

AS **EASY** AS **FALLING**
OFF THE FACE OF THE
EARTH

LYNNERAE
PERKINS

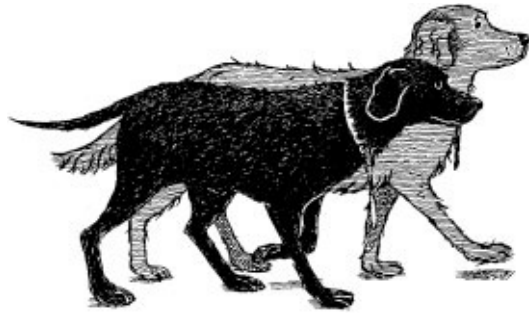
Winner of the Newbery Medal for *Criss Cross*

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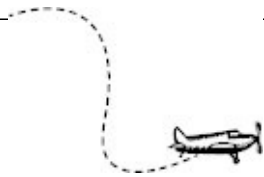
As Easy as Falling Off the Face of the Earth

 HarperCollins e-books





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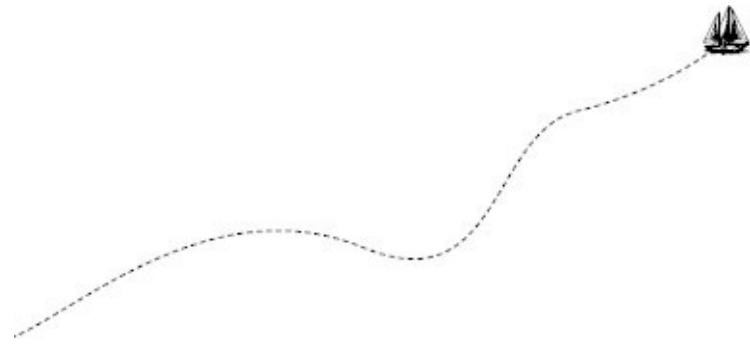
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WAIT

Wait a minute.

Was the—had the train just moved?

Ry turned his head to look at it straight on, but it sat on the tracks, as still as the lumpy brown hill he was climbing. As still as the grass that baked in gentle swells as far as he could see and the air in the empty blue sky.

He must have imagined it. Nothing had moved. Everything was the same.

But there it was again. Was it because he blinked? Maybe it was the water in his eyes; it had wobbled up his vision.

He picked out a post alongside the tracks, directly below the line where the logo on the train changed from red to blue. As he watched, the red and the blue shifted almost imperceptibly to the right above the post. Then perceptibly. The train was moving.

“Wait,” Ry said aloud.

Because it wasn't supposed to move yet. The conductor had said—the conductor had said forty minutes. Ry was supposed to be on the train. After a full second of hesitation, he went scrambling down the steep rubbled face of the hill. He was thinking that there was time, that trains usually move a little, in fits and starts, before they really got going. Probably he would get back on the train and then sit there waiting for another hour. But he was thinking it would be smarter to run than to watch it leave without him.

He was leaping and skidding, and he had just glanced up to check on the train when his right foot came down at the wrong angle on a surprise outcropping. He went tumbling in an out-of-control (but time-saving) way down to the scrubby thickets on the lower half of the slope.

Abraded and gravel encrusted, he rose in an instant to his feet. His boots had filled with pebbles and dirt. It felt as if beanbags were strapped to the bottoms of his feet as he thrashed through branchy turnstiles of brush in as straight a line as he could manage.

On his way up the hill, he had picked out a winding path through the wider spaces, but there wasn't time for that now. He no longer had to blink to see that the train was moving. It was passing before his eyes. People visible in the windows read their magazines, leaned back, lifted cups or cans to take a drink. His heart seemed to have moved inside of his windpipe. He willed it back down into his chest so he could keep breathing.

A small child saw him and waved. Ry waved, too, and shouted. His shout was lost in the roar of the train, but the boy beamed, delighted, before he turned away and was carried out of sight.

When Ry came to the barbed-wire fence, keeping who-knows-what in or out, he slowed himself to pay attention, to avoid snagging cloth or flesh. Still, he was over it in a flash, and running.

No one stood watching from the back of the caboose as he reached the clearing. There was no

caboose. The sound of the train faded, and he could hear his own deep gulps for air. He felt his heart thumping along.

The train melted from a recognizable object to a guessable shape to a black dot identifiable only by its position at the vanishing point of a set of railroad tracks. Ry watched the black dot until he could not see it at all. Though he breathed evenly now, and his heart was beating at its usual rhythm, it wasn't because he was calm. It was just that his body hadn't yet heard from his brain that they were in dire straits. Because his brain was still puzzling it out.

For many, many minutes he looked, unbelieving, at the empty air where the train had been. Then he turned in the other direction. It was a mirror image of emptiness, with an identical lesson in perspective. From either side of the tracks, more emptiness extended. There was the north emptiness, made of the strange eroded hills, and the south emptiness, with the grass and, in the distance, a blue-gray shape that must have been a butte.

The south emptiness had a shallow silty river, fringed sparsely with a few trees and bushes, flowing in rough parallel to the tracks. As his brain began to take in what had just happened, Ry's body walked over to one of the trees and sat down on a small boulder in its spotty shade. He untied his hiking boots, pulled them off, and held them upside down. The gravel and dirt spilled out like sands through the hourglass onto the geological time heap of wherever this was.

It felt good to have his shoes off. Ry pulled his socks off, too, and scooted himself around to where he could get his feet in the water. This was so nice that for half a minute, he forgot how he came to be sitting there. Then he remembered, and said some words. There was one word in particular that he said over and over and over. He said it until it didn't even sound like a word anymore. Until he felt almost calm. Then he said to himself, "It's not the end of the world," and that was true. It wasn't the end of the world at all. It might, though, be the middle of nowhere.

His backpack was traveling west in the overhead compartment of the air-conditioned train. No one would miss him for a while, or maybe ever; he had been careful about that. Now he looked at his watch again. Time was so weird. Exactly and only one hour had passed since he had opened that letter.

He had received the letter, with the yellow new-address forwarding sticker and "Urgent—important information" stamped on the envelope in red ink, several days ago. But it was like *Peter and the Wolf*, no, wait—it was like "The Boy Who Cried Wolf." The letters with "Urgent—important information" stamped in red had been arriving regularly from the camp director, and at first Ry would tear them open immediately. Inside, there would be a photocopied note reminding him to bring Gold Bond powder to prevent chafing, or to wear his boots for an hour every day to break them in, to study up on this or that epoch, or that the itinerary had been altered slightly due to unforeseen circumstances but don't worry, it would still be great.

The last one he had opened before this one had been kind of weird, he remembered that now, but to tell the truth, he hadn't read it that carefully. There was so much going on; the moving truck bringing the furniture, his grandfather arriving, his parents leaving for their trip. He tried to remember now what it had said. Because this one said only—he took it out of his pocket to read it one more time:

Dear Roy,

Do not come to camp. There is no camp. Camp is a concept that no longer exists in a real place or time.

We are so sorry. The Summer ArchaeoTrails Program will not take place. A statistically improbable

number of things have gone wrong and the camel's back is broken. Your money will be fully refunded as soon as I sell my car and remortgage my house.

We apologize for any inconvenience this may cause, blahblahblah. We hope to regroup and put together a bombproof program by next summer. Live and learn!

With deepest apologies, believe me,
(illegible scrawl)
Wally Osfeld

He almost hadn't opened it at all. He had come across it by accident, standing in the aisle reaching up into the overhead compartment, trying to search through his backpack without actually taking it down out of the bin, looking in all the zipper pouches for the bag of Peanut M&M's. He saw the envelope and thought, I guess I better see what this one says. He sat down, opened it, read it, thought, What the...?

Montana rolled by outside his window as he read it again.

He pulled out his cell phone to call his grandfather, but there were zero bars of reception. The battery was running down, too. Ry wished he hadn't texted his way across Wisconsin and Minnesota, friends from his former life, in his old hometown. He had tried to charge it in the outlet in the restroom, but the outlet was worn out or something; the charger just fell out. Plus it would be not only rude but smelly to sit there for the amount of time it would take. So he hadn't.

Just then the train slowed to a crawl. And slowed some more, to a creep. And then it stopped altogether. Ry couldn't see a station, or a town. Or anything, really.

After a few minutes, a conductor appeared and announced that there would be a delay. A minor mechanical problem.

"Do not get off the train," he said. "The train will move on as soon as the problem is resolved. Which will not be long."

But he told the elderly woman in front of Ry, in a lowered voice, that it would be forty minutes or so before the train moved on. An hour at most, he said. And he moved back through the doors to the next car to spread the news.

Ry sat there with his phone in his hand and the letter in his lap.

He just needed to talk to his grandfather.

Probably the train itself (being inside of it) was blocking reception. He would just step off for two minutes, make the call, get back inside. He slipped down the narrow, turning stairwell to the vestibule. No one was there. There were two handles on the door. But would moving them set off some kind of alarm? He had one hand tentatively on the handle when a voice behind him said, "You wanna go out?" Ry turned to see the lady in the red baseball shirt, the one who had slept with a practically life-sized teddy bear.

"I was just going to try to make a phone call," he said.

"Whatever," she said. "I open 'em when I need to step out for a smoke. Here: you just—"

She moved the handles and the door was open.

"I wouldn't go too far, though," she said, and disappeared into one of the restrooms.

Ha! Victory!

But standing outside the train, there was still no signal.

And a few feet away, no signal.

The hills were not that far off, really. Ry had a feeling that up on top of them, he could get enough reception. He checked his watch. If he was not at the top in ten minutes, he would turn around and

come back. It crossed his mind that someone looking from the train might see him go, but he decided not to worry about it. He would just act like he knew what he was doing.

As if he knew what he was doing, he strode through the scrubby grass. Casually, but also carefully, he climbed over a barbed-wire fence. Fortunately, it was not an electrified fence, at least at that juncture. The hills, when he reached them, were higher and steeper than he had imagined they would be. By going around behind the one in front, he found a more manageable ascent. Still, it was tricky. But fun.

He was having a good time hauling himself up and along. What a great summer it was going to be. Then remembering, and it was, Oh. Yeah.

He headed for a small flat area on a shoulder of rock. It wasn't the top, but it was probably close enough. The shoulder was tiny enough when he got there that it was a challenge to turn from his knees to a sitting position. Once he had managed that, it was like sitting on any other pinnacle on Earth, which is to say, it was kind of spectacular.

There was what might be a town in the far distance, and the train, not toylike, but smaller than up close. But you could ignore the train and the town, and then it just seemed like the land went on uninterrupted forever, in lumps and bumps of one kind or another. Someone had told him there was a county in Montana that had only one resident. He didn't know if that was true, but if it was, it looked like this could be the one. A pretty little river meandered along below, on the other side of the tracks. The sky, as promised, was Big.

He was balanced between all of it, precariously enough for a thrill, but short of actual danger. He glanced back down at the train. They were missing it all, sitting there with their magazines, eating nachos, only seeing the world through a window.

That was when the train had moved.

And after he was sure it had moved, that was when he gave himself over to gravity.

But too late.

Now, sitting under the tree, he looked back up at where he had climbed and thought two potentially useful thoughts. One was about that town he had seen in the distance. The other was that he hadn't actually had a chance, while he was up there, to try to make the phone call.

He decided to go back up.

The second climbing felt oddly familiar. Like, Oh, yeah, there's that rock. There's that bush. That skidded-out place was made by my own tumbling body.

It was possible that no human had ever climbed this hill before, that he was the only one. Maybe someone prehistoric had climbed it. Or one of the guys laying the track for the railroad, way back when. Why else would anyone be here?

As he climbed, the sound of a rusty hinge creaking open and shut emanated from Ry's stomach and he realized he hadn't eaten for a while, and that he would enjoy eating something about now. That wasn't going to happen right away, so he blocked the thought out. He wasn't going to starve. Yet. He didn't think.

He made his way once more to the place where he had sat the first time, and once more performed the maneuver by which he could turn and sit without falling off. The desolate brown hills still crouched there like ghosts carved out of solid time. The ceiling of sky was an optical illusion made by the atmosphere sucking up all of the colors of sunlight except blue—was that it? When it was just space going on from here to forever, really, with a flimsy veil of gases and moisture in between. The rolling grasslands rolled on and on.

Although he could see the town in the distance. Just barely, but he could see it. This time up, