





Boggle & Sneak

by

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Pressed Duck

Northfield



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For my daughters.

One

Alvy jerks the wheel hard to the left and hangs on tight to her hat. The speedboat throws a high wall of spray as it bounces across its own wake and shoots underneath a parked car. Alvy blinks painfully in the sudden deep shadow and pushes the throttle forward to narrow the gap with her brother's speeding sprayer truck, which is eighteen inches ahead and pumping out water so the boat can stay afloat. She can hear Alby shouting above the roar of the engines and the hiss of water hitting the road.

“Next time, I get to drive the boat,”
Alby yells.

“Next time, think up your own boat,”
Alvy retorts.

Boggle & Sneak

“Next time, build it yourself,” Alby shouts back.

It's just like Alby to complain and forget to enjoy the ride, Alvy thinks. She sends a high wave crashing forward, flattening Alby's hat. Alby, momentarily blinded, drives the truck's bumper hard into the side of a beer can and sends the can spinning toward the curb. The truck skids slightly, then regains traction.

Headlights loom up behind them. Alby darts a glance back at his sister and slows, steering carefully between the rear wheels of a long black pickup before stopping and shutting off the spray. Alvy pulls the boat in behind him. Water pools and flattens around them as the car passes and disappears. They look at each other.

“That takes the fun out of it, having to stop and hide,” Alvy says. They turn their heads and watch the headlights pass by.

Boggle & Sneak

“Not really,” Alby says, and he turns the sprayer back on and drenches his sister, then guns the truck’s engine and peels away.

Just as Alvy catches up and is about to drench her brother with spray, something at the side of the road catches her eye. A D-cell battery! They could really use one of those! She darts a glance back toward the heap of backpacks, tool boxes, coils of wire and piles of tarps in the back of the boat. There might just be enough room.

Alby has seen it too, and is already pulling over. Alvy cranks the boat’s engine down to idle. There is a streetlight directly overhead, but there is nobody in sight to notice them. They jump out and run over to the battery. Alby tries to lift it by himself—twisting his arms around the battery in a clumsy bear hug—but when he tries to straighten his legs it barely moves. He’s going to need help. He switches his grip to one end and his sister

Boggle & Sneak

grabs the other. They lift together and get the battery up to waist height, but then Alvy's wet hands slip, and down the battery comes, barely missing her toes.

Alvy has left the boat running, and the exhaust is getting into Alvy's eyes. He blinks painfully. "Could you shut that thing off?"

"You first," she says, just to be spiteful.

Alvy stomps over and shuts off the truck. Alvy waits for the engine noise to die out, and then she shuts off the boat.

They return to the battery and try once again to lift it. This time they make it three steps before Alvy drops his end.

Alvy dusts off her hands. "It's not worth it," she says.

Alvy says, "Right, okay, we don't need spare parts. I'll build your next invention out of mold spores and traffic noise."

Boggle & Sneak

Alvy isn't backing down. "If we put any more crap into your crap closet even light won't be able to escape."

"That closet is what keeps us in business," Alvy says. He kicks a truck tire. "We build stuff. That's what we do."

"Right," Alvy says, "That's what we do. That's always your attitude, isn't it? No need for a change; just keep on doing what we do." Even so, she helps him pick the battery back up, and they start sidestepping gingerly toward the boat.

"Oh, great," Alvy says. "It isn't your job to worry. Everything will turn out just fine. But I'm the one making things turn out. You draw up half a sketch on a napkin and think everything after that is just nuts and bolts. You don't see what it takes to fit all those nuts and bolts together. You get in, get out, and leave all the messy stuff for—"

Just as the battery falls into the boat, they hear a low rumble. When they

Boggle & Sneak

look up, they see a slow-moving street-sweeper headed right toward them.

Alby runs to his truck, and Alvy scrambles over the mess in the back of the boat and fires up the ignition. The truck's starter is screeching but its engine won't turn over.

"Let's go!" Alvy shouts.

"Won't start!" Alby yells back. He tries the key again. "Something's wrong!"

Alvy takes a quick look at the rapidly-drying street all around the boat. She's beached. "This is just perfect," she says. "If the boat were dead, we could at least drag it with the truck!"

By now, Alby is doubled over, tinkering with something under the truck's raised hood. The street sweeper is moving closer. Alvy vaults into the back of the boat, digs around in a crate, and comes up with a long rope and a pair of skates.

Boggle & Sneak

Alby is muttering, “I knew this two-part vehicle was a mistake. Too much complexity. Too much that can go wrong.”

Alvy already has the skates on. She skates up and ties one end of the rope to the truck’s trailer hitch. She skates back and loops the rope around a cleat on the boat’s hull.

Alby, his head under the hood, doesn’t notice. “And it’s not like this thing is light either, with all this water in the back. If I can’t get the engine started in the next couple of seconds, maybe there’s some way we can take advantage of all the water to get us up out of the street. Alvy?”

Alvy is skating toward the street sweeper. She zips past it, loops the rope around a tree in the median strip, skates back up to the sweeper, and with a mighty heave, gets the end of the rope up and over the sweeper’s bumper, and tangles it into something like a hitch. Then she hangs on.

Boggle & Sneak

Alby leans way over and looks around the truck's hood just as the rope goes taut. The truck jerks away from him and crashes into the boat, and both the truck and boat go bouncing up and over the curb and across the median.

He goes running off after them, but he has on his cowboy boots, and he catches a toe on the curb and goes sprawling. His hat comes off in the process, and a nest of snarled dreadlocks whips loose. He slaps uselessly at his locks as they flail like live snakes, and they speedily take advantage of their momentary freedom to bind his legs and tie his arms behind his back. He gives up the struggle, and lies there hog-tied, the truck disappearing off into his upper peripheral vision.

Meanwhile, Alvy is struggling with the knot on the street sweeper's bumper, which has drawn up really tight under the tension of the dragging vehicles. The knot suddenly goes loose, and Alvy jumps

Boggle & Sneak

awkwardly down off the sweeper, up the curb and over to Alby.

One lock at a time, she slowly unwinds her brother and manhandles his locks back into his hat. Alby is extremely grateful she's not laughing—much.

“Where?” she demands.

“In the truck,” he answers.

Alvy goes over to the truck, finds the duct tape, and duct-tapes Alby's hat down around his chin. “Looking good,” she says. She pulls off her own hat and mops sweat off her bald scalp.

Alby works his jaw. There's no way his big sister is going to get him to admit she's a genius for shaving her head.

“How far is it?” Alvy asks.

“Another block,” Alby answers.

“Maybe we should just leave the vehicles here and come back for them after. Nobody's going to find them in the middle of the night.” He gestures around them at the dimly-lit median. The toppled truck and banged-up boat are only fractionally

Boggle & Sneak

taller than the half-dead, never-mown grass and weeds around them.

Alvy nods. Together, they make their way over to the boat, lift out heavy backpacks and begin laboriously bushwhacking through the grass.

After what feels like an endless hike, they finally reach their destination. Panting and catching their breath, they stare up at the screen door towering above them.

Alvy pulls a crowbar from her pack and hands it to Alby. He looks at it, shakes his head and tries to hand it back. She grins. “Monkey get,” she whispers.

Alby pries the door open and holds it, mock-chivalrously, for his sister. Alvy frowns and squeezes her backpack-widened form through the opening into the screened-in porch. Alby wedges the crowbar so it holds the door open a crack, then steps over it into the porch. It’s quiet.

Boggle & Sneak

The window to the kitchen is standing open, probably window-locked on the inside at three inches to keep out intruders. That's a laugh. Alvy already has her grapnel out and is whirling it around her head. It arcs up and catches on the first try. Alvy looks smugly over at Alby, but he's pretending to look the other way.

Alvy climbs the rope hand over hand, her boots against the clapboard. When she reaches the sill, she hauls herself onto it and crouches low, waving at Alby to join her. He is halfway up the rope when Alvy sees two sets of eyes, green and glowing, moving toward her.

She grabs the rope with both hands and throws her legs back down over the edge, kicking Alby in the side of his duct-taped head. "Hey," he grunts.

"Cats!" she whispers.

Alby lets go and thunks to the floor. The cats are making themselves thin and squeezing through the three inches of

Boggle & Sneak

open window. Alvy's boots reach the floor and she and Alby begin to run, steering around the legs of the breakfast table, dodging chairs. The first two pair of paws hit the floor as Alby jumps over the crowbar and through the door. Alvy jumps too, but her pack gets caught, and she jolts to a stop.

“Help me!” she gasps.

Alby grabs her by the shoulders and jerks. She pops through, then turns back and gives the crowbar a solid kick. It hits the near cat across the bridge of the nose, and the screen door bangs shut. Alvy sticks out her tongue at the glaring cat.

Alby points around the side of the house and makes a knocking gesture. Alvy nods and starts off through the flowerbed. She reaches the foot of the trellis and shrugs out of her pack, then rummages in it. There— a pair of gloves.

Gingerly, she climbs her way up and through the roses. When she reaches the window, she removes a glove and begins to

Boggle & Sneak

tap softly at the glass. She keeps up a steady rhythm until the eyes appear in the gloom of the dining room. *Hello, eyes*, she thinks. *You just keep looking right...up...here.*

Behind the cats there is a brief flash of light, then a huge shift in the room's shadows as the door between the dining room and the kitchen drifts shut. Good job, Alby! She begins to climb her way back down.

Once she's back in the kitchen, she sees that Alby is already hard at work at the foot of the refrigerator. His fingers are jammed in the soft rubber of the door seal, and he's red in the face with strain. After a few seconds, he slumps, removes his aching fingers, and digs in his backpack. He brings out a jack, holds it up as though proud of it, then jams it into the door seal and begins to pump. This is much easier! The door unseals with a soft slurp, and the jack clatters to the floor. Now that it's unsealed, Alby is able to

Boggle & Sneak

shoulder the door open wider, and then he steps quickly over to his backpack, puts it back on, returns to the door and begins to scale the condiment shelves—a difficult climb with the heavy pack.

Meanwhile, Alvy has been chimneying up the crack between a cupboard door and the kitchen wall. A rope between her teeth trails off and down, the end tied to the straps of her backpack. She gets herself up and onto the counter, and begins hauling the pack up on the rope.

In the fridge, Alby has reached the shelf with the milk bottle. Someone has left the cap off, thank god. He reaches over his shoulder into his pack and pulls out the end of a rubber hose, which he threads down into the milk bottle. He then begins to squeeze the side of his pack rhythmically with his elbow. The hose wobbles slightly, as liquid pumps from the pack into the bottle. There— done.

Boggle & Sneak

On the counter, Alvy is trying to free-climb the blender. It's a nice challenge; most of its surface is slick, and there's not much to grab onto. The lid is easier. It is soft, and she can sink her fingers in and pull up.

From the blender lid, she can just get her fingers under the cupboard door and pry the door open. She steps up from the blender onto a small empty space on the shelf and looks up at the rank of hulking cereal boxes looming above her. This poses another chimneying problem; a wobbly one. When she reaches the top of the cereal boxes, she steps cautiously from one box to another, heading for the Raisin Bran, but then the Shredded-Wheat box under her feet suddenly tilts sideways several inches, and she's dumped painfully back down to the shelf below. Nothing to do but to climb up again. Balancing carefully atop the Puffed Rice, she gets the Raisin Bran box top open and uses both arms to unroll the

Boggle & Sneak

plastic liner. The box is about half-full—shadowy flake and raisin shapes down below in the dark. She kneels and shakes the entire remaining contents of her pack into the liner, then stands and uses one foot to stomp the liner, crinkling, back down into the box, then crouches and presses the box-top closed with her palms. Then, her pack empty and her movements light, she performs her climb in reverse. When she reaches the counter, she jogs across it toward Alby's corner.

Alby is standing on top of the sugar canister, waiting for her. He reaches an arm down for her and helps pull her up, and then they work together to shove the lid of the neighboring flour canister so it's partly ajar, making a crescent-shaped opening.

From his pack, Alby takes out a heavy particle mask and hands it to his sister. While Alby is strapping it on, Alby takes out a cardboard box the size of his two clenched fists and a spool of string.

Boggle & Sneak

The end of the string he ties to a loop on the top of the box, and then he hands the box to Alvy. She takes the box, salutes jauntily, and jumps gracefully down into the flour, throwing up only a tiny puff. The string unspools rapidly as she descends.

The surface of the flour roils for a few moments, and then Alvy's masked head breaks the surface. The box is gone, buried somewhere in the depths of the flour. The string is looped loosely around her right wrist. She treads flour, her palms sculling steadily. Alby reaches down and pulls her out.

Moving very cautiously now, they tug the flour canister's lid back on and begin to pay out the string: across the counter, past a few neglected dirty dishes, around a dusty garden gnome. When they reach the sink, Alby stretches out his arms and ties the string in a knot around the faucet handle. They take a careful survey of the room to see whether they've

Boggle & Sneak

forgotten anything, and then they take their (much lighter now) backpacks and slip back out the open window. As they're leaving the porch, the screen door squeaks open, then hisses shut, then closes with a soft bang.

