

ASTRID BLODGETT

# **THE NIGHT THE MOON WAS BRIGHT AND WE ATE PIGS AND BROWNIES AND DRANK FIZZY BEER AND DIDN'T REMEMBER MUCH AT ALL, IN THE END**

WE DROVE TO THE CAMP on a Thursday. The next morning we took our tent down and drove to another place to camp. It wasn't what I thought, Mom said, when we were all in the car. I mean, I had an idea. But not that. Dad laughed and said, Oh, you knew. You don't go to a thing like that and not know.

I sat beside Evan in the back seat. He smelled like smoke and sweat and yesterday's beer.

We camped somewhere else the night before and got to the pig camp in the morning. It wasn't a normal campground, with separate sites for everyone. It was a big clearing in the middle of the woods in the middle of nowhere. Dad drove right into the clearing and stopped. It was a tent village there, in the clearing.

Holy! Evan said. Lookit all the tents! Is there room for ours?

There'll be room, Dad said. There's always room. That's how these parties are. We'll all be piled on top of each other. Like pigs in a pen, ha ha. Hey, I hear they got two little pigs. They'll roast faster.

Mom said she was not going to watch the pigs cook. She couldn't bear to see a pig run through with a spit. It looked too much like a human baby. She would go for a long walk instead. With Marlene.

Do you see Marlene and Bill? Mom asked.

I saw a girl by the fire pit over in the middle of all the tents. She was about my age. Eleven.

Not yet, said Dad. Bill's probably stocking up at the liquor store. There's Arnie, over by the fire.

You can count on Arnie to be making the fire, Mom said. He likes to keep himself busy, doesn't he.

Hey, there's some boys, Evan said. Up in that tree.

How long are we staying? I asked. Because we never stay long enough. We just get to know the campground and then we have to leave.

A few nights, Mom said. Over the weekend probably.

Good, I said.

Dad backed the car over the grass between two tents and stopped. We were going to put up our tent right there, beside the car.

I can tell you what she looked like because she stood right next to me and Arnie when Arnie opened a beer. Half the beer fizzed out over the top. He made a face at the beer like something was wrong with it and his eyes flicked from me to her and back to me again. Flick, flick.

Here, kid, he said.

He handed me the half-empty bottle and went for another. I don't know why me and not her, but I took the beer anyway and looked over at my tent before I had any. It felt a bit funny. I had beer and she didn't. We were pretty much the same. Her hair was just like mine, brown and tangled, summer hair. But she looked into the fire pit like we weren't there. Her eyes were closed a little, as if her eyelids were heavy. Her glasses slid down her nose, and her mouth hung open a bit. She was bony and her bones were hard. Her shirt was too loose and her jeans looked too big. Because she was skinny. Her jeans had a belt, a thin pink one with a butterfly for a buckle. I wanted that buckle.

Cute, Arnie said to me. You're cute. It didn't really mean anything, the way he said it, but I waited for him to say, You, too, or something like that to the girl, and when he didn't I expected her to pipe up, I'm here too, ya know, you blind or what? That's what I would have said. But she didn't say anything. She just looked into the fire pit like we weren't there.

Arnie had a beard, longish and brown and a bit like wool, and hair pulled back in a ponytail and a small scar over his left eye. Behind him, next to his carton of beer, were three huge piles of firewood, organized by size: twigs, sticks, logs. I wanted to make a joke and ask if he was collecting wood

for the three bears, but then he would have to make one of us Goldilocks, her or me, wouldn't he.

I can tell you her name. Randi.

Arnie stuffed some crumpled newspaper into his tower of sticks, not the comics because I took them to read them later but something from the news. I never read the news anyway, he said, nothing worth reading in the news. It's all bad and it's all stuff I can't do anything about.

He knelt down and lit a corner of the paper. It flinched and curled and blackened. Red and blue flames shot up. He added to the tower, slowly, starting with more small sticks. Look it 'er go, he said. Look at 'er burn. He was so happy with his fire. Really happy. I backed up. I was wearing shorts, cut-offs from old jeans. I could already feel the fire on my skin.

I like a good fire, he said. I know what to do with a fire. I can just mind my own business here. Not get in anyone's way.

I was so thirsty I drank the beer in about five minutes. My whole face tingled.

Mom called and I dropped the empty beer bottle next to the carton and ran over to our tent.

