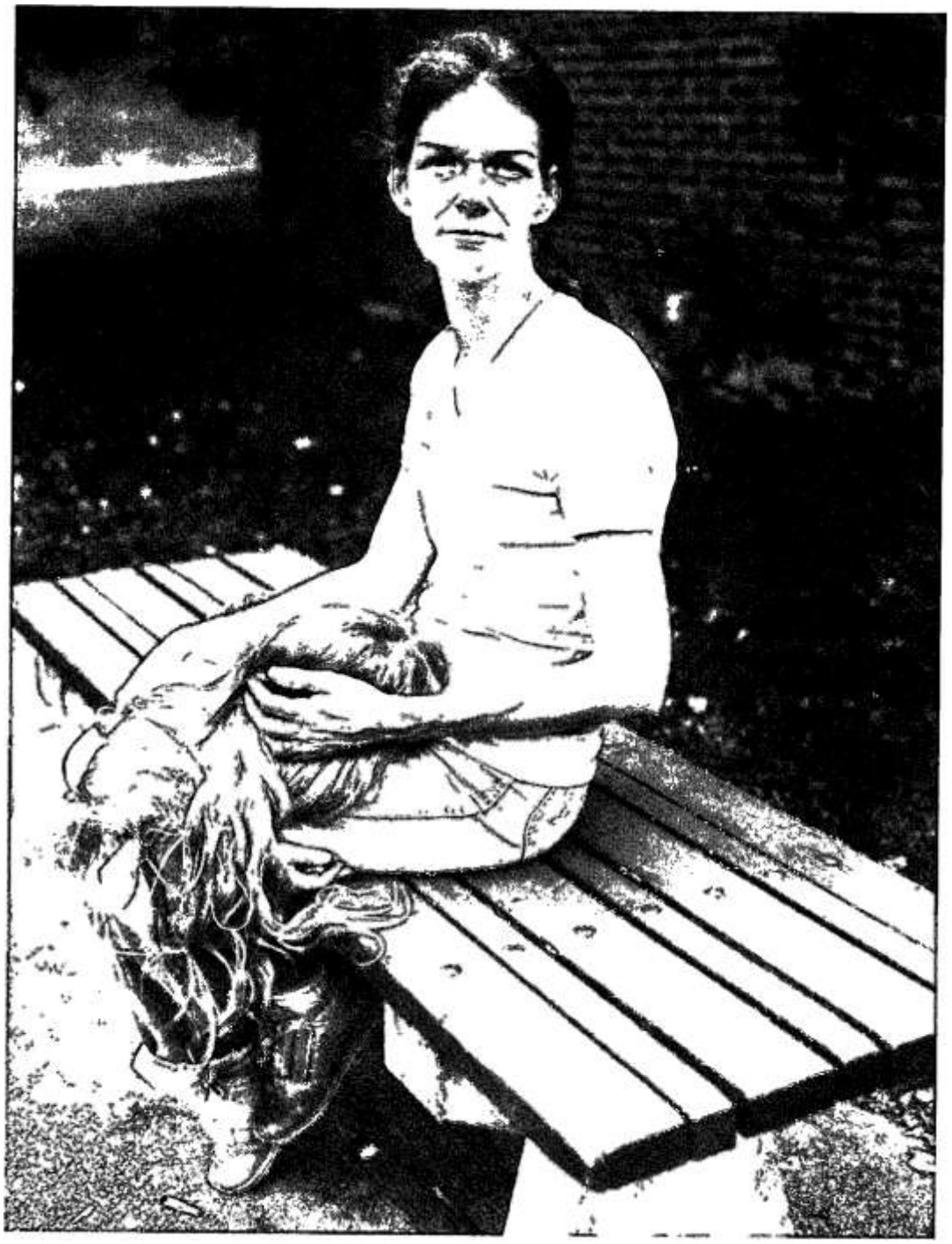

Photo by: Andrea Modica

LYNX

Andrea Abbott

If Ellen is lonely, she gives no sign of it. Why, having complained so long of noise, she will not dare complain of silence. But the silence is large, the white of acres barren, waiting walls. It is doctor's offices and the tiles of cheap clinics, of spurious apartments and the white of typing pools. Now take dirt, the crawling brown of dirt, now with that she could mold and furrow. From that something would. come, monstrous perhaps, perhaps, and here she stops to have some courage, perhaps red and flowering as impatience or volcanoes. She-waits for nights and wants the heat to continue. She wants the porch to lap around her and hold the end of heat in a pocket away from the night's chill. It is that edge that will drive her, she hopes, to something that stands at the edge of the thicket, something fiercer than a deer, more graceful than a bear, a lynx, long sought, too fast for her. Til now. But now she is alone and quick. She retreats and sulks in the humid house, her mother's house where the windows no longer open. She feels her desires, insatiable, pulling her away from herself. There is always something, outside that will not let her find the lynx.

When we were about ten and nine, your Aunt Paula and I, Ellen has told the story to her six year old, but he still likes the stories, Soon he will stop liking them. His ten year old brother is sick of them and rolls his eyes when she starts. Now she tells the large, white silence, because she is alone in *it* and doesn't need to worry about rolling eyes. We went hunting for a lynx in back of your grandfather's, no your great-grandfather's, place. Now, at this point in the story, she realizes that since she is telling herself the story, for the first time she can put in the scenery. The boys would never have cared about the scenery, but she does and indeed, as she tries to tell the story to the large white silence of her mother's living room, she realizes that it is the scenery she cares about the most. This surprises her because she had always thought she cared about the action of a story the most. The scenery goes on in her mind, on a large canvas, and, since the story happens in the winter, she watches with

longing the vast whiteness of the creek, snow and ice covered above the dam. She watches her footprints and her sister's making shallow lines across the ice and looks back over her shoulder in its n lon jacket, red, she thinks, and then thinks how nicely that must have looked, say to another watcher on the other side of the creek, and over this red shoulder, too close to catch the effect, she sees the thin pencil lines of the trees, delicately etched up the hillsid, with its ring of broken stone wall ,near itS crown. She had thought then, and thinks now, how it looked old as some Celtic rune stones, not that she 'had any firm idea of these things then, and is embarrassed at her fantasy now. She wonders why she must always translate things to what they are not in order to enjoy them. She thinks about the stone wall again, but the nearest she gets to actual is a Robert Frost poem. She would like to be an artist, but perhaps she would always draw "in the manner of . . .•

Now she is inside the picture. Her remembering spreads outward like ripples, and she is also the watcher at the top of the hill, the watcher -.yhom she onc.e would have hoped was the lynx. They are walking across the snow. It is old snow, slightly crusted at the top so that their rubber packs first crack the surface, then sink through a powdery mass until they scrunch most of the snow into a moist and creaking lump printed with their treads. They proceed slowly, pulling each heavy foot out of its prison, then putting it in again. At last they toil to the creek. It, too, is covered with snow, but there is a thinner layer here. They proceed cautiously at first, listening for cracks in the hidden ice, but after awhile they lose their caution, and try to clear away the snow. Underneath the ice is gray and rippled, a hazard for skates, but good to slide on. At the edge of the creek it breaks in layers, but there is no water under it. It is frozen through. They half skate, half walk in circles ar-0und the wide spot in the creek, just below the plank bridge. They have forgotten about lynx hunting, for after all, they are nine and tn. and have really come to do whatever the minute before them offers.

Because she is different than her sister, both in good and bad ways, as their mother will often say, Ellen remembers first. "Paula, are those tracks?• she asks in a thrilling whisper. They are not. They are round circles in the snow from small avalanches, drops of water, falling leaves, settling and shifting at night, who knows, but snow has almost always these imperfections after a time.They are not tracks, not even old tracks, they acknowledge after some disappointment. They finally turn from the untracks and begin walking down the creek.

They do not notice the boys, though the watcher or:i the cliffs would have, seen four dots, in pairs of two, converging on each other over a veld of white. The boys shout at them, two boys they know from school, brothers, the older a year ahead of Ellen, the

younger in Paula's grade. In school, the girls don't like them, don't like most boys, in fact, but really don't like these two, wh6 are poor, slow and rough. Out here, however, on the snow and ice, the girls have the feeling they have intruded on boys' space. They are enjoying an adventure. The four are like neighbors, never particularly close, met in Paris. They are all friendly, the boys are puzzled, but friendly. Paula asks them if they are looking for the lynx. The boys are contemptuous and the fragile truce almost dies. "Ain't no lynxes,• the older boy says, "We're walking our traps.• But they have no limp rags of muskrats dangling from their mittens. They, too, have been sliding on the ice, and down the snowy banks of the creek, like otters, as the packed snowbehindt hem demonstrates. All of them are now arriving at the age when it is difficult to admit to pure play. Suddenly Ellen slides on the ice, Paula follows, the older boy takes a separate patch and tries to beat her slide, his brother does the same and for a few minutes they are screaming up and down the creek.