Two

The family troops downstairs and into the kitchen. Lisa notices that the kitchen door has fallen shut. She kicks the doorstep up and down a couple of times, then rigs the door open and watches to make sure it doesn't fall shut again right away. Dad immediately starts flipping on components of his Enormous Espresso Setup: roaster, grinder, boiler, lever. Mom's granola is burnt because the oven timer got disrupted. Kirsten says she messed it up baking midnight cookies. Mom says it's okay; she has some day-old granola. She gets it out and dumps fresh yogurt from the yogurt maker, then wanders out of the kitchen muttering something about e-mail. Lisa pulls a large whisk out of one of her dress pockets and sets about making an omelet. Kirsten climbs up on a footstool, takes a loaf of bread out of the bread machine and starts grinding peanuts for peanut butter. Dad

Boggle & Sneak

is chattering about espresso, and isn't really paying attention as he dumps out bright-blue raisin bran and pours out acid-green milk. The milk foams when it hits the cereal. Dad, still not looking, takes a bite, does a spit-take, grabs up a glass off the counter, and jerks up the faucet handle. An enormous thump sounds out, and the kitchen is instantly filled with flour. Everyone goes silent. Three ghostly shapes blink at each other. Dad purposefully fills his dusty glass with water and drinks it in a single long swallow. This rinses the flour off his lips, making them the only touch of color in the all-white scene.

“Good one, girls,” he says, and starts grinding coffee beans.

“Good one, Kirsten,” Lisa says.

“Good one yourself,” Kirsten says back.

Up on her stool, Kirsten is looking into the open cereal cupboard. She notices something, and blows some of the

Boggle & Sneak

flour away in a big puff. There is a tiny but distinct boot print on the cupboard shelf, where the flour has stuck to a patch of spilled honey. Lisa joins her and looks over her shoulder. They blow more flour, and find more prints. Dad has the espresso machine going by this point, so he's deaf and oblivious.

Moving the footstool along the counter by stages, Kirsten follows the nylon line from the faucet handle to the flour canister, and pulls up the remains of the bomb. Lisa is dusting for more prints, puffing her way around the whole kitchen, finding nothing, but persisting anyway. Kirsten is sniffing the milk. She pours some into a juice glass and holds it up to the pale light coming in through the floured window. Lisa gives another short huff and then suddenly stops, staring at a partial print on the sill. Kirsten sets down the glass, climbs down, and comes over to look too. They crane their necks down

Boggle & Sneak

close to the opening, then measure it off with their fingers.

“Anybody home?” a voice calls from outside.

“Hang on,” Dad yells. He drops a sugar cube into his cup of coffee and stirs it as he walks out the door. Lisa stuffs a handful of napkins and silverware into a pocket, and the girls follow their father, holding their breakfast plates in front of them.

They stare into the dull eyes of an enormous ox standing at the foot of the driveway. The ox sighs.

On the bed of the oxcart is a shambles of a tiny two-seater convertible, soft-top caved in and caked with decayed leaves. Dull rusty paint shows through in a few spots out of a thick blanket of chicken droppings. Torn upholstery is partially visible through cracked and streaked windows.

Dad is looking back and forth, back and forth between the convertible, the ox,

Boggle & Sneak

and the ox driver, whose denim shirt doesn't quite reach his denim pants. The ox twitches off a fly.

"Guess you got an early start, to get here this early," Dad says.

The 21 bus drives by. The ox slowly turns its head to watch it pass.

"What?" the ox driver says.

"Do we owe you anything, or are we all set?" Dad asks.

"Where do you want it?" the ox driver asks.

"Top of the driveway," Dad says, "But I don't see how..."

The driver makes a cracking noise with his tongue. The ox starts to back up and the wagon begins to twist up the driveway.

"You've got an ox that can back?" Dad says.

The ox driver ignores him.

The girls look at each other and at the oxcart, then start rapidly forking breakfast into their mouths.

Boggle & Sneak

The ox somehow steers the cart up the driveway, narrowly but precisely avoiding the neighbor's van. The ox driver doesn't even watch. As the cart reaches the top of the driveway, the ox driver climbs down off the rocking cart and starts removing straps.

"You need a hand?" Dad asks.

The ox driver removes the last strap. The convertible wobbles on the cart. The ox driver gives it a shove with the flat of his hand. The convertible sags off the cart and crashes to the ground. The ox driver climbs up onto the cart, says, "Okay then," and makes the clicking sound again. The ox starts to step back down the driveway.

"Okay then," Dad echoes, and sips his coffee. The girls finish eating and scrub their faces with the napkins.

The neighbor comes out behind the neighbor's dog, and stares at the wrecked convertible for a moment before following the dog around the side of the house.

Boggle & Sneak

* * *

“We could rig an alarm,” Kirsten says. “In case it comes back.”

“I’m going inside,” Dad says. “Please clean up the kitchen before you go out.”

“It would be cool with lasers, like in a jewel-thief movie,” Lisa says.

“I was thinking we could just reuse the fishing line,” Kirsten says. “Maybe tie it to the door bells.”

“Okay,” Lisa says. “And we can put out some honey. That honey worked great. How come they don’t have honey in the jewel-thief movies?”

“We can get some at the co-op when I go out to buy peanuts,” Kirsten says. “They have some wormwood I’ve been wanting to try.”

The girls go back inside the house, and shut the door. The door bells jingle faintly.

Three

“Do you think we’ll ever run out of ideas?” Alvy asks, her voice crackling over the headset radio inside Alby’s motorcycle helmet.

Alby looks over questioningly at his sister, then returns his attention to his front-view mirror.

“What would we do?” Alvy asks. Her eyes are also darting back and forth between her speedometer and her front-view mirror.

“Can’t you just shut up and ride?” Alby asks. He tenses his grip on the throttle, and his motorcycle climbs the side of the barrel slightly, causing the whirling barrel to arc slightly toward the middle of the street. Alvy accelerates slightly to compensate, and the barrel returns to a straight trajectory.

“Do you think we’d have to walk,” she asks, “or stay at home?”

Alby ignores her.

Boggle & Sneak

“Where do you think ideas come from?” she asks.

“Ask yourself,” Alby says. “I don’t have ideas, remember? I just build things.”

“What if we only get just so many, and someday they’re all used up?”

“What if the Moon Men came and moved you to the moon? Would your ideas still be used up then? Or would you start having moon ideas?”

This shuts her up. They go back to adjusting their speed and monitoring the barrel’s forward progress.

“This is nice,” she says, “not having to hide.”

Alby sees a gray shadow in the corner of his eye, and suddenly his sister screams. A huge moth has somehow been sucked into the barrel, and it’s blown against her face shield, blinding her. Her hand spasms on the throttle, and the barrel begins to oscillate. “Help me!” she shouts.

Boggle & Sneak

Alby reaches out his arm and waves at the air. This does his speed-control no good, and the barrel begins to jerk violently from side to side. Alby waves at the air again. This time his fingers touch moth, and he jerks down hard on its wing. The moth pulls loose from Alvy's face shield, and blows, flapping, back out of the barrel. The jerking subsides, and they stop to catch their breath. Then Alby sees something else out of the corner of his eye. "Uh," he says. A uniformed policeman has stepped out of his cruiser, lights flashing, idling in the driving lane. The policeman is marching toward the barrel in the center of the road. "Um, let's—" Alby says. Alvy nods her helmet slightly and gently turns her hand on the throttle. Alby does likewise. The barrel slowly begins to roll. The policeman quickens his step. Alvy and Alby gently increase their speeds. The barrel rolls faster. The policeman starts to jog. Alvy ratchets her speed slightly ahead of her brother's, to turn the rolling barrel

Boggle & Sneak

away from the center of the road and back toward the curb. The policeman lunges and sweeps his arm toward the lip of the barrel, missing by a fraction. They're off and rolling again, bouncing over gravel and cracks in the road.

As they near the girls' house, they slow down the barrel and roll it to the curb at the foot of the driveway. They leave their bikes parked inside and amble out, shaken by engine rumble and deafened by the sound of the exhaust pipes inside the echoing barrel.

They creep up the side of the driveway and walk slowly around the beaten-down convertible.

"Here, can you give me a hand?"
Alby asks.

Alvy makes a stirrup out of her laced fingers and helps Alby vault up onto the ruined car's bumper. With the backpack on, he is heavy. Alvy wrings out her fingers.

Boggle & Sneak

On the bumper, Alby reaches up and digs his fingers in along the edge of the hood and pulls himself up onto the hood. He shifts his weight from side to side a few times, testing his balance, then tiptoes up to the windshield and peers through the murk.

“How’s it look?” Alby whispers.

“Chickens,” Alby says.

“What?”

“Shh, I think they’re sleeping,” he says.

Alby shrugs out of her backpack and starts pawing through it. She comes up with a coil of rope and begins tying a lariat. “How do we get in there?”

Alby looks toward the top of the windshield, gauging the distance. “Well, it’s a convertible,” he says. He creeps over to the edge of the windshield and tries to peer around it. “Here, let me try,” he says. He grasps the edge of the windshield and swings his legs out into empty space, kicking his feet toward the top of the

Boggle & Sneak

passenger-side door. “I— whoops!” he says, overshooting and falling through the missing pane of glass and into the car. He whacks down onto the passenger seat, sending up a cloud of dust and dried chicken droppings. The force of his fall startles the sleeping chickens, which start to cackle and flap wildly, raising still more dust.

Outside, Alvy is pounding on the door, in a useless effort to be helpful.

Alby flails and grabs for the door handle, which tears off but opens the door. The momentum carries him out the door, and he falls on top of his sister, flattening her to the pavement. The chickens follow, desperate to escape. Alby and Alvy are choking in the storm of dust and feathers.

Alvy gets to her feet first, still holding the lariat. She whirls it above her head and lets it fly, roping the lead chicken on the first attempt. The chicken, twice her size and terrified, fails to stop,

Boggle & Sneak

and jerks Alvy off her feet. Alby sees his sister fall and starts sprinting after the other chicken, which is veering around insanely, not making progress in any specific direction.

Alby quickly catches up with the chicken, puts a hand on her neck and smoothly vaults onto her back. This does nothing for the chicken's composure. The frightened bird leaps into the air, pecking and snapping frantically at the unwelcome rider. Alby locks his arms around the chicken's neck and holds on, panting and trying to catch a glimpse of his sister.

Alvy, for her part, has become tangled around a shrub and is being stretched painfully by the panicked chicken at the other end of the rope. She stifles a cry and hangs on.

After a few seconds, the chickens spontaneously lose all memory of what the fuss was about, and their movements slow to a near standstill—their eyes looking

Boggle & Sneak

dazedly around, wondering whether it's time to eat, or rest, or what.

Alvy slowly picks herself up, trying not to startle her chicken. She ties her end of the rope to the shrub and walks slowly over to Alby's chicken. "You want any help?"

Alby responds by sliding off his chicken's back. The chicken ruffles her feathers and stares dumbly at him. Alby keeps his eyes on the bird as he slips out of his backpack and feels around for his rope.

"This would be a lot simpler if we had some corn, or Fritos, or something." He loops the end of the rope around his chicken's leg and ties it off. The chicken lifts her foot, clucks, and falls asleep.

"Jeez," Alby says, and ties the other end of his rope to Alvy's shrub. Alvy takes a crowbar out of her pack and sidles to the porch door. Alby joins her. She pries the door ajar, and they both put their weight on it, shoving it open a few inches. "Can

Boggle & Sneak

you hold it?” she asks. Alby tenses his muscles and stares at her, so she takes her weight off the door and walks off to retrieve the chickens. The chickens take an immediate shine to the screened-in porch, and they flap up onto the picnic table and go back to sleep.

Alby has found a lovely wedge-shaped rock, which he has lugged up and jammed under the porch door to hold it open so they can ferry supplies. They’re standing by the open window, looking in.

“What do you think,” Alby asks. “Can we get through wearing our packs, or should we push them through first?”

Alvy ducks her head into the opening and measures the gap. A pair of yellow eyes rises up to meet hers.

“Whoops,” she says.

The cat leaps through the gap but catches a foot in the girls’ fishing line. The line pulls tight and violently shakes the door bells. The cat screams, and claws at its tangled leg. The chickens

Boggle & Sneak

catch sight of the cat and resume dervish mode, which further enrages the cat, and brings the other cat scrambling to investigate. The door bells jangle steadily. Alvy and Alby hustle as fast as they can, fully loaded, out the door. One of the chickens flies into the screen door with a resonant thwack, like a tennis ball meeting a racket. This dislodges the rock under the door, and the door falls shut.

The two chickens, in a merged feathery bundle, bounce down the porch steps and into the bushes. The cats decide that string-and-bells is an excellent game, and they're now taking turns ringing the bells rhythmically, just for fun. The kitchen light comes on, and the girls are standing there in pajamas, blinking at the hopelessly snarled cats. Kirsten silently goes for the scissors.

Out in the bushes, the chickens are pacing back and forth like soldiers on guard duty. Alvy and Alby are lying in the dust, sweating and covered with dust,

Boggle & Sneak

looking up at the fronds of lily of the valley.

“What a night,” Alvy says.