Where on earth have you been? You can unpack the mats and the sleeping bags. Where's Evan? I could use a hand. Your dad's off drinking with Bill already. It's not even eleven! He'll be wasted before the pig is done! Sheesh. What a mess if he throws up in the tent. It already reeks.

I opened the mats and left them to inflate, then yanked the sleeping bags from their sacks and tossed them all into the tent.

I see you met Randi, Mom said. Sherry's daughter. Nice you found a friend.

She's not a friend, I said. She hasn't said one word to me.

There's food in that box, Mom said. If you want some lunch. I'm going for a walk with Marlene.

The next day, when we were taking down the tent, everybody looked funny. Even Mom and Dad. Mom wanted to camp somewhere else for the rest of the weekend. Nobody slept, she said. We can't stay here. There are

some unpredictable elements in the group, she said. Most everybody is fine. It just takes one, though.

Which one? I asked.

Pick one, she said.

Good grief, Dad said, it was just a pig roast.

Arnie was good at fires. He kept adding wood. He wanted coals, he told us. Coals make a cooking fire. There were two sets of metal spikes already set up for the spits to rest on.

Arnie stood with his legs a little apart. There was a rip in his jeans under one knee, going across, and another up near the crotch, going up and down, that I sneaked looks at when he wasn't looking, just to see what he was like in there. When he moved one leg I could almost see in. He had the hairiest arms I have ever seen. He watched the fire and drank beer.

Where's your tent? Who you with? Who's your mom and dad? Arnie asked. I pointed over in the direction of our blue and white dome tent. You could just see a bit of it.

Wendy and Greg, I said. And my brother Evan.

I got a brother, Arnie said. Back east. Bugger never calls. I coulda used his help a while back and he acted like I was dead. Good riddance to brothers everywhere, I say. Arnie took a long swallow of beer and I sneaked another peek. Nothing. Just some white cloth. Gonna be a helluva party tonight, he said and looked around at all the tents.

I counted fifteen. You could hardly walk without tripping over guy ropes.

Where's yours? Arnie asked Randi. She turned and pointed to an orange tent behind us. A pup tent, for two. Then she turned back to the fire.

Miranda! called someone from inside the tent. Randi didn't say anything, she didn't even turn to her tent, but I could tell it was her mom calling. When she said Randi's name, I had two thoughts. One. Miranda is a grown-up name for someone who is not a grown-up. Two. She should to go her mom.

I went off to find Evan.

This is what happened. We went to a pig roast and ate pig meat and brownies and watched the adults drink beer and talk funny. The next morn-

ing, we took down the tent and drove even further into the forest and set up our tent along the river where nobody else was camped. On the drive to the new camp I was thinking that probably nothing happened. Probably it was a long winding dream.

On the drive to the new camp Mom said: It wasn't what I thought. I mean, I had an idea. But not that. Oh, you knew, Dad said. You don't go to a thing like that and not know. Evan and I didn't look at each other. My arms were so sore I could barely lift them. Mom threw up her hands and said: They called it pig roast! That's what they do at pig roasts, Dad said. There was pig! I said. I ate pig! Mom yawned and said, Well. I could sleep for two days! She looked at me and said, Ali, you kept me awake half the night. How many of those hash brownies did you have? There was hash in those brownies? Evan asked. He looked both surprised and excited. I wish I'd known. I woulda had more! What's hash? I said. You tromped around the tent all night, Mom said. She laughed softly. I didn't tromp around the tent, I said. Dad hooted and said: You were all over us. He drove slowly and peered up at the snowy peaks through the gaps in the pines. There wasn't much in those brownies, he said to Mom. Unless Ali ate about twenty-five, she wouldn't have felt anything. You were probably sleepwalking, Mom said. I don't sleepwalk, I said.

Evan laughed, and nobody said anything more then. I could feel him looking at me. I wanted him to look at me. I wanted to see what he was thinking. To see if he was scared, too. Somehow we agreed, yesterday, not to say anything. I don't know how we did that without talking about it, but we did. We were afraid of those boys he met, Johnnie and Zach. Johnnie's words were stuck in my head: *You did it. You did it. I didn't touch her. No, sir.* The *No, sir* was especially stuck in my head, because he was so definite about it.

But I was mad at Evan, too. How could I not be mad at Evan?

This is what we did at the pig camp. After I helped Mom with the sleeping bags I went off to find Evan. He was way up in a poplar tree. I climbed up to him. But we got bored and we went back to our car and made peanut butter and jam sandwiches. We took our sandwiches and went from our tent past the fire pit where the pigs hissed and spluttered on the spits and then over to the tracks. The tracks were on the other side of the pines. We didn't go straight through the pines. We went way over to the left between a few tents and then into the trees to make it look like we were just going into the

woods in case anyone was looking. Then we doubled back to the tracks. One of the boys Evan met was there. Zach.

