a few years’ time. The delight on his family’s faces as he walked up the path to home. Their welcome. Their love....

He woke some hours later, with the bright moonlight in his face. He could see the whole world—as bright as day, like in the nursery rhyme, but pale and without colors. Above him, the moon was full, or almost, and he imagined a face looking down at him, not unkindly, in the shadows and shapes of the moon’s surface.

A voice said, “Where do you come from?”

He sat up, not scared, not yet, and looked around him. Trees. Long grass. “Where are you? I don’t see you.”

Something he had taken for a shadow moved, beside a tree on the edge of the pasture, and he saw a boy of his own age.

“I’m running away from home,” said the Runt.

“Whoa,” said the boy. “That must have taken a whole lot of guts.”

The Runt grinned with pride. He didn’t know what to say.

“You want to walk a bit?” said the boy.

“Sure,” said the Runt. He moved his schoolbag so it was next to the fence post, so he could always find it again.

They walked down the slope, giving a wide berth to the old farmhouse.

“Does anyone live there?” asked the Runt.

“Not really,” said the other boy. He had fair, fine hair that was almost white in the moonlight. “Some people tried a long time back, but they didn’t like it, and they left. Then other folk moved in. But nobody lives there now. What’s your name?”

“Donald,” said the Runt. And then, “But they call me the Runt. What do they call you?”

The boy hesitated. “Dearly,” he said.

“That’s a cool name.”

Dearly said, “I used to have another name, but I can’t read it anymore.”

They squeezed through a huge iron gateway, rusted part open, part closed, and they were in the little meadow at the bottom of the slope.

“This place is cool,” said the Runt.

There were dozens of stones of all sizes in the small meadow. Tall stones, bigger than either of the boys, and small ones, just the right size for sitting on. There were some broken
stones. The Runt knew what sort of a place this was, but it did not scare him. It was a loved place.

“Who’s buried here?” he asked.

“Mostly okay people,” said Dearly. “There used to be a town over there. Past those trees. Then the railroad came and they built a stop in the next town over, and our town sort of dried up and fell in and blew away. There’s bushes and trees now, where the town was. You can hide in the trees and go into the old houses and jump out.”

The Runt said, “Are they like that farmhouse up there? The houses?” He didn’t want to go in them, if they were.

“No,” said Dearly. “Nobody goes in them, except for me. And some animals, sometimes. I’m the only kid around here.”

“I figured,” said the Runt.

“Maybe we can go down and play in them,” said Dearly.

“That would be pretty cool,” said the Runt.

It was a perfect early October night: almost as warm as summer, and the harvest moon dominated the sky. You could see everything.

“Which one of these is yours?” asked the Runt.

Dearly straightened up proudly and took the Runt by the hand. He pulled him to an overgrown corner of the field. The two boys pushed aside the long grass. The stone was set flat into the ground, and it had dates carved into it from a hundred years before. Much of it was worn away, but beneath the dates it was possible to make out the words