Inside, the kitchen light turns back off, and the girls troop back upstairs. The cats lap water from their dish and wash themselves, affecting to be cool and trying to recall what all the fuss was about.

Alby looks at Alvy. “Let’s get started,” he says.

Four

Dad, grumbling, shuffles over to the bedroom door and pulls it open. Smack in front of the door is a gleaming engine block. Mom is behind him, fully dressed. They stare out at the hall. Every inch of floor is covered with car parts: spark plugs, muffler, exhaust pipe, springs, wires, bolts, battery, all neatly disassembled and arranged in a careful jigsaw the length of the hall. At the far end of the hall, they can hear the shower running.

There is absolutely no safe place to put a foot down. Mom and Dad look at each other. The girls' door is still shut. Mom says, "We could use one of the rugs." Dad nods. Mom brings over one of the rugs and shoves it up against the engine block. Together, they rock the engine block until it rolls over onto the rug, then they tug and heave the rug until it's a foot into the bedroom. There is now a space of

Boggle & Sneak

wood floor about the size of a doormat visible in the hall. Mom and Dad sigh and step together out onto the bare spot, then bend and shift parts into the other half of the bare spot, leaving a stepping-stone-sized hole one step closer to the girls' room. They step into the hole, then shift car parts into the space they were previously standing in, which opens up another stepping-stone-sized hole one more step closer to the stairs. Mom is taking a bit more time than Dad shifting parts, picking them up, looking them over carefully with her brow furrowed. She runs a finger across a hose. It comes away clean.

After a few more shifts, they reach the girls' door and push it open. Lisa opens her eyes. "Hi Mom. Hi Dad. Why are you looking at me so funny?" She catches sight of the gleaming metal lining the hallway and crosses the door to look out.

Boggle & Sneak

Kirsten climbs out of bed and joins her.

“Could you girls please start hating each other?” Dad asks. “You’re too dangerous as a team.”

Lisa looks at Kirsten.

“Who left the shower on?” Kirsten asks.

The four of them look down the hall toward the sound of running water.

Lisa and Kirsten look down at the stepping stone Mom and Dad are sharing. They reach down, pick up a battery and a rim and move them inside their bedroom. Then they step out into the new double-sized stepping stone and the whole family starts junk-shifting down the hall toward the back bathroom. It goes a lot faster with four people.

After shifting the leather seats, which are worn but extremely clean and seem to have been freshly oiled, they reach the bathroom door, which is shut. Dad inches it open.

Boggle & Sneak

Four heads crane around the doorframe and peek inside. There, upended in the claw-foot tub, with the shower beating down on it, is the convertible's naked body, a bit rusty but exceptionally clean. There is a long pause. Finally, Mom steps forward and shuts off the shower tap. Rivulets run off the orange paint and leave a fine sheen. Has this thing been waxed?

“You girls work fast,” Mom says.

Kirsten is staring at Lisa. Lisa is staring out the window at the end of the hall, trying to make out a pair of indistinct white blobs up in the lilac bush. “Anyone want to help me gather eggs?” she asks.

* * *

Late that evening, the girls are sitting side by side with their aching fingers soaking in dishpans full of ice and water. As soon as they got the car parts moved and organized to Mom's satisfaction, they rode their bicycles to five separate fabric stores, including two in

Boggle & Sneak

outer-ring suburbs that had possibly never seen bicycles used for actual transportation before. They brought back acres of tulle, miles of white thread and, most importantly, more than a thousand tiny jingle-bells. It was touch-and-go with the bells until the very last fabric store, which had had a two-gallon Ziploc full of left overs from the previous Christmas, when a local Episcopalian pageant unexpectedly went bust and defaulted on its order.

The sack of bells was heavy, lumpy and noisy, and made for an uncomfortable ride back to the house. The girls walked to the neighbors' to borrow a ladder, then set about stitching wide panels of tulle, which they gaffer-taped over every possible basement and first-floor ingress, and onto which they hand-stitched the one thousand seven hundred and thirty-four jingle-bells, which after the first three hundred or so started to make their finger joints squeak.

Boggle & Sneak

The whole three-story house is now dressed in a huge glittering tutu. The jingle-bells, every time a strong breeze blows through, rustle with a kind of metallic high frequency that has neighborhood dogs whimpering and covering their ears.

The breezes, in fact, present a danger of constant false alarms, but it is too late to worry about that now. The one spot on the house below the second floor that isn't draped in billowing, tinkling tulle is the front door, which is standing wide open to the street and has a huge Welcome banner draped across it.

The girls with their ice tubs are seated at a card table immediately in front of the door, along with half a dozen thermos bottles of nasty, tarry, but highly-caffeinated black tea, much of which they have already drunk.

The cats, together with a litter box and dishes of food and water, are locked away in one of the upstairs bedrooms.

Boggle & Sneak

Mom and Dad, after asking the girls not to run up any additional spectacular water bills, have also locked themselves away upstairs. So it is only the girls, their aching fingers, their leather tongues, and the jitters.

“What if they don’t come?” Lisa asks.

“Don’t be like that,” Kirsten says.

“No, really, what if they don’t come?” Lisa asks again. “What if there’s some union regulation or something that says if the people are still awake, then just come back another night?”

“They’ve got to come,” Kirsten says. “We didn’t sew all those bells just for them not to come.”

“And anyway,” she continues. “We’ll be ready for them tomorrow night too. We’ll still be awake!” She glares at the thermos-lid and shakily takes another sip.

A gust of wind ruffles the house’s skirts, and the neighbor’s dog buries its

Boggle & Sneak

head deeper into its paws.

Five

“Did it have to be stocking caps?
Isn’t that a little cliché?”

The two stocking caps inch forward
across the worn linoleum, hugging the foot
of the shelves.

“Shut up,” Alvy says. “They’ve got
security cameras in here. Did you want to
just walk in?”

“Plus, they’re hot,” Alvy says.
“Couldn’t it have been baseball caps? Or
sun visors or something?”

“How about black cowboy hats,”
Alvy suggests. “We could tie black
bandanas around our ankles.”

“How much farther?” Alvy asks.
“My knees are getting sore.”

“You should have worn kneepads
like I said,” Alvy says. “We’re almost
there.”

Alvy sneaks a peak out the brim of
the cap. He gazes up at the rows of
bubble-packed toy airplanes and

Boggle & Sneak

slingshots. “Did we have to pick a 24-hour Walgreens?” he whines. “This would be a lot easier if they were closed.”

“There,” Alvy says, pointing. A freshly-stocked rack of primary-colored balloons in three sizes: regular, extra-large, and sausage-shaped.

“Do we have a plan?” Alby asks.

“You’ll think of something,” Alvy says.

Alby rolls his eyes. There’s not enough space in this hat for a couple dozen packages of balloons. He drops the brim to shade his eyes from the evil yellow flicker of the fluorescent lights, and tries to think. What does he have in his pockets? Scissors, string, chewing gum.

He takes out a stick of gum and bites it. There’s really no good way.

“Sit tight a second,” he says.

He rolls onto his back, tugging the hat along with him, up against the toe-kick at the bottom of the shelves.

Boggle & Sneak

He peeks his head from under the brim and surveys the ceiling for visible cameras. None in sight; at least not right here.

“Come on out,” he says. “No cameras here.”

Alvy crawls out from under her hat.

“Got any string?” Alby asks.

Alvy digs in her pocket and holds up a coil of fishing line, about the same as what Alby has.

“Okay,” Alby says. “Wait here.”

He hoists himself up onto the bottom shelf and begins to climb the hooks monkey-style, until he reaches the top row of balloons. Then he shimmies back along the hook, holds on tight with his knees and ties a knot through the hole at the top of the innermost balloon-bag. He lets the rest of his string out in a long dangling loop, careful not to snag it on the merchandise below.

Alvy, watching, sucks in a nervous breath.

Boggle & Sneak

Alby tries to look down. He hears rustling below him. He shrinks back against the back of the shelf and holds his breath.

A uniformed employee walks by briskly, humming, oblivious.

Alby, hanging onto his hook at waist-level with the clerk, follows the clerk's passing apron pockets with his eyes, painfully aware of the wadded empty stocking caps in the aisle below. The clerk doesn't seem to notice them, and disappears around the end of the aisle.

Alby lets his breath out and starts threading the untied end of the string through the holes on the other balloon-bags on this hook, then pulls the string taut and swings down to the hook below and repeats the process there. He's sure Alvy is going crazy with boredom and impatience by this point, but that's fine. Next time she can come up with the plan.

He finishes stringing the third and final row, then hops down to the bottom

Boggle & Sneak

shelf and finds Alvy taking a bite out of a Pez.

“You went and got Pez?” he says.

“You don’t let me in on the plan,” she says, “I go and get Pez.”

Alby holds out his hand, and Alvy slaps the heavy Pez down into it. He takes a bite.

“This is going to be a little noisy,” he says, looking down at his string.

Alvy stares at him smugly, holds up the end of her own string, and yanks it.

On the other side of the partition, half a dozen clock radios suddenly start blaring AM radio static at deafening volume.

Alby drops the Pez and runs out into the aisle, pulling on his string. The balloon-bags slide off their hooks and slap down onto the floor and each other, forming a slippery pile.

Alby and Alvy grab their hats and shove them back under the bottom row of toys. Then they wait.

Boggle & Sneak

The chorus of radio static thins and stops, and they can hear rustling on the other side of the partition and boxes being lifted and replaced. Then the sound of footsteps walking away.

They look at each other, then hop down onto the floor and pull the hats down over their bodies.

Alby loops the free end of the string around his waist, and they start crawling back toward the entrance with the long train of balloons trailing behind.

As they near the checkout counter, they both slow, lift their brims, and perform the best shoe-scan they can manage. No shoes are obvious, but who's to say there's nobody behind the counter watching the curious procession of two mashed hats and thirty-four bags of balloons on a string?

That's just a chance they're going to have to take. They scramble on all fours toward the exit.

Boggle & Sneak

Some recent patron has left a wire shopping basket on the floor in front of the checkout counter.

Alby spots it and scrabbles over to his sister, bunching the hats together. He scrambles into her hat and holds out his string for her to take.

“Let’s go!” Alvy says, turning away from his outstretched hand.

“Just take it,” Alby says. “I want to get something.”

“Get something?” Alvy says, but she takes the string, and starts pulling the balloons toward the door.

Alby steers his hat over to the basket and shoves against it, starting it toward the door.

The wire screeches against the floor.

Alvy stands up and starts to run. This causes the hat to form a sharp pyramid, and the tassel to bounce jauntily.

Boggle & Sneak

Alby stands and runs too, pushing the basket through the hat with his palms. The basket continues its screech.

As they reach the electric eye in front of the exit, Alvy gives a heroic leap, and her hat's tassel flops through the light beam across the door. The door swishes open, and Alvy, Alby and their baggage train scurry through it, expecting at any second to be un-hatted by giant hands from above.

No hands appear, and they manage to shove and drag their load into the shadows on the side of the building.

They stop and pant, still expecting company from inside the store.

Finally, their breathing returns to normal.

“Good one on the balloons,” Alvy says. “But did you have to steal something four times your size?”

Alby looks at his basket and pats it lovingly. “This is just what we need,” he says.

Boggle & Sneak

Back at home, Alvy is using a large tank to blow up balloons. Alvy is welding case-fans to the back of the wire basket.

Alvy says, "I think we need a vacation."

Alvy stops welding and raises his mask. "A vacation," he says.

"Yeah, you know," Alvy says, "get out of the city. Get away from the nightly grind. Go someplace new. Get a change of scene."

Alvy shakes his head and slaps his mask back down. His voice is muffled. "Where would we go?"

Alvy ties another balloon to the basket, which is now starting to shift on the concrete. She looks up at the balloon-silhouettes against the darkening sky.

"I don't know," she says. "Away from here."

Alvy sends a shower of sparks bouncing across the floor.

"We've got a job to do," he says. "Who would do our job?"

Boggle & Sneak

Alvy blows up another balloon.

“Do you think the whole world would stop if we stopped doing our job?” she asks.

Alvy runs his gloved finger along the joint he has just made.

“It’s our job,” he says.

He sets down his torch, takes off his mask and gloves, and walks into the shop.

Alvy ties the balloon to the basket and goes to inflate another one.

It’s a good job, she thinks. Still...

She feels the air move around her. She looks up, sees a whirl of feathers and claws, and feels herself being knocked off her feet and jerked roughly up into the night sky.

Six

The 21 bus rumbles by outside, and a breeze jangles the alarm bells. In the entryway, the girls lean against the walls, empty thermos lids in their hands, chins on chests, breathing deeply and regularly.

Alby tries jumping again. His boots thud on the wood floor, causing sand grains to jump. The girls do not stir.

He stomps over to Lisa, takes hold of the hem of her dress, and yanks. She snores on. He goes over to Kirsten's shoe, takes off his backpack, and swings it as hard as he can against her shin. No movement.

He sighs, walks to the midpoint between the two girls, digs in his pack, pulls out a bugle, and blows a huge blast of air into it. Both girls' eyes snap open.

Alby looks up at them. "I need your help," he says.

Seven

The eagle's talons press painfully against Alvy's ribs. She had given up flailing and kicking after a few minutes and now hangs, limp and uncomfortable, saving her strength for the inevitable confrontation with the eagle's beak. For now, though, they fly. High, pale-gray clouds reflect the steadily dimming lights of the thinning suburban sprawl.

The eagle banks, and Alvy, in spite of her fear and dread, feels faintly exhilarated by the speed and the rush of the air. They are descending toward an absurdly tall, garishly-lit theater marquee, double-outlined in neon and flashing tracer lights.

They land roughly. The eagle relaxes its claws and drops Alvy, who falls, sprawling, onto the filthy, corroded steel of the sign. She rolls and scrambles back, until her leg goes over the edge and she half loses her balance. She pulls her leg

Boggle & Sneak

back up and returns a couple of inches, and then she and the eagle stare at each other.

Alvy is busily trying to imagine a set of defensive aerial gymnastics involving the buzzing tubes of hot neon.

The eagle bobs its head slightly but does not advance toward her.

Alvy is happy to put off her last-ditch leap for as long as possible, so she simply centers herself on the sign, prepares her muscles, and stares warily.

“I need your help,” the eagle says.

Alvy goggles, surprised, and surveys the thin air all around her once again, still hoping for some useful weapon or path of escape.

“I’ve been watching you,” the eagle says, and ruffles his feathers slightly.

Alvy sprints forward and leaps, hands out, tensed for the burn of the neon.

Boggle & Sneak

The eagle lazily reaches out a claw, snags Alvy in midair, and drops her back onto the sign.

“Don’t you want to hear my problem?” he asks.

Alvy backs again to the furthest edge of the sign, and folds her arms across her chest.

“I like to eat smelt,” the eagle says.

He shifts his eyes, turns his head to follow the motion of something in the sky, then turns back to Alvy.

“Something has been stealing the smelt from my part of the lake.” He pauses, lowers his head, and narrows his eyes. “I’ve been forced,” he says, “to eat herring.” He shudders.

Alvy continues to stare silently at him, her heart still thudding.

“I was on my way north,” he continues. “A couple of small creatures caught my eye.” He blinks. “Creatures of a certain size always catch my eye,” he says. “So I stopped flying north for a few

Boggle & Sneak

days. I stopped by the river and stayed in the city and watched, and I believe I've seen enough. I believe you can help me."

Alvy is scowling. "Why snatch me?" she demands. "Why not just ask?"

"You were busy," the eagle says. "I was impatient. Once I had seen enough, I didn't want to wait anymore."

"Why me?" Alvy asks again.

"Oh, come now," the eagle says. "You know it yourself. You are unique. You're brilliant, you are inventive, you are just what I need."

"I'm not a detective," Alvy says.

"Inventor, detective, I really don't discriminate. To a truly first-class mind, a problem is a problem, don't you think?"

"My brother—" Alvy begins.

"I can only carry one, and I chose the one I wanted," the eagle replies. "I should think you'd be gratified that you're the one."

"We're a team," Alvy objects.

Boggle & Sneak

“Don’t you ever wonder,” the eagle says, “whether he’s holding you back?” He taps a claw. “After all, aren’t you the brains of the operation?”

“Why should I help you?” Alvy asks. “What’s in it for me? I was happy where I was.”

“All right,” eagle says. “I’ll take you back. I’ll find someone else.”

“You said something was stealing your fish,” Alvy says, “what kind of a thing?”

“The smelt were there,” eagle says, “and now they’re not. I notice these things.”

“So notice where they’re going, and get them back.”

“You don’t enjoy a good puzzle?”

“Where is the puzzle? Perch. Watch. Notice. Catch. Eat.”

“Why do you think I asked you?” the eagle says.

“You didn’t ask,” Alvy says.

Boggle & Sneak

“Are you coming?” he asks. He holds out a claw. “The flight north will be a lot more comfortable, since I know you won’t be trying to wriggle free.”

“My brother—” Alvy says again.

“Are you coming?”

Alvy walks forward, and the eagle’s claw closes around her.

Eight

There is a knock at the door.

Alby looks around, panicked.

Kirsten appears from the kitchen with a couple of large bowls. She uses the bowls to gesture toward a pile of books in the corner of the room, and Alby sprints over and hides himself behind them.

Lisa opens the door, searches her pockets, and trades the delivery man a handful of bills for two heavy plastic sacks. She shuts the door and scoops Alby from his hiding place up onto the table.

Kirsten lifts a fat phone book onto her chair and sits on it. The girls peel the wrappers from their chopsticks, dump noodles and broth into the bowls, and start to wolf.

“Let’s go over this again,” Lisa says, around a mouthful of noodles.

Alby had turned his back on Alvy and gone inside the shop for a minute.

Boggle & Sneak

When he came back out, the basket was still bobbing in the breeze, pulling gently against its tether. The bag of balloons Alvy had been drawing from still lay just where it had been. The moon still shone through the dusty air. There was no sign of his sister. He walked straight to the edge of the garage roof, and looked off, but there was no sign that anything unusual had taken place.

“Alvy?” he called.

He walked back into the shop and looked around, shaking his head perplexedly, and confirmed in his mind that he hadn't seen his sister walk through. There was no way off the roof except through the shop. Even though he was certain he hadn't seen her pass through, he nevertheless walked back into their shared living space, looked everywhere, and even walked all the way down to the street. Still no trace. He walked back out onto the roof, and looked carefully around. Nothing there but the

Boggle & Sneak

familiar shapes of finished and half-built vehicles, scavenged junk, gravel, waves where the roofing tar had heaved, and close to the edge, rolling slowly in the breeze, a lone brown feather.

He walked over to it. As he approached, the feather twitched and levitated slightly. Strange—the wind didn't seem to be shifting. He took another step forward. The feather let out a tiny but distinct spark of static electricity and jumped again. Alby reached out his hand toward the feather. The feather darted toward him, avoiding his outstretched fingers but flying parallel to his arm, and stuck tight against his shirt. When he pulled on it, it was surprisingly hard to remove, and it sent another painful spark into his hand.

Alby and the girls study the feather before them on the table, weighted down by the empty tea thermos.

“I wouldn't have thought something brown could glow like that,” Kirsten says.

Boggle & Sneak

She uses her chopsticks to spoon the remainder of the rooster sauce out of its container and onto her bowl of noodles.

Lisa lifts the thermos, just to see, and the feather again darts through the air and sticks itself against an empty Styrofoam take-out container. She picks it off and sticks it back under the thermos. “Let’s say she was carried off by the bird that dropped this weird feather,” she says. “That’s bad.”

Alby, pale, looks down at the floor.

“We need a tracking device for weird birds,” Kirsten says. “Maybe we should call the Department of Weird Birds, and ask whether they have a radio-collar program.”

“What’s with that tape on your head?” Lisa asks Alby, changing the subject. “Did you hurt yourself?”

“We had a disagreement,” Alby replies.

The girls look at him, confused.

“My hair and I,” he clarifies.

Boggle & Sneak

“Bad hair day?” Lisa asks.

“Exactly,” he nods.

“Can we see?” Kirsten asks.

Alby looks up at the girls. It might be nice, he thinks, to have some full-sized help for hair care. He shrugs. “You should be able to handle it.” He starts unwrapping tape. “I’ll probably need a little help...”

The tape comes off the hat with a linty rip, and the hat falls into his lap. Alby’s hair, free at last, explodes outward in all directions. There is a loud thunk as the thermos falls over. The feather sails into the hair, which begins to wind tightly around it.

“Hey,” Alby says. His arms flail at the hair and the feather. “Help!”

Lisa pokes her fingers into the corona, pinches the feather, and pulls.

“Ow!” yells Alby, as Lisa uses her other hand to free the feather.

“Mmf,” he says, as the hair, irritated, begins to cocoon his head.

Boggle & Sneak

Kirsten reaches in, pulls the hair back, and holds it in a ponytail with her fist.

“I see what you mean,” she says.
“Bad hair.”

Lisa holds Alby’s hat onto his head with her thumb and twists the used tape in loops around the hat and Alby’s chin. The tail of the tape refuses to stick and dangles down, but the loops hold.

Lisa looks at the toppled thermos and twists the feather in her fingers. “A whole bird full of these would really be something,” she says. “I wonder whether we could use your hair kind of like a compass needle.”

Alby shakes his head. “If that were going to work, why didn’t it work just now? All I got was a snarl.”

“Maybe there’s too much interference,” Kirsten says. “Maybe if we could get you way out in the middle of nowhere...”

Boggle & Sneak

“... or way up in the sky,” Lisa says. “Didn’t you say you were working on a balloon?”

“You saw what happened,” Alby says. “I can’t just go up in a balloon and take my hat off! I’d just as soon jump out and try to fly!”

“We didn’t have any trouble with the hair,” Lisa says. “We’ll just do what we did.”

“Um,” Alby says, holding his arms out. “The basket’s only this wide.”

“Oh, right,” Lisa says.

“So unless you’ve got your own balloon...” He takes a bite of shrimp-chip.

Kirsten is concentrating. “Feel like another trip to the all-night Walgreens?” she asks.

* * *

“This is stupid,” Lisa says, setting the heavy shopping bags down on the sidewalk.

Boggle & Sneak

“His sister is missing,” Kirsten says.
“We don’t know how much time we have.
Come and help me get the Sunfish down.”

Alby watches from the side of the garage as Lisa, up on a step ladder, untwists the rope and slowly lowers the Sunfish down from the rafters.

Kirsten immediately starts stripping off the sail.

“Dad’s going to kill us,” Lisa says.

“He’s going to kill himself because he didn’t think of it first,” Kirsten says.

She tosses the sail aside in a heap.
“Let’s get this thing out to the street.”

They wait for the 21 to pass, then drag the Sunfish out into the street. Alby watches anxiously, peeking out from under the flap of Kirsten’s backpack.

Kirsten pulls a roll of packing tape out of a Walgreens bag, twists a loop of tape around the tip of the boom, and leaves the roll dangling. She takes out another roll and repeats the process, about an inch removed from the first roll.

Boggle & Sneak

She takes roll after roll out of the bag, until tape-rolls dangle from the full length of the boom. Then she sticks a broomstick through the rolls and looks to Lisa for the all-clear.

Lisa checks the street again, then gives her the thumbs-up.

Kirsten begins to run, holding the broomstick out, unrolling the tape as she runs.

Lisa shakes her head, but she hangs another Walgreens bag over her arm, takes a bottle of root beer out of the bag, shakes the bottle, untwists the cap, and starts to run after her sister, spraying root beer onto the tape as she runs.

Kirsten is still keeping about a block ahead.

Lisa's bottle runs dry, and she switches it for another one. After five blocks, the tape and the root beer run out, and the girls dash back the way they came, hoping to make it before the next 21 comes along.

Boggle & Sneak

Kirsten is breathing hard, holding her broomstick like a spear.

“This isn’t going to work,” Lisa says.
“It’s night.”

“So?” Kirsten says, and then they hear it: the humming.

“See?” Kirsten says.

The early dawn air vibrates with the intense hum.

“It’s a law,” Kirsten says.

The strands of tape are starting to buck and rise.

In the distance, they can hear the sound of a diesel engine.

“It’s the 21! Quick!” Lisa says.

The tape is moving faster now, slanting up toward vertical.

Kirsten catches up her backpack, which knocks Alby over and tosses him into the bottom of the pack.

The girls hop into the Sunfish, which is now starting to rise.

“This is disgusting,” Lisa says.

“Jealous,” Kirsten says.

Boggle & Sneak

The girls look up at the seething buzz of millions of root beer-addled flies, stuck tight to the packing tape.

Alby, bruised, crawls out of the pack and joins the girls looking up at the black sails.

“I can’t believe that worked at night,” Lisa says.

The little boat rises higher and higher, floating up into the first rays of the morning sun.

Nine

The eagle spreads his wings wide, braking and landing on a high branch of a bleached dead tree. “Here you go,” the eagle says, setting Alvy down on a limb. “Let me know when you have the thief.”

The eagle steps away from her and prepares to take off. Alvy goggles at him. “Where’s my workshop? Where’s my stuff? How am I supposed to contact you? How am I supposed to get out of this tree?”

The eagle turns away and beats his wings. “You’ll think of something,” he says. “That’s why I picked you.”

“You’re kidding, right?” Alvy asks, but the eagle is already soaring high into the sky.

Alvy continues to stare, dumbstruck. At the foot of the tree, a stream sparkles and widens, pouring over smooth granite boulders and disappearing

Boggle & Sneak

over an embankment down to the still
expanse of the lake.

She tests her footing. The branch
looks rotten but feels solid enough. It is
difficult to get a clear idea of the size of the
tree from this vantage. She can see the
trunk rising above her, and she can see
other leafless limbs in the air all around
her, but she has to take on faith that her
own limb in fact meets up with any path
to the ground.

She begins to edge sideways. She is
grateful that the limb is dry, not wet and
slippery.

Suddenly the wood beneath her feet
turns to powder, and she is falling,
reaching out to get her arms around the
limb as she passes it but missing, then
bicycling for a grip on anything but finding
nothing.