Look at this, Evan said. It was an old hand car. Look what we found, before.

The hand car was small. It was just big enough for four or five kids. The car was just wooden boards on top of rail car wheels. There was a lever in the middle. You could sit on either side or the front or the back. Evan and Zach sat on one side, dangling their legs. I sat on the back. We could see the fire pit and all the people.

Dad came through the trees with his friend Bill. Bill tipped his beer toward us and said, Look what you found.

That's a relic, Dad said. Looks like it's in great shape, though. Does it work?

Don't know yet, said Evan.

Don't go too far, Bill said. The pigs are coming along.

They went back to the fire pit.

Evan stood up and put his hands on the lever. She's a girl, Zach said. He didn't look at me. He didn't even move his lips when he talked.

She's my sister, said Evan. That meant I could stay. I could do whatever we were going to do.

We thought the tracks weren't being used. No one would leave an old hand car sitting on a track when a train might come along. It would be in the way of a train. And anyway we hadn't heard any trains all day.

You made the car go by pumping the lever. Evan and Zach and I took turns with the lever and rolled along the tracks a short way. It was hard work, especially going up a slope. The car never got going very fast and the lever was heavy and stuck so it took a ton of work to get it to go. We took lots of breaks.

You even like pig? Zach said after a while. We were stopped beside a slough. Zach had a bag of sunflower seeds that he didn't share. Every minute or so he'd pop a seed in his mouth and work it with his tongue, frowning the whole time, and then spit out the shell. He showed his tongue when he spat. It was fat, like a pig tongue.

Never had it, Evan said.

You have too, I said. Pork chops. Sausages. Ham. Ham is pig.

I mean pig roast pig, idiot, Evan said. My sister thinks she's so smart.

He had to say that because he was thirteen and Zach was older than us, fifteen or sixteen. Evan wanted Zach to think he was smart.

Zach spat shells. She's a girl, he said again. If Zach was my age, I would have said something but because he was older, and bigger, I pretended I didn't hear.

When we got back to where we'd started Mom and Marlene were there. They'd changed into their long hippie dresses, the ones with too much colour. The dresses meant that it was coming up to evening, the air was going to get cool soon and the bugs would come out.

Come on down off that, Mom said.

They're just sitting on it, Marlene said. Her words slid all around the way Dad's do when he's had too much beer. They're not going anywhere, she said.

Evan and I went back to the camp and grabbed food, handfuls of pretzels and carrot sticks and brownies, and went into another part of the woods, near the river, and ate and tossed pebbles into the water. Zach wasn't with us. After a while Evan and I went back to camp for more food. It was getting dark now and everybody had a drink and a smoke. Not cigarettes. Something they called weed that smelled like old dry mushrooms. Where's the weed? they said. Any more of that weed? Nobody spoke normally. Nobody looked straight at you. The adults thought everything was hilarious. And they were loud. There were empty beer bottles everywhere. The pigs had finished cooking a while ago and were on a picnic table, cut up. Evan and I ate pig meat and chips and white buns that we pulled the insides out of and squished into balls and rolled around in our mouths till they turned gluey. We could eat whatever we wanted because no one was checking. We could even take beer. Evan took one and drank half all in one go and then made a face and laughed and gave me the bottle and I had some too, maybe I finished it, maybe I had a long sip and gave it back. We went back to the tracks. We didn't even bother going the long way. The adults were too distracted. Kids were invisible.

Zach and the other boy Evan met earlier were there. Johnnie. Randi was there, too. I could tell that Zach and Johnnie had asked her to come by the way she stood near them, like she was with them and they were looking after her. Zach was the tallest and probably the oldest. He even had tiny black hairs on his top lip. Johnnie was shorter and chubby. They didn't look like boys you could get into any kind of conversation with. They weren't talkative. These boys just looked at you in a way that made you feel picked over and icky.

Randi couldn't hoist herself up onto the hand car. She tried, but she couldn't get up. The boys just watched. So I reached down and pulled her up.

It was like pulling up a big rag doll. She hardly weighed anything. I didn't know if she was my friend yet. But I wanted her to come. I didn't want to be the only girl.

