The Story:

The bank was high and steep, and from that small cliff two short legs dangled. The water was just 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. So, even as the lost profits gnawed at their thoughts, the investors settled, bitterly, 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, and she was telling a story, “The man dodged in and out of backyards, under bleachers, and even tried hiding in the dumpsters at school, but the police kept on his heels. They kept running after him. Then, he figured out how he could lose them for good. With the police following, he ran along Mercer street until he found this path. Then, at a bend he ducked behind a magnolia 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. 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, all the secret paths and shortcuts. 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 little she used to have nightmares of bad things lying just off the path. Now, though, she was big, and she liked the woods - at least, she liked 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, the soccer season kept them both busy afterschool, which lasted while there was still enough daylight in the evenings to play by. In the spring the boy broke a leg, and hardly went outside until it healed in late June. The girl however spent the second half of that summer with her Aunt. When school came, the girl continued with soccer, while the boy tried cross country. The next summer 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 creek, even at twilight, and both were starting to get old enough to appreciate the hues of the sunset. One evening they stayed out until late.

It had been drizzling earlier in the day, but not enough to keep them from playing outside. The boy, in a red rain jacket, was building himself a lean-to out of sticks. The girl sat on the log in a blue rain jacket humming to herself next to a long-cold fire pit. She had been trying to tell a story about the fire pit, how it was used for warmth in the winter by a family living off-grid, but stopped when she noticed crumpled beer cans around the pit, though, unsure of how they fit in the story.

“Do you know what this is?” The girl asked, holding up one of the cans.

The boy peeked over his small structure, “A soda can?”

The girl looked at it, “But I don’t know this brand of soda, never even heard of it.”

“What’s it called?”

“3 sheeps.”

“3 sheep. Sheep I think is one of those words where the singular and plural are the same word.”

“It says 3 sheep*sss*. With an ‘s’,” the girl insisted.

“Weird. I wonder what Mrs. Stofferahn would think of that grammar.”

“I don’t know. Why would a family living in the woods have soda cans?” The girl wondered, “bean cans I could see, but not soda.” She tossed it into the fire pit.

“Huh, not sure.” Cicadas chattered. Water gurgled along the creek bed. The boy looked for sticks

The girl had been quiet for some time when the boy looked over to see why. She was holding a glass bottle that looked like ones he’d seen on the top shelf at home, but he still asked, “What are you drinking, Maddie?”

The girl looked up at him suddenly, then back down at it, “um, it’s my mom’s alcohol.”

“Oh”

The girl raised her head, “do you want to share it?”

“Oh, uh, no thanks.” The boy stammered, “It’s getting kinda hard to see the sticks, do you want to go back?”

The girl took a drink from the bottle, “Do you want to stay a little longer? The sunset is so pretty.”

The boy turned, and looked out that direction. He spread his jacket on the ground and sat on that. She wasn’t wrong; the clouds were just clearing 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.

“Can I ask you something?”

“Sure”

“When you’re older,” the boy said, “What do you want to do?”

The girl thought for a moment, “I don’t really think I want to get older.” She replied, “I don’t really like thinking about the future at all.”

Lightning bugs blinked around them as twilight settled.

“Maddie,” he said, somewhat timidly, “Is it because of your parents? Because of their divorce?”

The girl shifted on her log.

The boy looked down, “Sorry, we don’t have to talk about it, but I just wanted to say… well, do you remember when I broke my leg a few years ago? When I was stuck inside and couldn’t go out to play for weeks while I was recovering? Sitting there, I got kinda jealous of all the things I saw outside my window - the mailman, my neighbors, deer and squirrels, everything - because I really just wanted to go outside and run, or play soccer, or anything. It felt like I’d stare out that window bored for hours. But sometimes you’d be in the window, and then I wouldn’t be bored, because you’d knock on the door, and my mom would answer and ask you about your day and your family, and you’d be polite and listen while she told you about her day and whatever else adults talk about until she ran out of things to say, and then you’d come over to me and ask me how I was doing. And all I did was complain, but I loved hearing about what you were doing, and you told me about how you were excited to go to Oregon to see your aunt in a few weeks. I remember one day when you brought me some frogs you had caught in a jar, and it felt so funny to hold a frog on the couch in my living room. I think that day, I figured out why it meant so much that you’d visit - because you could’ve done all the things I wanted to do instead, but you sat inside instead of under the sun. And I thought to myself that I want to be someone who can do that for other people someday.”