She can feel her body accelerating,
and then suddenly gray dust and chips
explode around her, as she crashes
spread-eagled into last year's nest. Her

Boggle & Sneak

fragment of nest jerks free of its branches, and she falls with it, loose fragments flying up around her, blinding her, filling her mouth and nose. Then she hits bottom, and the remainder of the nest disintegrates and settles over her in a filthy gray blanket.

Seconds pass. She seems still to be breathing. She lifts a bruised arm and twitches nest-dust away from her mouth and nose with the back of her hand. It tastes foul.

She scrabbles at her eyes and blinks away splinters, chalky rivulets of tears running down her cheeks. This is just unacceptable. The eagle should just have eaten her, the way she originally expected. What is she supposed to do out here in the middle of the woods without any tools? What did she let the eagle talk her into? The eagle picked her to find his fish. Isn't that because he wants her to do what she does? But what she does takes paper, it takes gasoline, it takes tools! What it

Boggle & Sneak

doesn't take is rocks and water and a bunch of plants. Surely that was obvious!

She sits up and slaps at her clothes.
Stupid eagle! I don't belong out of the city!

She stands up, takes a step, and buries a leg deep in the pile of leaves and branches where she had landed. She pulls it free and slithers clumsily down off the pile. It feels great to get her boots back on solid ground!

She looks at the trunk of the eagle's tree and spits. What she wouldn't give for a speedboat or a dirt bike, right about now! What kind of a story was that eagle telling, anyway?

She can see the smooth steel of the lake spreading all the way to the horizon. All that lake, and not enough fish to satisfy one lousy eagle? Even if the eagle in question is finicky, stupid, mean, and crazy?

She sits down on a rock. What's the point of stealing fish, anyway? She imagines smashing the glassy surface of

Boggle & Sneak

the lake with a brick and reaching in through the shards to remove a fish. Putting on a mask and holding up the lake at gunpoint, the waters of the lake giving up a duffel bag filled with shining, flopping fish—one of them surely carrying a dye bomb.

She looks around her. Assuming the eagle wasn't just raving nonsense, assuming the eagle was telling the truth and not just yanking her chain so he could dump her out here a million miles from civilization, assuming any of that, then this right here is the scene of an ongoing crime, where somebody is going to the trouble of systematically emptying the lake of the eagle's favorite fish.

Come to think of it, it's actually pretty funny. The thief might just have the kind of mind she could appreciate. Maybe she should catch the thief just to meet the thief. Maybe she should catch the thief just to congratulate the thief for finding such a perfect way of messing with

Boggle & Sneak

that arrogant eagle. Maybe—oh, wait—
Maybe she should catch the thief just to
catch a ride back to any kind of town!

She wipes more dust from her
cheeks. To do any of that, she'll have to
catch the thief. The thief, who is in the
middle of a large-scale crime spree, right
here, right now. She looks around,
suspecting she might not be completely
alone.

Here's the thing, though; if the thief
were just walking around in the open,
then the eagle would have spotted him.
On the other hand, even the eagle says
he's impatient. Maybe he didn't do a good
job of looking, preferring to let somebody
else do his dirty work. Maybe what this job
needs is someone just to do the work, take
a careful look, and be patient. All she
needs is a really good vantage point, where
she can see the whole inlet.

She twists her body and looks
slowly up the tall dead tree.

Drat!

Boggle & Sneak

She walks over to the tree and digs the toes of her boots into the cracked bark. She digs her fingers in, and slowly begins to climb.

Back out on her old limb, she finds that she can get a clear view of the entire inlet if she shimmies far enough out, to where the limb was too thin to safely hold the eagle, but where she feels secure enough, if a bit exposed.

* * *

After a couple of hours, she has seen the wind change twice, she's seen what looked like a deer approach the water and turn back into the woods, and she's seen a squirrel fall from a branch in the neighboring tree, only to catch itself on the branch below and scamper out of sight.

It doesn't require an eagle-like impatience to conclude that she is not going to be able to perform a twenty-four-hour stakeout without leaving this branch. For one thing, she is thirsty. The good

Boggle & Sneak

news is, she has become inspired to test out some tactics from watching the squirrel. Just out of reach is a thin green twig at the end of a long thin branch on the neighboring tree. Alvy jumps out slightly, grabs the twig (which bends under her weight) and swings down to a similar twig below, and so on down to the ground. Small size seems to confer some advantages.

Water is going to be easy, but other things are going to pose more of a challenge. Food, for example. She decides to take a tool inventory. Pockets of her leather jacket: empty. Front jeans pockets: empty. Rear jeans pockets: lint, otherwise empty. Meh! She really is no better off than a squirrel!

She walks down to the stream, kneels down, and scoops up water to her mouth with her cupped hands. Really the only thing she has that a squirrel doesn't have is some past experience with

Boggle & Sneak

improvisation. That nest might turn out to be good for something.

She walks over to the leaf pile and finds a handful of destroyed nest. It is papery, brittle, and bone dry. Perfect!

Alvy carries the nest flakes over to a granite ledge by the stream and sets it down in a small depression. Then she finds a couple of fist-sized rocks and clacks them together above the nest material, hard. She is surprised by how much this hurts her hands. She tries a slightly different technique, striking down with one rock against the other. It makes a loud noise and leaves a mark on both rocks. She tries again, wincing at the impact and the noise. Isn't this how this is supposed to work?

The sky begins to darken but she works on, oblivious.

Isn't there some other way to do this?

She walks back to the leaf pile and digs out a narrow stick about the length of

Boggle & Sneak

her forearm. *Hmm, maybe.* She carries the stick back to her tinder pile, kneels, and rubs it back and forth vigorously between her palms. It makes her palms hot; hopefully it's making heat down in the tinder too. She keeps at it. Sawdust wears off the stick and mixes in with the nest-particles, and her palms get hotter and hotter, but still no noticeable result. Something pokes dully into her shoulder. She looks up. A fat raindrop plops into her eye. Oh, great.

She redoubles her efforts, leaning out over the tinder to shelter it from the rain. More drops hit against her jacket.

The tinder stirs and stirs, but generates no spark, no heat, no smoke.

More drops hit against her hat, her arms, the stone around her. She sets the stick down, frustrated, and scans her surroundings for shelter. Nothing obvious presents itself.

She starts walking rapidly away from the lake, hoping to spot something

Boggle & Sneak

she has missed. The patter of the rain increases, turning to a shower, then a downpour. Exhausted and lost, she runs into the wan shelter of a birch and watches herself get soaked.

Ten

Alby looks so proud and puffed up, with his shoulders thrown back and his long dreadlocks pointing straight ahead, that the girls have to laugh. Alby, for his part, is delighted to have even a temporary break from his hat. This eagle-tracking is great for hair obedience!

“Course correction, eighteen degrees,” Kirsten says.

Lisa shakes up another root beer and uncaps it, directing the spray high into the air, eighteen degrees to starboard, then drops the empty bottle onto the growing pile on the floor. There is a mad buzz as the flies change course to pursue the root beer.

“Sir, we’re running out of root beer, sir,” Lisa says. “We might want to start saving it for coarser adjustments. Plus, I want to be navigator now.”

The girls switch positions.

Boggle & Sneak

Alby shakes his head violently, enjoying how his dreadlocks stay still even when his head is in motion. Usually it is the other way around.

“We’ve been over water for a long time,” Kirsten says. “Do you suppose we’ll ever see land?”

Lisa points to a faint line on the horizon. “What bothers me,” she says, “is that we know what direction we’re going, but not how far we’re going. Maybe we’re going to fly across all the Great Lakes. I wish we had brought some sandwiches.”

Kirsten nods. It has been a long night.

* * *

When Kirsten wakes, clouds have moved in, and the line of shore has grown much closer. Lisa and Alby have drifted off, too. Alby’s head is lying on his folded arms on the bow. His locks are straining outward, straight ahead.

Good. They haven’t drifted off-course while she slept.

Boggle & Sneak

The first raindrop hits the deck.

It's going to be weird, she thinks, if the boat fills up with rain, and we have to bail.

More raindrops fall. There is a crackling sound above her. She looks up and sees one of the ribbons of tape waving and buckling.

Up to now, the flies have kept the tape in pretty constant tension.

It is starting to be a real rain.

Lisa stirs.

Another strip of tape loses its rigidity and begins to flap.

Is the rain bothering the flies somehow?

Lisa opens her eyes.

Kirsten points out the flapping tape. Lisa's eyes grow wide. "Hey Alby, wake up!"

Alby's head jerks up. "What's going on?" he asks.

"We're not sure," Lisa says. "Either the rain is washing off the root beer, or..."

Boggle & Sneak

The Sunfish's bow takes a sudden dip, and throws Alby and the girls into a heap.

"...or it's washing off the flies," Alby finishes.

The rain falls, long ribbons of tape whip and snap around them, and the choppy surface of the lake grows nearer and nearer.

"I would feel a lot worse," Kirsten says, "if we weren't in a boat."

The boat hits the lake, and an icy wave washes over them.

Lisa is the first to her feet. "Help me with the tape," she says.

Kirsten stands and joins her.

Lisa reels in tape, hand over hand. Kirsten sticks a length of tape on the diagonal, from the boom to the mast, then starts joining other strips to the first, overlapping them in layers, trying to smooth them with her fingers. In the rain, the adhesive is tacky and sloppy. It holds, but the strips bunch together.

Boggle & Sneak

“This is going to be ugly,” Kirsten says.

They work quickly, reeling and sticking.

A sodden triangular mat is taking shape, with ugly tangled loose ends. It catches the wind and yanks the tape from their hands.

“Worked, though,” Lisa says.

The shore is growing very close, maybe a few dozen yards away.

They blow on, and more and more water appears to be pouring in. They are listing hard to port.

“Didn’t Dad say he was going to patch the hole in the hull?” Kirsten asks.

“Yeah,” Lisa says.

Kirsten looks down at the bobbing empty root beer bottles, useless for bailing. She splashes water out of the boat. As if that will do any good. And the water coming in, fast now, is *cold*.

She looks anxiously toward the shore. How far could they swim if they

Boggle & Sneak

were really cold? It would be such an insult to freeze in the summertime within a few steps of land.

“Alby,” Lisa says, “this might be a good time to get on my shoulders.”

At least the waves aren't so high.

The hull's heavy side goes under again. The girls hang on tight.

Alby scrambles up onto Lisa's shoulders. His locks, soaking wet, are wrapped tightly around his head but thankfully don't seem to be getting in the way of his arms.

Wait! Have the locks lost the eagle's trail?

The hull goes under again. The sail no longer seems to be providing much forward momentum; it is just acting to push the hull further under the waves.

The girls' legs are already underwater inside the boat, even though the boat is still partially afloat. Their feet are starting to feel numb. The shore is

Boggle & Sneak

still thirty yards away. An easy swim if it weren't so cold.

“Let's go,” Lisa decides. She looks over her shoulder at Alby, then jumps into the water. It hurts. She starts to paddle. In warmer water she is a competent—even elegant—swimmer. But nothing seems to be working right. It is like having several fewer joints.

Kirsten is slightly behind her, beating at the rain and the lake with wooden arms.

The wind is at their backs. At least the wind isn't cold.

“Hey,” Kirsten yells out.

Lisa looks back.

Kirsten falls forward, and then stands upright. They have reached the shallows!

Lisa orders her legs to straighten. They half-comply, and she finds the bottom.

Boggle & Sneak

She fumbles forward, and slowly begins to rise from the frigid water into the rainy but pleasantly warm air.

Kirsten is thrashing at her side.

They slog through ankle deep water and up onto rocks and mud. Cold. Both girls are shivering hard and unable to stop. Lisa, her teeth clenched to stop them chattering, looks over her shoulder for Alby. He isn't there. Did he lose his grip at the last minute? She scrambles to her knees. Where has he—

There— he is lying on the very edge of the water, unconscious, like a waterlogged branch washed up by the storm.

Lisa picks him up and holds him close. She can feel his tiny breaths heaving in and out. She lies back beside her sister, shivering, with the rain still falling down.

Eleven

Alvy, hungry, wet and cold, sits with her arms crossed and her head bowed at the foot of the tree. A shaft of golden sunlight pierces the dissipating clouds and illuminates the spot where she sits, warming her and causing her to look up. A film of rain glistens on every surface. The lake has calmed, and light dances on small waves like fish scales. Fish scales.

She stands up. Her clothes are clammy and cling to her skin. It is an unfamiliar, unpleasant sensation. Will she be able to walk herself dry, or will she just mildew to a standstill?

She begins to jump, two-legged, from rock to rock. It feels good.

Jump. *Bam!* Jump. *Stupid eagle!*
Jump. *Ditch me out here in the middle of nowhere!* Jump. *All so you don't have to eat herring?* Jump. *Well, bring me some herring!* Jump. *Stupid eagle!*

Boggle & Sneak

Her clothes stay damp, but her muscles begin to warm up.

Jump. *If I had some tools...* Jump. *...you stupid eagle...* Jump. *...I could catch your fish thief.* Jump. *But what am I supposed to do?* Jump. *Beat him to death with sticks?* Jump. *Stupid eagle!* Jump. Clang!

