

Nic Howe

## Periphery

The thick trees canopied above Jacob, preventing any natural light to pierce through. That was okay though, Jacob liked the dark. One could do as they liked in the dark. No one could see you, though he thought he could see through it himself. His school jumper and trousers were stained with dirt, but his mother's inevitable scolding over his dirty clothes didn't matter to Jacob right now, all that was on his mind was getting home. He had been lost for some time, so long in fact that he could not quite remember exactly how he had gotten lost in the first place. Jacob scanned the thicket of forest surrounding him, he could have sworn that he heard rustling and scurrying all around him, but there was no movement. He didn't like not knowing, he liked being the top of his class in maths and reading and science and history. He knew about geography, he knew about the White Cliffs of Dover, the Cumbrian Mountains, and the rivers Thames and Severn, he knew there was no forest like this in England.

He remembered bits of the previous day, going to Matthew Watkins eleventh birthday party – he didn't like the boy much, but his mother had forced him to go. It was a pool party, but Jacob didn't like swimming, mostly because he didn't know how to, but he told everyone he just didn't like it. He remembered the food being good at Matthew's party, there were a lot of crisps and pizza and sausages, but his mother

wouldn't let him eat the sausages. Jacob didn't fully understand why, but he did as his mother said. Jacob heard a branch crack near him. He thought perhaps there were other lost children, just like him, that he couldn't see or hear. Why he couldn't see or hear them, he did not know.

Jacob hugged himself. It was cold, too cold for just this jumper. Why was he lost? He couldn't remember leaving the party without his parents. How did he find himself in this odd forest? Was he in Scotland? Or perhaps Wales. Jacob had never been to Wales, but he went to Scotland once on holiday. This forest reminded Jacob of Scotland. It was dreadful: dark, gloomy, cold. He hated it. Scotland is far from London though. Wales is not much closer, but it is a bit closer. Either way, it was difficult to believe that he managed to get to Wales or Scotland by himself in less than a day. Well, he assumed for less than a day. It was hard to tell.

In the distance Jacob saw a faint bit of natural light piercing through the thick canopy, and he heard the sounds of rushing water. Excited, Jacob forgot all about Wales and Scotland and being lost, cold and hungry and sprinted toward the light. He was pushing at the thicket around him, though it seemed to be moving aside on its own bending elastically away from his flailing arms. Jacob didn't notice this; his eyes were fixated on the light ahead of him. Suddenly, Jacob couldn't hear the rustling of the other lost children around him; he couldn't hear much of anything other than the sound of his

panting. For a moment he considered how strange it was, though he couldn't pinpoint why. This didn't bother him though; he was finally, after all this time—however long it was—going to be free.

The trees on the edge of the forest regally bent open for Jacob, as if there were two unseen servants that were welcoming him to his throne room. The sudden burst light stung at his eyes, like when mother would open the blinds every morning in order to awake him from his slumber. His eyes adjusted, and he found himself on the bank of a river. A gentle breeze prickled his face. He had hoped that exiting the forest would give him a better idea of where he was. It didn't. The river was rushing by him, behind him was the vast forest he had found himself lost in, and ahead of him was a wide open plain. How curious, Jacob thought, that there didn't seem to be anything alive out there. Not a single tree or wild animal or bush or flower or anything. He pouted. This didn't help him at all. He was out of the forest, but this river didn't seem to be much better. He thought about swimming across the river, but he couldn't swim. Even if he got to the other side, he would still be just as lost as he was before. Jacob decided to walk along the river. Perhaps he'd find help somewhere.

The river pleasantly gurgled beside him, accompanying him on his journey. Jacob wondered for a moment what he was trying to find exactly, whatever it was it seemed like he'd never find it at this point. He was beginning to grow weary. He just

wanted to sit down and eat something hot. He thought back to all of the party food. It was all so delicious. The trees were daintily swaying in the breeze. Perhaps if he went back into the forest he would come out at a different point that would be more helpful. Part of him thought that was a good idea, part of him thought it was a waste. He stumbled and fell to the ground. He was tired. He decided to take a nap; figuring that if there were any dangerous animals he would have seen one by now. Though the forest was very large, and it was very possible that he didn't come across any of the forest's inhabitants. What if one stumbled across him napping and ate him? Perhaps he wouldn't even notice. It would be as if he just fell asleep and never woke up, and then he would be out of the forest. That didn't seem too bad all things considered.

A foghorn blew in the distance. Jacob convulsed at the sudden sound. Did he sleep? He looked all around him. He was in the same place, as far as he could tell. Every bit of this place looked the same, so it was hard to say. He looked up and down the river. It was hard to say which direction the horn had come from; its sound enveloped him in a way that made it sound like it was right in front of him. He thought for a moment that it was some creature in the forest. He knew of no creature that made a loud blaring honk like that, but he didn't know much of anything about this place. Jacob convulsed. Now that he was awake, getting eaten didn't seem so nice.