How it ends Ellen doesn't remember. It is a dream, like all memories, and somewhere in the frozen white she and her sister are walking away_ from the boys, each of them leaving long black trails of boot marks behind them. Again, they are dots flung out from a center. They will never speak to each other again, though, because it is a small school, they will see each other every day for the next eight years or so. When the older boy is killed, much later, in Vietnam, she will be as sorry as if he had been a close friend, and will remember this winter afternoon as if it had been some tender and exotic lover's meeting. There, in that icy silence, the possibility for uni.on existed, a cutting through of the crust of their different lives. It did not happen, nor did any of them want it to happen. Somewher. in the moments that are missing from the pictures of this day, they drifted away from the meeting point, in perfect harmony that they should, their very tenuous hold on each other already exhausted.

Ellen clings, and will always cling, to such moments, more than the real, fleshed moments of her life. She cannot lose the delicate fronds of chance. Her sister does not remember the meeting at all, and thinks she has made it up whenever it is recalled. Her sister, whose real life has become as delicate and finely etched as designs in glass, needs large, vivid moments, not transparent winter afternoons where nothing happens.

The boys laugh at them when they find out they are looking for the lynx. Paula tells them, of course. She is honest and tells everyone everything. Ellen seldom tells anything that is real. She tells endless stories that seem infinitely better to her. She never shares anything that matters. To her, the lynx matters. She is furious with her sister for telling, furious with the boys for laughing. "I got a knife. I'm not afraid of it.• She won't show them the knife,

which is just as well because it's a pen knife with a blade an inch long and sailboats on its case. She thinks she is braver because she is so inadequately armed. She pictures the lynx leaping at her sister, she spearing it, in the right place, just before it kills. She will be brave and accurate. She looks with longing at the knives the boys carry, long sheath knives, hanging negligently from their belts. She knows her father will never buy her one. She has always wanted things like this, guos, hatchet, knives. She already knows she will never do anything brave or noble. All her life she will try the adventures permitted to women and she will know when she has gone too far. Already she is feeling the length of her string, the feel of the peg in her center.

Now they are walking along the bottom of the ridge, picking their way through the broken limestone, twisting their ankles when they suddenly slide through the light snow into a miniature crevasse. They follow the line of the ridge until they ar well into a little wood that they have never been in before. They are not as far away from home as they think and hope they are, but already they are out of their usual bounds. The land has smoothed somewhat. There is no longer a sharp line of ridge, but instead the wood slopes gently up a hill. They have been plodding in silence, half in a daze, when they hear voices and the dull whine of a chain saw. Paula wants to go back. Ellen wants to go on and see who is talking.

When they come upon the loggers, the strange men are as mysterious to her, as if they have strayed into someone's else's story. There is something unsettling about finding adults in the woods. These are adults with a purpose, rough brown and dirty men, small and wiry. There are four of them, not any proper kind of logging company, but the sort of men who drift from farm job to farm job in season, and log in the winter. To· Ellen they seem like gnomes, sprung like mushrooms from the forest floor.

Paula is afraid, and wants to slink back into the woods. Ellen wants to meet them. She hopes they will talk some incomprdhensible language and pull strange herbs and roots to eat from their pockets. But she is afraid too. She knows that she and Paula have no right to be there. The girls wander on the edge of the circle of trees the men are cutting. One of them finally notices and waves at them in an offhand way. The girls watch while the men girdle a small maple. There is no reason for them to stay, but they do. At last Ellen thinks of a reason. "Maybe they know about the lynx.• Paula has forgotten the lynx. Her feet are beginning to get cold. She wants to go home. Already the short day is ending and the shadows have turned strange and menacing in the little circle of half cut trees. Paula is half dreaming of her mother's kitchen and cups of cocoa. Ellen is too, but will not leave. She has come for something, for the lynx, for some signpost, some marker. She will not

leave without it. She thinks the loggers hold some key; some clue. To leave would be always to wonder. She does not know how to ask.

The loggers help them, as in the best stories. They put down their saws, the job half done and sit on stumps and draw thermoses of coffee and cigarettes out of their jacket pockets. •want some?• They wave sandwiches at the girls who shake their heads but do not move. The men ignore them. Sometime farm hands, odd job men, often out Of paying work, their kids are all around them. A kid watching them lOQ, fix a tractor, milk, that was what kids did. Ellen knows this, has always been drawn to the asbestos shingled houses, the yards filled with old washers, old cars, old hounds sitting on asbestos shingled dog houses, the kids who are each others brothers, sisters, cousins, live in great tangled skeins. She pretends she is the logger's girl. One of the men gets up and walks over to the girls. Now they are both a little afraid. Paula turns to go, Ellen stands her ground. The logger smiles shyly at them. "What you girls doin out here?• He is barely taller than Ellen.