Clang?

She stops jumping and looks down. Underfoot is a flat scrap of rusted metal about the size of her torso.

She picks it up and shakes some of the mud off it.

This is what I have to work with?
But at least it's something.

She kicks around a bit and finds a cracked piece of driftwood to use as a handle for the metal scrap. There—a makeshift shovel. She surveys the area once again.

If you assume that the thief is fishing smelt out of this inlet, and if you assume that the thief is coming and going

Boggle & Sneak

by land, then you can imagine a line—and not a very long one—that the thief has to cross.

She walks to one end of the imaginary line and starts to etch this imaginary line into the ground with the shovel. As she paces and etches, she tries to make a plan: *I could dig a pit to trap the thief, but that would take forever. I could use the shovel to dig a bare patch on the ground, and use the bare patch to trap a footprint. But what if the thief runs off and all I have left is a footprint? I could—*

The dragging scrap metal hisses along the ground, and then suddenly clunks into rock.

She looks down and sees that the whole remaining third of her imaginary line is covered with rock. Digging or scraping isn't going to help her there. She shoves her ugly shovel violently into the ground in frustration. There is a buzz, and the dust around the shovel bursts into flame.

Boggle & Sneak

What's this?

She digs again, cautiously, with the tip of her shovel, and brings up a severed, rubber-coated wire. *Electricity? Out here?* But first things first: she digs around the smoldering weeds and carries them in the shovel, gently, over to a patch of exposed rock. Then she sets the weeds down and sets about gathering the driest twigs and branches she can find.

After a few minutes, she has a satisfactory campfire going, and she sits down beside it to soak up the heat and the smoke.

* * *

When she wakes up, the fire has dwindled down to embers and has to be resuscitated. Once that's done, she returns to inspect the wire she has uncovered. Perhaps it leads somewhere?

She scratches the shovel against the exposed wires, looking for more sparks. When there are none, she begins to dig along the wire, uncovering it and pulling it

Boggle & Sneak

to the surface. For the first time since her arrival, it feels like progress.

Little by little, she uncovers the wire, skirting the rocks and looping around trees. It seems to be working its way toward the shore, but via a roundabout path determined by the presence of dirt and absence of rocks. She works faster as she goes along, drawn on by the hope of finding something, anything that might help to justify all this work and this whole stupid situation.

When she is within ten feet of the shore—hot, tired, but mercifully drier—the wire suddenly dives straight down into the soil and disappears.

Several minutes of excavation make a big hole and expose more wire but don't make anything clear and don't provide any way to continue. A wild-goose chase.

Alvy sits down, leans back on her hands, and shuts her eyes. She can't recall a time when she felt such a loss of confidence. Does she really have it? Or is

Boggle & Sneak

all her success bound up in her home, her tools and her brother?

She opens her eyes and looks at the long, useless wire lying in the dirt, looping out of sight. She wishes she had not wasted the effort. But then she had started out trying to establish a perimeter, to draw a line around the inlet that the thief would have to cross; to find some way of rigging a trap or an alarm to give her a moment's advantage; to give her some chance of catching—or at least identifying—the thief.

She takes her shovel and severs the near end of the wire, then starts coiling it around her arm, and humming.

She retraces all her steps, all the way back to the beginning of her imaginary line.

Now then, where was I? This time, I have an additional tool; something that may actually get the job done right.

She climbs up into the low branches of a bush and ties off one end of the wire,

Boggle & Sneak

tugging at it to make sure it is reasonably secure. Then she climbs down and runs from bush to bush, stringing the wire out at about the height of her raised arms, and twisting it around tree trunks. *Not invisible, of course, but if the thief isn't expecting it... And especially at night...*

The work goes quickly, and even the rocky section has just enough exposed plants growing out of cracks to provide hooks and hangers and tie-points for the wire.

She reaches the end of the imaginary line and drops the remaining loops of wire onto the rocks. The wire is long enough! It's about time her luck took a turn for the better. She surveys her handiwork. Not elegant, certainly. Ugly. But all she needs for starters is a trip and a shout...

At that moment, the wire pulls taut and shakes violently. Something is pulling on it, and hard.

Boggle & Sneak

Right now? How could her trap have worked so quickly?

She begins to follow the wire back, trying not to expose too much of herself to the eyes up ahead.

The line continues to jerk.

She jogs along, hoping against hope, dying to see what she has caught. The wire is unstrung, and has been pulled under a leafy bush. She tugs gently on the wire, and gets a powerful jerk in return, followed by a sudden silence.

She creeps forward, not knowing what she will find. The bush remains motionless. Cautiously, she reaches out an arm and slowly, gingerly lifts the nearest branch.

Furious yellow eyes stare out at her.

Oh, perfect: she has snared a lynx.

She can see that the lynx has a twist of wire wrapped around its foreleg. The lynx has figured this out too, and seems to be pondering its options. Alvy doesn't love any of hers, either. Until she

Boggle & Sneak

gets the lynx sprung, her trap is ruined, half pulled down. But if she frees the lynx, then she'll have a freed lynx to contend with.

She walks off down the wire to look for her shovel. When she gets it, she walks back, and stares at the lynx-bush. Maybe this is the point when she should chuck it in, leave the lynx to starve, start walking, and try to find a road, figure out how to hitch a ride, find her way back to the city. If she stays out here much longer, she might starve along with the lynx. But walking away from the tangled lynx doesn't seem within the spirit of the game as she has ever played it, so she takes a look at her shovel and her surroundings: *Can lynx swim?* She takes a look at her boots. *Couldn't I have put on running shoes when I woke up yesterday morning?* And then she brings down her shovel and chops off the wire.

The lynx gives a medium-sized tug at its end but then goes still again.

Boggle & Sneak

Oh well, maybe this is going to be easier than she thought.

She tiptoes around to the other side of the bush and whacks another break in the wire.

No movement at all from under the bush. That's a relief. At least she doesn't have a loose, angry lynx to contend with.

But then the lynx is out of the bush and bearing down on her fast.

She takes a giant leap over the boulders, and lands wrong. She's bringing a big pile of brush and debris sliding down after her. The lynx is in the air, and Alvy is sliding, falling, tumbling... and the pile of branches and stones is falling right on top of her, scratching and pummeling and tossing her, debris falling down... Then, silence.

It's dark under here, but she's not badly hurt as far as she can tell.

She lies very still, and holds her breath, waiting to see yellow eyes or feel digging, batting paws but there's nothing.

Boggle & Sneak

How long is it prudent to wait? Do lynx have long attention spans?

Alvy lies very still for several minutes, then tries an exploratory kick. There's no return motion, so she tries her arms. They seem to be working normally, so she rolls a bit and starts lifting off sticks and rolling off rocks. It's a wonder she wasn't killed just by the rocks; boulders as big as her head have rolled down and piled up on the branches and sticks that seem to have saved her.

She dusts herself off. *Now, where was I? Oh, yes. If you assume that the thief is stealing fish out of this inlet, and if you assume that the thief is coming and going by land...*

She walks up the hill to the severed wire. *It has just enough slack in it to allow a splice. Now that's a mercy. But if you don't assume that the thief is coming, and going by land...*

She applies the other splice and lifts up the section of wire the lynx has pulled

Boggle & Sneak

down. Then she walks down to the shore
and stares at the water and the waves
rolling in.

Twelve

When Kirsten opens her eyes, Lisa has found a soggy pack of matches in her dress pocket and has a small fire going. Kirsten edges over toward it, grateful for the extra warmth. The sun is out now, but it's still cold inside her wet clothes. Alby has come to, and he is sitting close to the fire with his arms around his knees. The smoke rises straight up as they sit and scheme. Kirsten notices that she is still wearing her backpack, and the straps are starting to chafe. She loosens them and slips out of the pack. A wave of water pours from the flap and hisses around the fire. She opens the flap to see how the contents have fared. The cheese and crackers, wrapped in plastic, have done okay. She breaks them out. Alby has to hold a single slice of cheese with both hands, and he has to open his jaws wide to take a bite. This makes the girls laugh.

Boggle & Sneak

It's not a real meal, but it's enough to help give them some spirit back.

They look out at the lake. Lisa says, "I guess your locks won't work when they're wet."

Alby says, "They might not work anyway, like at your house: they couldn't pick anything up until we were way up in the air."

Kirsten asks, "How long until they dry out, and we can try again?"

"It's hard to say. It's sunny, so probably not too long."

They go back to watching the lake. After a few minutes, Alby stands up. "I'm going to take a look around," he says. He walks off into the undergrowth.

"Are there any more crackers?" Kirsten asks. Lisa passes her the wrapper.

Suddenly, they hear a scream.

Kirsten drops the crackers, and both girls start crashing through the woods toward the source of the noise. It's

Boggle & Sneak

Alby, with his legs kicking the air, high off the ground. Evidently, his locks have dried. They have seized the opportunity to snake upward, grab an overhanging tree branch, and pull Alby off his feet and into the air.

His face is red. He is swinging his arms, trying to catch hold of the branch so he can take some weight off his scalp.

Kirsten wrestles his locks free of the branch, and holds them in a knot in her fist while she lowers Alby down and lets him catch his breath.

“Alby had the right idea, cutting hers off,” he mutters.

Kirsten can feel the locks flexing in her hand, but she has a strong grip and doesn't let go.

Lisa has found a sodden piece of string in her dress pocket, and she helps Kirsten bind the locks into a single frustrated bundle. Alby pats his hair warily. “Well, I guess that answers that,” he says. “When they felt the pull, they

Boggle & Sneak

didn't have time to mess with me. I guess they've lost it."

"Maybe if we get out somewhere high," Kirsten says, surveying nearby trees for their climbing potential.

"Easy for you to say," Alby says. "I've had enough of heights for a few minutes."

Lisa looks at him apologetically, and puts him in her pocket. "If we want to find Alvy..." she says.

She grabs a low branch, and swings her legs up. Alby hangs on. She gets up to the next branch, and Kirsten swings up from the ground, following.

"Do we all need to go?" Alby asks. "Shouldn't somebody stay down to catch us when we fall?"

Lisa, fairly high in the tree by now, tests a branch with her toe, and decides it's a bit too small. They've climbed as high as they can in this tree. "Ready?" she asks.

Boggle & Sneak

Alby shrugs helplessly. There isn't another way.

Lisa steadies herself, and shucks off the string one-handed. Alby's locks pause, considering, and then whip painfully around Lisa's wrist and lever Alby out of her pocket until he is upside down, rigidly tethered to Lisa's wrist. Alby and Lisa both yelp in pain.

Kirsten, on the limb below, is too far away to help. "Alby, you okay?" she asks.

Between the pain and the indignity, Alby can only sputter.

Lisa, for her part, is trying to figure out how she can get a hand free to work on the locks without losing her grip and falling out of the tree. She decides that she's going to have to climb down out of the tree with Alby still attached, and worry about removing him once she's on the ground. "Sorry," she says, and reaches a foot down. Kirsten sees what she's doing, and tries to get herself down and out of the way.

Boggle & Sneak

Alby just grits his teeth and holds on. Lisa swings down off the limb and onto the ground, jarring Alby and making him gasp in pain. Kirsten rushes up and pries him loose.

The girls retie the locks into a paralyzed bundle.

Alby is fuming. “Any other bright ideas?” he snaps. “Maybe you could just throw me out of the tree and see what happens.”

“Maybe if we were out on the water,” Kirsten says. “Maybe that would cut down on interference.”

“I’m not going out there again,” Alby says, stubbornly jutting his chin. “That was cold, remember?”

“She means in a boat,” Lisa says.

“Right,” Alby says, “just float me out there in one of your shoes. My hair and the laces should get along great.”

“We could build a birch-bark canoe,” Kirsten says. “At least an ugly, floppy one.”

Boggle & Sneak

“We would have to have something to sew with,” Lisa objects. “And something to seal the seams with. It would take us until fall.”

“How about a dugout,” Kirsten says. “We’ve got the fire. Maybe we could hollow out a log by burning it. Since we are stuck in the Stone Age.”

Alby and Lisa frown at her.

“You got anything better?” she asks.

They continue to frown, but don’t offer up other alternatives.

“Okay then,” Kirsten says. “Let’s go look for logs.”

Shaking their heads, Lisa and Alby walk slowly off into the woods.

Kirsten starts off along the shoreline, looking for fallen trees. This time it’s Lisa who calls out.

“Hey,” she yells, “come look at this!”

There is some rustling and crashing while Kirsten and Alby try to get over to where Lisa is. Lisa is looking at a leafy, muddy mound, which gradually resolves

Boggle & Sneak

itself into an old-style Volkswagen Beetle, incongruously parked here in the woods, far from any road. Its wheels are straddling a canoe-sized fallen tree trunk.

“There’s your log,” Lisa says. “I guess that’s what stopped the car.”

“Pretty funny car for off-road,” Alby says, but the girls ignore him. They are busy checking out the condition of the car. It doesn’t look good. The tires are shredded, the hood is crumpled, and the body is eaten with rust.

“Planning to make this fly?” Alby asks.

“No, but it might float,” Kirsten says.