Suddenly, the source of the noise came inching down the river. It was a large white double decker ferry, like the one he took to go to France one summer, chugging its way along. There were ripped banners dangling from the second railing. It must have been used for some kind of festival a long time ago. It blew its horn again, and Jacob had to cover his ears, the sound was so loud. He stood still, eyes fixed on the ferry. The ferry very slowly made its way down the river toward Jacob. The horn sounded again. Jacob wondered if the ferry would stop for him, if there was even a soul on the ferry. He didn't see anyone, that's for sure.

As the ferry approached, its sloth like pace slowed to a halt and the horn blared once more. Jacob flattened his hands against his ears harder. The horn managed to get even louder. The ferry boat was in dreadful condition. Now that it was closer Jacob could see that the white paint was chipping off in all places, and etched into the side was the unreadable faded remnant of what he presumed to be a name. The boat slowly bobbed in the river, and Jacob wondered how it had stopped itself, was there an anchor? The river was rushing past the boat, yet the boat remained still. There was no anchor.

"A lost soul, aren't you?" Jacob jumped; it had felt like years since he had heard another human voice, though Jacob knew it was only a day. His eyes quickly scanned the boat, and on the bow facing him he saw who he presumed to be the captain.

“Alright there, lad?” said the man. He looked frightening. He was short and stout, with a head of curly hair that was ghostly white, and a matching beard. He was wearing white pants that were ripped in a number of places, muddy black boots and a navy blazer that was much too large for him. The man had one boot raised up on the railing and was staring at Jacob. Jacob knew not to talk to strangers, but he figured this was a bit of a different situation.

“Er, yes sir, I am quite lost.” Jacob tried to be polite with the man. “Normally I wouldn’t ask this of you, but do you think you could help me get home?” The man had yet to blink. His eyes were fixed, unmoving. Jacob assumed he wasn’t a pleasant man, but he had nowhere else to go.

“Home?” The man broke his stare from Jacob and quickly scanned the periphery of the forest behind Jacob. He still didn’t blink. “I don’t know about home, but I can most certainly take you up the river some.”

“That would be excellent sir, thank you.” Jacob broke eye contact and eyed the boat. “Er, how shall I be boarding then?” The man lowered his boot and kicked a section of the wall, which dislodged. He removed the section and tossed it behind him, before throwing down a moldy plank that looked as if the slightest bit of weight would snap it in two. The plank hit the river bank with a thunk, and the man gestured toward it while staring at Jacob.

Jacob tepidly prodded the plank with his foot. The man laughed an obnoxiously hearty laugh. "Trust me, boy; the plank snapping is the least of your worries at the moment!" Jacob frowned. This was awfully rude of the man. Jacob glanced down at the river and suddenly felt sick. He had to take a step back from the river to regain his senses. The ferry boat captain's smile faded. "Ah, I understand." He was stroking his beard. "Just don't look down, son." He stood on the other end of the plank and extended his hand forward. Suddenly Jacob felt safer. He kept his eyes fixed on the captain, who had still yet to blink. He didn't look down, even if he wanted to, he didn't think his body would let him.

After an eternity he reached the other end of the boat. "Alright then?" The captain said, helping him on. "Yes, thank you, sir."

"Right then, off we go!" The horn suddenly blared again. It didn't sound quite so loud this time.

Jacob was standing next to the captain as he steered the ferry downstream. He tried to catch glances of the captain's eyes as he directed the boat aimlessly forward. His pupils were huge and empty, and the man never blinked. Jacob kept trying to catch him blinking, but he never did.

“Excuse me, sir?” The captain grunted in acknowledgement. “Do you mind explaining where exactly we are?” The captain turned to look at Jacob. One of his eyes was slightly lazy, Jacob hadn’t noticed that before.

“Son,” the captain took his hands off the wheel, but it didn’t seem to matter; the river was stick-straight. “I’ve been working this river for as long as I can remember. Let me tell you, I’ve never met a soul like you.” The captain lightly prodded his chest. Jacob didn’t know whether to be flattered or slighted by this. “Tell me, you’re lost, aren’t you?” Jacob nodded. “That’s right... poor child.” The captain finally looked away and grabbed the wheel once more. The river still wasn’t turning.

“Tell me son, have you ever looked at the river?” Jacob was confused.

“Sorry, looked at the river? I don’t quite understand what you mean by that.”

