The Story:

The bank was high and steep, and from that small cliff two short legs dangled. The water was 10 feet below, however, and not dangerously quick even after a summer rain. The little legs had never heard, nor guessed, but that bank was dug by a full river, long before the legs were born. At one time, the deep waters had fed a whole forest; that lazy brown river quenched the thirst of many willows. Back then, floods would occasionally break through the low land, turning the rolling hills into islands. This was no good for development, so the subdivision planners changed this hazard into a series of circular ponds within pretty parks; afterwards the water became much more temperate in the area these legs swung. Yet, that stream did not wholly yield. Its willows’ roots ran deep, twisted the land, and confounded the wheeled equipment. The stream, though now steady, was strong, and it frustrated attempts to blot it out completely. Despite the gnawing of lost profits, investors had settled for a simple path built in the woods - that would at least raise the value of what houses could be built for their proximity to greenspace.

This is the bank where the small legs swung. As far above the legs as the water was below, another set of legs balanced on a branch. These belonged to a young boy who had climbed about as high as he could, and he was smiling, because he had never climbed so high. On the bank sat a girl of the same age, who was relating a history, “The police were on this man’s heels, though he dodged in and out of backyards, under bleachers, and even in the dumpsters at the school. Then, he figured out how he could lose them for good. He ran along Mercer street until he found this path. The police were still chasing him even as he took the path. Then, at a bend he ducked into some bushes and off the path. That’s where the police missed him. Their stomping boots ran right by as he held his breath in a thornbush next to a low magnolia. It wasn’t long before the officers realized they had lost the trail and doubled back, but it was already too late. The man had been raised in this area, and knew these woods like the back of his hand. Once those officers were out of earshot, he stole into the dark of the forest and couldn’t be found – because the police didn’t know how to navigate in this forest. He still lives in here, hunting for food and drinking from the creek. That’s why you see so many fallen trees crossing the river – because he put them there to use as bridges.”

The boy landed with a thud about a yard behind her, then drug himself to the bank and sat himself there, “that was a tough climb,”

“You’re covered in pricklies”

“Yeah,” he said, as he picked these out of his shirt, “And I’ve got a bit of scratch too,” he held up his right arm in pride.

The girl scrunched up her face in disgust, then her look softened as her eyes moved to the other side of the bank again, “How would you care for yourself, if you got hurt and you were living out here?”

“If you can’t wash it in water at a house? You could wash it in the creek I guess”

She looked down at the green and brown swirls beneath, “No, that water is dirty. That’s not good for a scratch.”

The boy looked down too, then at his arm, and realized he wished he had some tap water from home. “So what though? This will heal on its own fine.”

“But what if you were living out here? What if you had to escape the law and care for yourself in the wild?”

“Oh, I thought that was a serious question.” The boy resumed picking pricklies. “You’re just asking for a story.”

“It *is* a serious question, because it’s for a serious story.”

“Huh, well I don’t know. I’m sure you’ll figure it out though. There’s people who survive out in the wild, they have to do it somehow,”

“Yeah” Her legs swung. Burs from his shirt landed in the creek. The moss-covered water slowly carried these away beneath them.

“Want to cross the creek?” He suggested. She looked out again, but the sun was getting lower, and that side of the water was less known to her. It looked darker, and a little scary.

“Um, no.” She looked at the boy, “Won’t it be time to go back soon? You won’t be able to get to the top of another tree, if you take as much time as you did with this one.”

“I don’t have to climb – don’t you want to explore?”

She looked back at the other side. When she was a kid she used to have nightmares of bad things lying just off the path. Now that she was big she liked the woods, but only the familiar parts. She hadn’t crossed the river many times, and it was still a little scary, “Another day? Maybe when it looks brighter?” The two of them were shadowed by a small patch of cloud at that moment, and though the boy knew it wouldn’t last long he also knew the girl got worried by new areas in the woods, “Fine. Tomorrow, if the sun’s shining?”