Lisa nods, smiling.

“Great,” Alby says. “Let’s carry it over to the water.”

“Quit pouting, and help us think about this,” Lisa says. “It doesn’t look easy to roll.”

“Maybe if we had some skids,” Kirsten says, “we could slide it?”

Boggle & Sneak

Alby tries to picture the three of them pushing or pulling a car. “Got any salt?” he says. “Maybe we could attract a herd of deer to help pull.”

“Or squirrels,” Kirsten says. “Lots of squirrels.”

Lisa has stalked off, climbing up over the rise and following the sound of running water. There’s a small creek running over rocks in a curving path down to the lake. She looks back the way she has come, down toward the stranded Volkswagen.

“Hey,” she yells, “I’ve got a better idea.”

Kirsten and Alby come to join her, and Kirsten quickly sees what she means.

Both girls start gathering armloads of brush and dumping them into the creek. Most of the brush washes downstream. Alby points a finger at a tall downed birch sapling, and the girls drag it over and dump it across the stream. Its

Boggle & Sneak

branches reach in and down, and up and out.

The girls bring more brush, which washes and catches in the birch tree's branches. It's hard work, and the girls are soon muddy and covered with twigs.

The creek widens slightly behind the girls' growing dam.

Alby walks off for a few minutes. When he returns, he directs the girls to another downed birch tree, and they drag it over and add it to the pile. The dam is growing pretty dense now, and the water is stacking up behind it, forming a small pond. The girls eyeball it.

"Maybe one more tree?" Kirsten says.

Alby goes and finds them another tree. They drag it, scraping and snagging across the ground, and lay it crown to crown with the first tree, forming a huge, curving wall.

The water rushes under and around this third tree, but with another dozen

Boggle & Sneak

armloads of brush, the pond begins to fill, and a thin trickle of creek water begins to run down toward the Volkswagen.

The three of them walk down, well to the side, to wait and watch. It's a long wait, the leaves and grass around the car slowly rustling and stirring and flowing, and another small pond forms on the uphill side of the log under the wheels of the car, but eventually the log and car together rock slightly, and begin to slide—slowly at first, then faster—stopping and starting and stopping, as the water and mud push them down toward the lake.

A final surge carries them forward, and the log and car splash into the lake and then sit there, beached on the rocks.

The girls scramble down to take a closer look.

“Hard to say,” Kirsten says.

“Here,” Lisa says, and she darts up onto the bank and brings back a long branch the size of a pole.

Boggle & Sneak

The two girls together try to lever the Volkswagen out of the shallows.

“Why are we messing with the car, again?” Alby asks.

But the girls give a final heave, and the car totters, tips, and splashes over on its side in a deep spot, then rights itself and begins to bob out into the lake.

“Quick!” Lisa says, and the girls wade in deeper, catch the car by the bumper, and drag it back before it gets out of reach.

“Here’s our boat,” Lisa says.

* * *

It’s a bit of a struggle to get the car dragged into shallow enough water to be able to get the doors open. In any case, only one of the doors opens at all; the passenger side door appears to be stuck permanently shut. When they get the driver’s side door open, Alby and the girls pile in and shut it behind them, only to realize that this means the car is stranded in shallow water on its rims. Someone will

Boggle & Sneak

need to get out. After a brief exchange of glances, Lisa slides across the other two and climbs out, shutting the door behind her. She's going to have to paddle. She does a quick search for the flattest, whitest piece of driftwood she can find, then wades back out into the chilly water with the paddle under her arm. She puts her shoulder against the car, and shoves. It grates across the gravel and begins to bob. She takes a splashing running start, and bounds up over the submerged bumper and onto the roof of the car, where she sits cross-legged on the sunroof and tries to reach the water with the paddle.

She finds it works best if she lays herself flat, reaches way out, and sculls the paddle in the water. She doesn't have a lot of control this way, but she's got the car moving out away from shore.

Alby and Kirsten are looking up at her anxiously. The car does appear to be watertight, and they can see the surface of

Boggle & Sneak

the lake level with the bottoms of the windows.

There is a gentle breeze, but it doesn't seem to be able to get a grip on the exposed portion of the VW, so Lisa has a slow but fairly easy time rowing. About a hundred yards offshore, she takes a break and knocks on the sunroof, startling Alby and Kirsten out of their hypnotized enjoyment of the gentle boat ride. Lisa points toward shore, widens her eyes, and shrugs. Kirsten reaches up and tries to open the sunroof. It's stuck. Lisa shifts her weight around until she's straddling the sunroof, and then Kirsten tries again. This time, it opens. When it gets all the way open, Lisa reaches down to try to grab Alby, who is being held up by Kirsten. The stretch causes her to lose her footing, and she tries to catch herself but drops one leg down the sunroof, and then all of her tumbles in after it, squashing Alby and Kirsten, and causing the car to tilt violently to one side, which dips the

Boggle & Sneak

sunroof under the surface for a moment, and they all get soaked again.

Alby is unhurt, and when they get themselves untangled, Lisa stands on the seat, quickly frees his hair, and holds him aloft, one-armed.

Alby's locks foing out horizontally, pointing toward land, and he smiles with relief.

"That white tree," Alby says, pointing. The girls' heads are also out of the sunroof, and they look, and see what he means. Lisa winds his locks tightly and hands him down to Kirsten, who sets him on the seat. Then Lisa climbs back out, straddles the sunroof until Kirsten gets it closed, then begins to paddle.

Thirteen

Alvy hums as she works. *This is going to be a big fish!* She had started with the spine, gently bending a long, thick branch, then had spent a happy hour hunting down appropriately-sized curved sticks to use for ribs, laying them out along the spine to get the relative sizes correct. Then she had used her shovel to chop down an armful of grass stems the length of her forearm, and now she was carefully using the stems to tie the ribs in place along the spine, holding the spine down with one foot and pulling up hard on the ends of each stem to draw each knot down tight. It was coming together rather nicely, and she was enjoying both of the art of it and the hard muscle work in the warm sunshine. It wasn't clear that the tail was going to look quite right, but then this was only improv.

She puts a finishing touch on the approximate skull and stands back to take

Boggle & Sneak

a look. Yes, that should do nicely. She climbs in and crouches in the body of the skeleton, gauging the clearance of the ribs above her head. Really, this is turning out to be one of her best efforts. Alby would be proud. She frowns, thinking of her brother, and hopes he isn't worrying too much. She shakes the thought aside and steps out. *Now I need a skin.* She walks along the edge of the shoreline, carefully scrutinizing the piles of driftwood and debris. *There. That looks perfect.*

She stretches out her hands and gathers up a faded but intact bread bag that has washed or blown in from who knows where. The size looks just about right. She hikes back over to her skeleton with her armload of bread bag. It is quite a struggle pulling the bag over the skeleton's head all the way down over the tail, and when she is done, the bag, worn looking and sloppy, hides her masterpiece skeleton, making it look like a great flabby heap. But there is no helping that. She

Boggle & Sneak

lifts the light but ungainly bag-mass over to the fire, then sets it down and edges it nearer to the flames. At a certain point, the thin plastic begins to melt and shrink, pulling tight against the twig bones until they protrude slightly. Then she snatches the fish away and turns it, roasting it carefully until the skin is taut all over, a misshapen but recognizable trout with garish orange and pink dots and blobs.

Now for the tricky part. She has laid out two nearly-identical sticks almost exactly her height, and she holds one immediately above the fire's flames until its bark begins to smoke. Then she uses the smoking stick to stab the trout in the ribs, stretching the plastic deep into the wound without causing large tears. She leaves the stake in place, then deliberately repeats the procedure on the other side of the fish. It seems successful; there are no noticeable holes except the remaining unshrunken mouth of the bag flapping past the fish's tail. Perfect. She carries the

Boggle & Sneak

fresh fish wobbling down to the water, and sets it in nose-first. She smiles broadly.

This is going to be fun!

She lifts the bag and crawls inside the fish. Visibility isn't great. At best, the clear sections of the bag had turned cloudy when the plastic shrank, but she can still make out objects as if through greasy glass.

She tucks the mouth of the bag in after her and ties it off as best she can. It looks like it ought to hold. Then she rocks the fish gently from side to side, pulling carefully on the oars, until the bank lets go of the tail and she began to float. The round sticks do not make ideal oars, but the fish floats, and it flops forward, deeper into the water of the inlet. *It would be ironic, she thinks, if the thief took the land route and sprung the wire trap now while she is out here on the lake, but it is good to be moving in a vehicle of her own design. It has been too long.*

Boggle & Sneak

She rows steadily, and the trout makes its way out into the center of the little lagoon.

Now then, if I were a fish thief... She allows the trout to drift. *Is there really anything to see out here?*

She hears the faint throbbing of an engine in the water. *Amazing, how sound carries.* The throbbing gets louder, resolving into the steady chop chop chop of... what? A ship's propeller? She rows with one arm, turning the trout, and tries to get a full view of her surroundings. She sees a huge shadow looming nearby, and the chop chop chop becomes intense. She stirs the water vigorously, trying to get a perspective on the source of the noise. Out of the murky section of the bag on the bottom of the fish, just past her thigh, she catches a glimpse of a large translucent moving object. Another bagfish? She swirls the oar. The object is big and appears to be hourglass shaped. *There*

Boggle & Sneak

aren't jellyfish in the Great Lakes, are there? Certainly none with motor noise...

The thing is moving fast and changing direction, zigzagging beneath her. She drops the oar and presses her face against the belly of the fish, hoping to get a better view of the thing's next pass. There! In the rear half of the hourglass—a flash of scales. The body of the hourglass is a mesh of something. Netting? Is it some kind of fish trap?

The thing reaches the end of a pass and doubles back, this time closer to her depth. Time to row.

She beats at the water, producing plenty of bubbles but not a lot of motion. *Really, now.* That thing is bearing down fast!

There is a sudden tearing sound, and Alvy's fish is ripped free of the water and up into the air. She scrambles around the careening fish on her hands and knees, trying to find a window that

Boggle & Sneak

points upwards, so she can try to get a clue of what's going on.

The fish is being carried by some kind of large bird—*an osprey?*—and other bird shapes are closing in. It's a flock of gulls, harassing the osprey. *Are all birds like this? Can't a guy eat his fake fish in peace?* The gulls are beating the air around the osprey and diving at it.

The osprey drops the fish to pick up speed, and Alvy is falling out of the sky. She is arrested by the beak of a gull with no sense of proportion—her fish is almost as big as it is—and the gull flaps clumsily for a few seconds above—*is that a road?*—and then spits her out.

Alvy and her fish flop out of the sky, head-over-tail, side-over-side, and finally slap down into the bed of a speeding pickup truck. They tumble a few more times and come to rest against the tailgate. The fish crinkles softly in the wind.

* * *

Boggle & Sneak

Alvy lies still for a long time, no longer able to ignore all her bruises. She's grateful now for all the breaks in the bag letting fresh air in, and she lets the air blow over her, not moving, hoping she hasn't broken too many bones.

She doesn't try to move again until the truck slows, turns, rolls down some bumps, and finally stops. The doors open and shut, and the bed of the truck rolls a little on its springs as people get out.

She peels herself out of the mashed fish. All of her seems mostly to work, so she climbs up on the wheel well and peeks over the edge.

She's in a campground. Nobody appears to be looking her way. She heaves herself out and over, falling a long way, and rolling on the landing. She darts over into a patch of weeds and sits down to look around some more and take stock. On a picnic bench in the nearest campsite is a bag of Cheetos. It's good to be back in civilization! She verifies that there is

Boggle & Sneak

another weed patch on the far side, then dashes through, leaping high and snagging the Cheetos as she goes by, then dragging the bag behind her as she sprints back into the weeds. Ah, Cheetos. Life is sweet.

She takes an enormous mouthful of Cheeto and comes away with powdery orange grease covering her nose and ringing her eyes, but she doesn't care. She's been starving for a night and day, but now she has a whole sack of Cheetos, food of the gods. She's going to need something to drink pretty soon, though.

She takes another bite of Cheeto and looks out.

Two pairs of campers pass each other, one pair carrying a cooler between them.

"They are out of smelt," one of the men with the cooler says, "but they think they'll have some in the morning." He jerks a thumb toward the edge of the campground.

Boggle & Sneak

Alvy drops her Cheeto. This might be worth checking out. She waits for the campers to pass, then darts out and runs to the next patch of weeds. Ahead of her is a blue wooden-sided building. She runs up to it, presses close to the wall, and sticks her head around the corner. There is no one in sight, but she has a wide expanse of parking lot to cross, unless she can reach—she sprints again—that tree. There's another tree, and then she can see the sign over the back door of the fish market. Well, this is a predicament. She's hiding against the trunk of this tree, with the beach on one side, parking lots on the other and plenty of places to hide—there are empty crates and boxes stacked up behind the fish market— but she's tired, she's thirsty, and she may have to wait until morning to see who will be delivering the smelt. She would just as soon be somewhere more comfortable, or at least somewhere she can get a drink of water.

Boggle & Sneak

Across the way, she sees a woman walking up to the blue building. Well, it's worth a try, but she'll have to get back over there.

She plots out a route with a few patches of grass the height of her shoulder and decides to move slowly and take her chances. Don't fast-moving objects capture attention anyway?

She saunters slowly along the strip of grass, even slower across a strip of bare gravel, and practically oozes back against the blue building. She thinks she passed the door on this end when she was going by a minute ago. And here it is!

She leans against the door, and it opens a crack, just enough for her to squeeze through. It's dim in here, and quiet. Boats and the frames of boats hang in the rafters. She feels homesick for her workshop.

At the far end of the open space is a sink. Too high to reach, but if she climbs up on these books here... and from there

Boggle & Sneak

onto this bench... then she can get up onto the table... and jump from the table onto this counter here... and then it's a short walk over to the sink.

She pushes against the faucet handle with both palms and turns on a trickle of water. She hops down into the sink and enjoys the tall waterfall, then holds out her hands and drinks delicious mouthfuls of cold water, washing the remaining orange crumbs off her face. It takes several slippery flying leaps to get hold of the lip of the sink and pull herself back out. She shoves the faucet shut, climbs up a fishnet, walks out onto a rafter, then lies down to wait for nightfall.

Fourteen

As before, it's not too hard to get the Volkswagen to move, but accurate steering is a whole different matter. Although Lisa is trying hard to keep the car heading toward the white tree, she is soon forced to be glad that she's heading toward shore at all, and she gives up on accuracy.

When the Beetle finally lands, they are completely out of sight of the white tree. It's around off to the north someplace. They'll have to go and find it.

Kirsten shoves open the driver's door, and water floods into the car, which sways slightly, then settles down a little.

Kirsten passes Alby to Lisa, who carries him to shore. Lisa's arms and shoulders are sore from all that rowing. They start to walk north, hoping they'll be able to get a vantage point that looks anything like what they saw from out on the lake. Off in the woods, they catch a

Boggle & Sneak

glimpse of the tufted ears and tail of something stalking between trees.

“Hey, a lynx!” Lisa says. “Dad’s always talking about those.”

“We could probably get a closer look,” Kirsten says. “We’ve got bait.”

“Hey,” Alby says, “this is the great North Woods. You never know what could be hiding in those trees. Maybe you girls are the bait.”

“It’s a beautiful summer day,” Lisa says. “Warm, sun shining. Perfect for ghost stories.”

Alby ignores her.

“You would think that monsters only come out at night,” he says. “But the really dangerous ones—the really scary ones—only come out on perfect days like this. They wait for days like this, because that’s when you least expect—”

They didn’t even see it coming—the brown blur that darted out and pulled Alby off his feet and dragged him toward the line of trees. Some kind of big weasel?

Boggle & Sneak

Both girls immediately give chase, yelling and waving their arms.

The marten drops Alby and disappears up a tree.

The girls run up to Alby, who is scraped up and gasping for breath. He puts his head in his hands, and the girls give him some room. Then he looks up. “We’ve got to find her,” he says.

* * *

They have almost given up hope when they finally spot the white tree. They reach its trunk and stare up at the bare limbs.

“Well?” Kirsten says.

“I’ll do it,” Alby says, gritting his teeth. He unties his locks. They tense and writhe slowly, seeming confused. Alby folds his arms, waiting for the locks either to point a direction or else tie him in a painful pretzel-knot. They continue to writhe. “I’ve never seen them do that before,” Alby says. “I wonder what it’s supposed to mean.”

Boggle & Sneak

He cautiously starts to pull them together and tie them up. The locks don't resist, which is alarming. He ties the knot tightly and looks at Kirsten for a decision. "I guess we follow the bearing," she says, and stalks off into the woods. Lisa and Alby follow.

After a few minutes, they come to the road. Lisa puts Alby down into a pocket, where he makes a weird bulge. They wait for a string of cars to pass, then jog across and try to spot a route up the steep hill beyond. It's going to be a long climb.

Alby actually has the easiest time of it, running from rock to rock. The girls follow him, stepping on the same rocks, but the rocks tend to roll under the girls' feet and tumble down the hillside. Alby still looks grim, bounding on ahead of the girls, hoping they're getting close, hoping for some sign. Then there is a loud snap.

The string around Alby's hair breaks, and his locks stand out from his

Boggle & Sneak

head in a spiky bouquet. Alby freezes, darting his eyes around, hoping there's something to see.

“Up there,” Kirsten points.

On a ledge immediately above them, there's a tall pine, and high in the pine they can see a nest.

Alby runs up a narrow ravine and pokes his head over, then runs up the rest of the way. The girls can see the tops of his crazy locks bobbing above the lip of the ledge.

Lisa holds out her hands in a stirrup and boosts Kirsten up, then Kirsten holds out an arm and pulls, and Lisa scrambles up after her.

Alby is over by the foot of the tree, staring at something. The ground around him is littered with feathers and eagle droppings, fish scales and broken bones. Partly covered by debris is a shape that looks neither fish nor bird. It's a hat.

Alby starts to sprint, pouring on a remarkable burst of energy, dashing his

Boggle & Sneak

body into the trunk of the pine, clawing with hands and feet at the bark, scrambling straight up like a demented squirrel. There is a high scream and a sudden shadow. The eagle dives toward Alby, and all his locks dive toward the eagle with such force that they carry him away from the tree and into the air where he falls, windmilling, and Lisa snatches him up just before he hits the ground.

Both girls jump from the ledge and bend their knees in anticipation of the impact. Lisa lands badly and cries out in pain.

The eagle's arc carries it back high into the sky, and it circles, watching. Lisa tries to take a step and crumples to the ground. Kirsten, looking over her shoulder at the eagle, offers Lisa a hand, and pulls her back to her feet, helping her a few steps down the slope and under the branches of a birch. The eagle is soaring away, disappearing.

Boggle & Sneak

Alby is no longer ahead of them, so they turn and look. He's just standing there, locks twisting above him, looking up at the sky where the eagle had been.

Fifteen

Alvy wakes up just as the sun is going down. She sits up, stiff from lying on the bare rafter. It's completely silent except for a low murmur from the campground and the quiet splash of the waves. She climbs down the net by feel and drops onto the counter, then decides she wants another drink of water. This time she remembers to push a plastic cup into the sink ahead of her, to make sure she has something to climb up on so she can get back out.

After her drink and a quick wash, she creeps down her ladder of objects, hurries across the length of the room, and squeezes out the crack in the door.

The trip across the open space between the parking lot and the dock is much easier in the dark. There's a large dog sniffing off in the shadows of the dock, but either it's downwind of her or else just

Boggle & Sneak

doesn't care. It ignores her completely as she passes by.

There's a truck idling out back of the fish market. Curses! Has she missed the delivery? Is it going on right now?

She runs across a wedge of shadow toward the stack of discarded crates and boxes. Suddenly she finds herself flying forward, and she tumbles to the ground. Her foot has caught in something. She picks herself up and tries to untangle her foot. She has stepped into a short coil of fishing line, broken at one end, with a lead sinker tied to the other.

There is movement on the other side of the market's back door. She creeps carefully to the stack of boxes, winding up the fishing line as she goes. She drops the line and sinker into a pocket, and then pulls herself up and finds a vantage point in deep shadow, on top of a wooden crate against the market's cedar siding.

A man pushes out the door backward, his arms wrapped around an

Boggle & Sneak

evidently heavy cardboard carton.

Another man follows, walking forward, supporting the other end of the carton.

“All the fishermen up here are a little weird,” the first man says, “but not like this. I’ve never even met the guy. We just keep exchanging notes like we’re in grade school or something.”

They lower the carton carefully to the ground.

“And I don’t know what’s up with this barter arrangement. I could pay him money, but I guess this is what he wants.”

The man opens the door, and steps back so the other man can pass ahead of him.

“Well,” he continues, “he can get smelt when nobody else can, and it’s always fresh.”

The door swings shut, muffling the men’s voices.

Alvy settles down, making herself comfortable for the long wait ahead. She wishes she could make out the lettering

Boggle & Sneak

on the carton, but she doesn't want to be down on the driveway when the men come back out.

It turns out this is a good decision, because the door immediately swings back open, and the men walk out, now wearing light jackets. They get into the idling truck and slowly drive up the driveway, crunching gravel.

Alvy waits and listens to the silence descend. When she's sure everything is completely still, she climbs down off her crate and over to the carton. The letters are large enough to read even in the dim glow of the distant security lights, but they seem only to contain an unfamiliar manufacturer's name and handling instructions, with no clue to the nature of the crate's contents.

She climbs onto the carton and makes a halfhearted effort to pull it open, but the glue holds and she quickly gives up and returns to her perch by the wall. The quiet deepens. Cars pass

Boggle & Sneak

occasionally, and indistinct voices float up the hill on the other side of the market.

Finally all sound dies away, and Alvy is alone with the motion of the water, some lost moths, and the whine of a single indifferent mosquito.

Her legs begin to get sore.

* * *

Something about the shadows rearranges itself. A portion of the dark darkens. Alvy shifts in her seat. A huge box-shape is coming down from the sky.

She gets to her feet. The box settles down onto the driveway, squeaking softly and unpleasantly as it lands. Styrofoam! But that doesn't explain the descent from above.

She squints up, trying to see. There's something big up there, blocking out the stars, but she can't bring it into focus.

There's a soft pop, and something breaks free from the top of the big

Boggle & Sneak

styrofoam box and swings over toward the cardboard carton the men brought out.

She starts to scramble down to get closer, no longer worried whether or not she's making noise. The swinging object is a large black puck. The puck wavers slightly, then sticks fast to the carton and begins to lift it into the air. Alvy jumps for it, and sends the carton swinging on the end of its invisible tether, but she fails to get a grip, and falls, sprawling, as the carton rises above her.

Now that she has some idea what she's looking for, she thinks she can make out a dark balloon hovering high above the fish market. The balloon is beginning to move to the side—perhaps it's being pulled?

She hears a clatter and a curse from up on the roof. The roof! She begins to run, and vaults up on the stack of boxes, causing the stack to sway alarmingly. The balloon is drifting above her, moving up and over the market. Her last leap causes

Boggle & Sneak

a box to topple and start a noisy avalanche, but she throws herself up and out, catching herself on a drain pipe. She clambers up onto the roof, where she can see a small dark shape disappearing over the far edge.

She sprints across the roof and sees the shape drift lazily to the ground. The shape has arms and legs, and moves in impossible, graceful bounds.

There is no obvious route to the ground on this side of the roof, but there's a weedy pine nearby. It is unacceptable that she should lose sight of the carton or the boulder towing the balloon, so she throws herself desperately in the direction of the tree and claws at the air, hoping to snag a branch. Dry needles burn across her palms, and she falls, bouncing from branch to branch, each branch slowing her and stinging her until she reaches the lowest one, and then she falls the remaining distance onto an ugly flat bush.

Boggle & Sneak

She collects herself and begins to dash toward the boulder.

She pulls her fishing line out and into motion, hoping the line doesn't tangle too badly, letting the sinker fly toward the boulder. The loops of line uncoil and then suddenly snag, twisted around her arm. She cries out in frustration, running clumsily, looking down at the mess around her arm. Then the line pulls taut, and she's jerked roughly into the air. The other end of the line has miraculously snagged the boulder who, Alvy can see, is slapping feverishly at the tangle on the other end.

The boulder touches down, and then, painfully, Alvy does too, crashing and dragging along the ground. Then the boulder is off and up again, towing Alvy behind. Alvy's extra weight is making each bound shorter, less graceful.

"Stop!" Alvy yells, trying to twist any slackness in the line around her arms and shorten the distance between them.

Boggle & Sneak

The bounder, angry, makes each jump harder and higher, but with each landing, Alvy, now a twisting nebula of hopelessly snarled and knotted fishing line, is barreling up closer, now a twisting nebula of hopelessly snarled and knotted fishing line. Soon Alvy is close enough to reach out a badly scraped and bruised arm and grab the bounder by the fabric of the bounder's suit.

She's surprised to confirm that the bounder is her own size and approximate shape, if seemingly heavier and strangely muscled. The bounder slaps at her hands a few times, then eventually slows, bobs to a stop, and turns to glare at Alvy. Alvy looks into the bounder's angry eyes and realizes she's looking at a girl, about her own age.

"Get off me," the girl says.

Alvy tries to speak but finds her voice muffled by the cloud of nylon. She shrugs hard, trying to get her face clear of

Boggle & Sneak

the line. “Was that you, with the fish trap?” she asks.

The girl continues to glare. “What do you want?”

“The trap scared me to death,” Alvy says. “It’s a nice design, though.”

The girl has started searching through her pockets, looking for something.

Now that she’s up close, Alvy can see that what she had taken for muscle is actually part of the girl’s suit. She glances up at the balloon, and suddenly gets it. “Ballast?” she asks. “Nice!”

The girl now has a small knife out, and she’s sawing away at the loops of fishing line. The severed segments fall to the ground around their feet. “You still haven’t told me what you want,” she says.

“Alvy,” Alvy says, holding out her hand.

The girl looks at Alvy’s hand for a couple of seconds, then relaxes a little, snaps her knife closed, and takes Alvy’s