"We were skating on the pond.• The •were• instead of •was• marks here, as does the fact that she answers him at all, as do her clothes, obviously hers and hers alone, bought for her. They stand and look at each other for a while. She is ill at ease. He is not. He is waiting to think of what to say.

"You go to school in the village?"

This is the question of a man who went to a school in the country, all one of two rooms of it, for a few years. It preserves an old division, more blurred since the •central school" has arrived, village kids, country kids; rich kids, poor kids.•

"Yeah, I'm in fifth. Mrs. Hobbinses.•

"My boy goes there,• he says with some pride, "Mebbe you know him. Clarence Fletcher. Big tall boy.•

Ellen is consumed with shock and horror. Clarence Fletcher, who was in her grade when she was in third, who is still in third, who will be in third until he's sixteen and able to legally retire, each year they have to get a desk from the high school for him. Clarence. And here is his father. Clarence, following her around every recess till she was mean, like the rest of the kids. Clarence, drowned puppy, abandoned kitten, Clarence, her, conscience and torment through third grade and here is his father on lynx hunting day. 1 know Clarence,• she says brightly, sprightly, nimbly as her mother in a room full of church ladies, •we were in third grade together.• She does not let this man know what a shadow his son is on her day.

•so was I,• Paula adds, not to be outdone in the social graces.

They both feel the weight of Clarence, the intolerable burden to this tiny man. They feel for him the heaviness of coming home to Clarence, the courage of saying he is Clarence's

father. They feel unnecessarily, something they will share all their lives.

"He's a good boy,• says Clarence's father, with real warmth and a sort of false modesty, "Dunno how he got so big. Hauls wood like a man.•

They are open mouthed and staring, but Clarence's father is also schooled in social grace, or perhaps too used to odd behavior in children to comment. •want to see my finger?• he asks abruptly, "Took it right off with that chain right there.• He points to a chain, very like the other chains girdling the downed trees. Presumably a man knows which chain took off his finger, though. They do not dispute it. Paula does not want to see and runs in terror to the thickest part of the wood. Ellen steels herself for the bloody stump. She feels to run away from this horror would be to admit her girlness, forever locking her out of everything worth having. The man takes off him chamois glove and she half expects to hear the finger dr9p to the snow. He shows her a whole hand, rare for a logger, and does not laugh.

He is not, then, like her elderly cousin Carl, who, knowing the magic trick of thumb and finger which makes it appear that his finger is detachable, roars with laughter when she and Paula scream. They go on screaming even when they know the trick, for Carl himself, not the trick, is somehow sinister. This man is not like that, no man of mystery and terror. He is showing a treasure and is puzzled, rather than pleased, at Paula's fear.

"Look," he says to Ellen, "I took it clean off there• and he points to a ,deep groove, well dirt encrusted, that runs around his left index finger. "I picked it up, stuck it back on, wrapped a rag around it and it stuck on. Five years ago I did that, sometime it aches a little when it's gonna rain.•

She is amazed and skeptical, but, because he is not Carl, she believes him, the starfish-man, lizard-man, maybe he can re-grow a finger, maybe anybody can. Or maybe he o::lly can because he's Clarence's father and he hasn't noticed there's something wrong with Clarence. She chews this over. She asks him about the lynx. "Oh, yeah, theys lynxes around. I hear them yowling out at night, and theys wolves, too. I seen one just two years ago, out by the under the bluff road, but some people'll tell you there ain't none no more. They just ain't out here. I hear bout the lynx and this cold a winter, lots of things come down from Canada cross the ice. You oughn't to be out here.•

"I got a knife.•

"Don't count on no knife. First you gotta be able to use it. Sides, it's gettin pretty dark. You two oughta be off home.•

And he was right because it is winter and they are north and the sun has finally come through long enough to die in fire around them, making the shadows of the girls, the loggers and the trees, both the dead and living, blue and long and wavy so that the whole woods seem on fire and

quenched in the deepest sea at the same time.

They all fade away now, the loggers and the circle of trees, as neatly as in a fairy tale and the two girls trudge home, tired and, at least in Ellen's case, depressed. This has been her moment of epiphany, to meet a man who can stick his finger back on. Now that he has told her there are lynxses, she knows there are none. No more than the wolves, no more than they are little Red Riding Hoods, or the loggers the woodsmen of ancient memory. They are where they are and soon they will be back in the hard, warm clasp of their mother's kitchen, being given cocoa and there will be no way she can tell about the lynx that was or was not there.