The boy paused, fumbling for a moment, “What were we talking… oh yeah. That’s why I wanted to say something, just so I let you know that I want to be here for you, like you were for me. I know it’s not really the same thing - honestly I don’t really know what it’s like. But maybe that doesn’t matter; I mean, you didn’t have to have a broken leg to be there for me.”

The girl sniffled, “

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, do you remember when I broke my leg a few years ago, and you still came by my house to say hi almost every day? That meant a lot, that you would do that. And, I hope I can be there for you kinda like you were for me.”

Cicadas chattered. Water gurgled along the creek bed. Twilight settled. The girl sniffled, “Thanks, Nick.”

The boy turned toward her, and saw that she was starting to cry. “Aw, Maddie, I’m sorry.”

He started to walk over, and was going to sit down until he caught a strange glint in her hand. He stopped, staring at it sidelong. Cautiously, he asked, “What do you have?”

“Huh? Oh, do you mean this?” As she spoke Nick noticed that she was slurring her words, “it’s a bottle of, uh, my Mom’s liquor. Do you want some?”

“No.” The boy stood for a moment, looking around, and realized that the last of twilight was slipping away, “Let’s go, it’s getting late.”

The girl looked out to where the sun had set, but now could only make out a distant streetlight. “No… can we stay? I don’t really want to go back just yet.” She took another drink. Maddie’s voice swung back and forth in an almost sing-song fashion. “It’s almost August, you know?” She said, “And we only have so many nights left we can come down here in the summer.”

Nick turned, and set his eyes on the same light Maddie saw, “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 we’ll be older, and can finally do all of the things we really want to do. I could build a house, or climb a mountain. And you can write a book, or something.” The boy thought for a moment, “I’m excited to be older, aren’t you?”

This made the girl laugh, “Sure.” Then, the swaying in her voice stopped, “I don’t think it’ll be like how you say.”

Nick turned back to Maddie, “When I was stuck inside with my broken leg, all I wanted was to go outside and run, or play soccer, or anything. I’d stare out my window jealous of everything that got to be out there. The mailman, my Mom when she’d get groceries, the deer. But sometimes you’d be in the window, and then you’d knock on the door and politely listen to my Mom tell you about her day or whatever until she ran out of things to say and then you’d come over to me and listen to me complain. But I loved hearing about what you were doing, and you told me about how you were excited to go to Oregon to see your aunt in a few weeks. I remember one day when you brought me some frogs you had caught in a jar, and it felt so funny to hold a frog on the couch. That day, I figured out why it meant so much that you’d visit - because you could’ve done all the things I wanted to do instead, but you sat inside instead of under the sun. And I thought to myself that I want to love people like that someday.”

The boy paused, fumbling for a moment, “What were we talking… oh yeah. That’s why I’m looking forward to getting older - because I think I know what kind of person I want to be. So even if things do get hard, I can find comfort in this… constant tug of a desire to be a good person, like how when a river encounters rocks and roots in its path, you know it’ll carve its way past, because its constantly being pulled to the sea. So I always want to be more like that girl who sat inside with me.”

In a dark rain jacket, that girl sat hunched on a wet log next to a bottle of tequila and stared at the ground, “I wish I could be like that again.” To her, the boy seemed to tower like an obelisk. “I think that’s why I want to stay down here while we can, so I can find that again.”

Realizing what she was saying, the boy started to choke up, “Maddie… let’s go… there’s nothing special about this creek.”

“What?”

“Let’s go home. Could you give me the bottle?”

“No!” the girl bolted up, but much too fast, so she had to catch herself on the boy’s shoulder. Once she got her bearings again, she straightened up so she was looking the boy in the eyes. At this age they were still the same height. “No, you can’t have any!” And she put the bottle to her mouth and held it there.

“I’m sorry Maddie, but I’m going back, please come with me,” the boy turned around.

The girl put the bottle down “No, stupid! Stay here!” She screamed, as she swung the bottle at his head. The boy fell down, and the girl lost her balance and fell on top of him. Once she got her bearings, she yelled again “I don’t wanna lose that girl!” with all the strength she could muster, Maddie drove her fists into the dark body on the ground.

Still, she missed more than she hit, and after a while she tired. Looking around, she could make out a streetlight. Maddie stumbled and crawled from tree to tree until she made it there. About a half hour later, Nick came to, and, moaning, did the same.