“Okay.” The two of them did cross the creek the next day, and many more days after that until school started. Then they both were busy afterschool with their own soccer practices; the soccer season lasted while there was still daylight afterschool. In the spring the boy broke an arm, but once it healed in June he went back to climbing trees the rest of the summer. When school came, the girl continued with soccer, while the boy tried cross country. The next summer the girl spent living with her aunt, but the summer after they spent most sunny days together near the creek, as they did for 3 more summers after, save for a handful of weeklong camps each had.

Neither any longer feared the woods on the other side of the water even at twilight, and both were starting to get old enough to appreciate the hues of the sunset. The boy was building a stick hut, sort of, as the girl sat on a log, swaying back and forth, next to a long-cold fire pit. She had been telling a story about a remote family living in the woods who used it for warmth in the winter. She stopped when she noticed crumpled cans around the pit, though, unsure of how they fit in the story.

Peaking over his small structure, the boy said, “Let’s go, it’s getting hard to see the sticks.”

Both still had a curfew at dark, but this had become burdensome to the girl rather than the convenient excuse not to test her courage in the dark that it once was.

“Let’s just stay while it’s still light out; the sunset is so pretty.” The boy turned and looked at the sunset, and sat down a little ways in front of the girl, leaning against his lean-to. It had been raining most of the day, so both were in their rain gear, but the clouds had cleared out in the West.

The light changed slowly, and as the sun waned it filled the sky with a light too bright for the eyes. The creek was a golden fire, and the clouds blushed. Every bright color orbited an intense central glow. This slowly faded, and the sunset bruised the sky. The silhouetted trees loomed.

I assume that something in that scene moved the boy to say what must’ve been on his mind for some time. “Maddie, I heard your parents were getting divorced,” he said, “and I’m sorry.”

The girl shifted on her log.

“I know you probably don’t want to hear about it. I just wanted to tell you that I’m here for you if you need me. I know it’s not really the same thing, but you were for me when I broke my leg and it took forever to heal, and that meant a lot.”

“Thanks, Nick.” Cicadas chattered. Water gurgled along the creek bed. Twilight settled. “Do you want to share some of this with me?”

“Some of what?”

Maddie pulled a bottle out of her jacket, “It’s some of my Mom’s alcohol. It tastes weird, but it’s kinda warm too.”

“Oh,” Nick hesitated, “You drink that stuff?”

“Some nights I do. Have you tried it before?”

“No.”

“Huh” Maddie answered, “Do you want to try some now?”

“Not really. I kinda want to go home.”

“Oh. I was thinking of staying out a little later. It’s almost August, and we only have so many nights left we can come down here in the summer.”

“Well, we could come back tomorrow, and the day after. And we’ve got next summer too.”

“What about when we’re older, and don’t have summer vacation anymore?”

“Well then I’ll be older, and I can finally do all of the things I really want to do. I could build a house, or climb a mountain. But I don’t think that starts from staying out late… drinking.”

“Oh, so what do you think will happen to me when I’m older? Think I’ll be too drunk and tired to be anyone?”

“I...I don’t know...forget I said anything? My parents just told me to be back before the streetlights came on, and they’ve told me not to drink. Can we just go home?”

Maddie tried to stand, but stumbled slightly. She caught Nick’s shoulder and steadied herself, looking into his eyes. They were still the same height. Nick could tell then that she was starting to tear up. “Maddie, I’m really sorry you have to see your parents getting divorced. But you’re not like them, your future is bright, and full. I’m really looking forward to seeing it.”

She started to cry, then took another draught from the flask. Nick put his hand on her arm, which she hit away with one hand, while the other hand hit him in the head with the flask.

She beats him up, drunkenly. At the end she says, “you don’t know what I’m like.” and stumbles her way out of the forest alone.

I want Nick to have this idea of who they could be, about how good things could be for them. Maybe then he acknowledges Maddie’s parents’ divorce. Maddie is actually more scared of the future than she lets on, and wants to stay out past curfew. She offers her drink to Nick hoping that convinces him to stay. He doesn’t.