“Have you ever looked at the river? I mean really dug in and stared at her. She’s a real beaut’, you should give it a go.” The captain glanced a glance that was a few moments too long to be a glance at Jacob. “Don’t worry; you’re safe on the boat. Marginally at least.” This didn’t alleviate Jacob’s worries, though he wasn’t quite sure what those worries were. He walked back a few steps and leaned over the boat and looked at the river.



Whatever the captain was talking about when he said the river was beautiful, he was wrong. It was horrible, putrid, disgusting. Jacob wasn't sure how this was possible, nor how he failed to notice it while walking along side it for an eternity, but it was a dark, murky brownish purple, like the color of the bruise he had on his arm after playing rugby for the first time. The smell, whatever the smell was, he had never smelled something so horrible in his whole life. Jacob had to lean back for a second; the smell had hit him so hard. Jacob considered how odd it was that he hadn't noticed any of this before. He glanced down at the river once more. He then noticed something floating slowly toward him against the current. It was a twig, a single twig, drifting lazily against the rushing river. It was brown, like a normal twig, and it clashed horribly with the murky river. It was jagged and broken, looking like it was violently snapped off from one of the many trees in the vast forest he had left behind.

Jagged branches sprung out from the twig in all sorts of places, but it all coalesced into one singular twig that was valourously pushing its way upstream. It looked sharp, sharp enough to hurt your foot if you stepped on it the wrong way, sharp enough to do some damage to someone or something. It looked like a weapon, Jacob thought, like a sword, something to do battle against trolls or dragons. It looked like the kind of twig that he and his friends would fight over when starting a play fight. It was the best twig of the bunch, it was the one that felt the most right to use, and it was the one that you wanted to hold.

Bark was chipping off of the twig at various places along it, revealing patches of light tan under the dark exterior. Jacob wondered if the tan layer gave way to more tan layers, or layers of different colors. He wondered about all the parts that made up this little twig, how it was so powerful to be able to fight upstream like that and prevail. It got close enough to him that he could see parts of it more clearly now.

The bottom – or so he presumed – of the twig was jagged, not cleanly pointed like the other end. He assumed that that was where it had broken off from its prison, attached to one of the infinite trees making up the infinitely large forest. The points along the bottom of the twig looked as sharp as the point on the opposite end. A double-edged sword, Jacob thought. It was just as likely to hurt you as you are to hurt someone else.

Jacob counted each branch of the twig. Six, three on each side. Each one was as sharp as the previous, and they all jutted out at various angles to the final seventh point which bravely faced upstream, directing the twig to its destination. He noticed a small bump closer to the top of the twig, it looked like a wart. He had a wart once; it wasn't a pleasant experience. Jacob forgot where he was, he forgot about the captain and the boat and the putrid river, the only thing he could think of was the stick, each point jutting out into his mind, the pointed wood digging into the crevices of his spirit. Its jagged, dark brown bark was inviting, it made him feel at home. He wanted to smell it.

He imagined the sweet inviting smell of sap oozing from the twig, his hands getting covered in the sweet sticky substance. He imagined the feel of the bark against his skin, the feel of the bump under his thumb, the feel of the jagged bottom pressing up against him as he pressed the other end into his opponent.

He imagined the change in texture between the brown bark and the tan underside, so smooth, yet it would splinter and put bits of new twigs into his hands, digging into his skin, making him bleed. Jacob wanted the twig; he wanted it more than anything else in the world. He wanted to dive into the river and take it for himself; he wanted to wield it as his weapon, take it into battle. He stretched out his hand and reached for it. There was no way he could, he was far too small. He was so enraptured by the twig that he didn't hear the captain behind him.

"Swim for shore son, you don't belong here." Jacob felt a shove, and he was falling, falling down into the river below him. The ferry sounded its horn and nonchalantly proceeded down the river. Jacob thought he was drowning, this felt like drowning. There was no air in his lungs, just disgusting, murky water. He couldn't swim. The twig was gone, its journey upstream continued as Jacob sunk. Swim for shore, the captain said. Jacob opened his eyes. Despite the water being impenetrably dark and murky, Jacob could see clearly. He looked up. His mother was there shouting, not angrily like she did when Jacob broke her favourite vase, but mortified. She looked

frightened. Jacob saw all of his friends staring down at him, blank expressions on their faces, with their mouths agape, dark shadows in place of their eye sockets. They were screaming, but Jacob couldn't hear them. Jacob's father came out of nowhere and dove into the river. His father grabbed him, and pulled him up and out of the river. Jacob surfaced, and his father was gone. The boat was gone. The twig was gone. He was alone. He looked to the each end of the river. The endless plain, the endless forest. He climbed up onto the riverbank and stared at the forest before him. It looked exactly like the point from which he emerged all that time ago. Was it a couple hours ago? A few days? Who knows. The branches spread open regally for Jacob. Perhaps there was another way out.