Randi and I sat at the back. Zach and Johnnie were at the front. Evan stood and moved the lever. Whenever someone took a turn, the person who was at the lever took that person's place on the car.

We pumped along the stretch of track we'd gone down earlier and then back. When we passed the area near our camp, we looked through the trees toward the fire pit. Everybody was moving slowly and laughing. Somebody played a guitar, someone played a drum, somebody sang. People talked loudly. Some people were glommed together and touching each other all over and kissing and making funny sounds. Gross, Evan said. Gross. None of us wanted to be there. We made the car go the other way, into the pines, above the river. There was a long drop on one side. I sat very still when we moved past the drop. It was steep, not steep like a cliff but steep enough and mostly open, with bushes and rocks and big trees at the bottom. It was a long way down. We couldn't see where it ended.

It's getting dark, I said. I want to go back. I felt woozy. The moon peered at us over the tops of the pines, a big, worried face with scarred cheeks and a round O for a mouth.

We're going to stop here, Zach announced. Take a break. He stopped the car and hopped down. Randi jumped down beside him. Then Johnnie and Evan. They walked a few feet away toward the edge of the forest. I stretched out on my back, now that I had the hand car to myself. The sky was clear but it looked deep, like a swimming pool full of blue-black water. Stars began to pop out and dance. A star picked me up and I danced with it through all the other stars. When I said *Stop!*, the star set me back down. It wasn't that I wanted to stop. I liked dancing in the stars. It was that something wasn't right. It was too quiet.

I sat up. All the boys had their backs to me. They were facing Randi and making a wall between Randi and the hand car. They stood like Arnie, their legs spread into upside down Vs. Their hands were on their hips. I slid off the hand car and walked over.

When I was close, I could see Randi's face. Her eyes were huge. They didn't look normal.



Zach pushed at the butterfly clip on her belt and she took a few steps back and curled in a little. Like the newspaper, when Arnie lit it. Curled in and shrank.

C'mon, Zach said. We just want to see. Just give us a look.

What, you don't like us? asked Johnnie. The way he said it, nobody would like him.

Evan didn't say anything. He wanted to be like Zach and Johnnie. I could see it in the way he looked at them. In the way he tried to stand like them and turned up one side of his mouth. But he wasn't like those boys. He was just pretending.

You're cute, Zach said. Anybody ever tell you you're cute? That was what Arnie said, but Arnie wasn't creepy. He was just Arnie, and there were other adults all around. I knew that if I yelled for mom by the fire, she'd hear me. But nobody would hear us way out here. We were far away and the air was warm and thick and heavy and made everything slow. I was slow, too. I felt like a statue, stuck in sludge.

Hey, I said. Guys. Maybe there's dessert. Maybe there's cake. Let's go back.

The boys turned to me. Their eyes were bugged out and shiny.

Who's she? Johnnie said.

Evan looked at him but didn't say a word. I wanted to give him a punch.

His sister, dolt, Zach said finally.

Johnnie took a step toward me.

They don't want to play, Zach said. Let's go back.

Nobody moved.

I think they do, Johnnie said. Now I looked at Johnnie. His eyes were small and mean and he was smiling like somebody made a joke. It's a party! Johnnie yelled.

Something happened in Zach. No, he said, shaking his head, No, dude, let's go back. I told you, that's his *sister*.

Oh, that sucks, Johnnie said. He made a disgusting sucking sound and spat a huge glob of saliva onto the ground near his feet, then shuffled past me to the hand car. He was too fat to run. Last one on's a rotten egg! he yelled and hoisted himself up.

I ran over. Evan and Randi were right behind me. Randi put her hands on the car. C'mon, I said. I pulled her up and Zach got the car going.

Must be around midnight, Zach said after a minute. Anybody got a watch?

No, said Evan. But I bet the party's still on.

Of course it's still on, Zach said. It'll go till the sun comes up.

How do you know? I asked.

That's how these parties go. Don't even try to talk to any of the grown-ups tomorrow. They won't make any sense till after lunch. They sleep and sleep and sleep. Sometimes they end up in different tents or somewhere off in the woods or whatever. Sometimes they turn up, sometimes they don't. You'll see.

Johnnie's shoulders were slumped and he didn't say anything. He didn't help move the lever. Randi took a turn, but she could hardly get the car to move. You gotta pull your weight, Johnnie said, though she was. You can't have a free ride, he said. No one told him that he was getting a free ride. I could see he was still bothered. Johnnie turned and squinted at me and Randi. His shoulders twitched and his left leg shook. He was so heavy the whole car wobbled a little.

It took way longer going back. Maybe the dark made it seem so long. Or there was more uphill. Evan took a long turn, and then it was my turn. This was how we were: Johnnie and Zach in the front with their legs dangling down. Evan on the side, behind Johnnie. Me pumping. Randi at the back, partly behind Evan, partly behind me.

When we got to the drop, Johnnie stretched out slowly, even though there was no room to stretch out, and bumped into Evan just enough that Evan's shoulder bumped Randi. It was a little bump, hardly a bump at all, more like a tap, like a Hey, how's it going?, and she should have stayed where she was, anybody else would have just stayed put or grabbed onto something, she could have grabbed me or Evan or anybody, but she didn't. She fell off.

I can tell you what she looked like. Because she stood right next to me when Arnie opened a beer. Most of the beer fizzed out over the top. Did I say that already? Standing by the fire was the best part of the day. It was before I went on the hand car. Everything felt just right, by the fire. Maybe someone shook that beer. Or maybe it was just warm. Arnie made a face at the beer bottle. He made the face you make when you are puzzling over a complicated math problem. When you know you won't get it right away. You might get it

tomorrow or next week, but not right now. I wanted to tell him it was okay, because I know what that's like. He made the face and said, Bloody hell and then Oops, pardon my French and looked at us and said, Here, kid, and gave me the beer. His face looking like he was trying but still hadn't figured out whatever it was he wanted to figure out. It was funny, about the beer. Why me and not her? This is what we did: Arnie lit the fire and gave me his beer and I drank it and Mom called me to the tent and I went and later I ate pig and the next day we left the camp. That's what happened.

I saw her hand first, a hand up high, and then the hand was gone and her legs were in the air instead. There was the crack of a rock hitting a rock and then a snap like a dry stick breaking. She didn't cry or yell or say anything at all. She skidded over the rocks and the roots and the shrubs. Then she did a somersault. A slow somersault. She had time to yell or grab something. Anybody else would have. We all had time to do something, it was all so slow. But then she was through the trees at the bottom, I'm sure she got to the bottom, but it was too dark to see her.

She should have just come back up.

We kept going. No one said to stop. No one stopped the car. Johnnie looked at Evan and said loudly, You did it. You did it. I didn't touch her. No sir.

I pumped us over the crest of the hill and then we had another downhill. For a minute I didn't have to work hard. At the bottom of the hill was a long flat stretch and then another uphill. I could hardly move the lever anymore, but I took my turn. I took my turn so I wouldn't be pushed off. No way I was letting go of that lever now, not for anything. I pumped till I couldn't feel my arm and I kept going even though my arm was floppy and useless like a rag doll's. I looked at Evan, I wanted Evan to take a turn, but he was being like the big boys. He was just sitting there.

The moon was high and it shone down on us like a spotlight. Finally I heard the camp noises. They drowned out the squeaking of the lever. Guitars, drums, singing, howling like pretend wolves, laughing. And there was the light of the bonfire, sending sparks up.

I stopped the hand car and hopped off and ran fast to get away from Johnnie and Zach. I scooted between the dark shapes that were outside the light of the fire. People dancing. Smoking. Heads tipped back drinking. And

from tents, moaning sounds. Like people were sick maybe, from too much pig, maybe, or too much beer.

Hey, kid. Someone grabbed my arm. It was Arnie. He was still by the fire. He must have been there all day, feeding the fire and drinking beer. Hold up there, he said.

When I stopped I could feel my heart thumping in my chest. I wanted to ask him to tell me where I was on the hand car. How I knew her bones were so hard. How I felt them. How I knew how much of a bump it was, that it was a little tap, just a little tap on the shoulder, no more. I wanted him to ask why I didn't grab her even though there was time. He would know because she had been right here beside us in the morning and in the afternoon, she had been right here looking at the fire with her mouth open a little and her glasses slipping off her nose, she had been so close we could both touch her if we wanted to, but we didn't want to, did we, because she acted like we weren't even there, that was it. That was it. He would ask after her though, wouldn't he. Someone would ask. Soon, they would all ask.

What Arnie said was, Kid, long time no see! Where you been all this time? I've been all by my lonesome here, he said. Want a beer? He held one out to me. I shook my head and looked hard into his eyes, willing him to see everything that I had seen so someone else knew. So someone else could carry it. Here, he said, tipping the beer from side to side. Take it. There's more. Have a sip. It'll help you sleep through this ruckus.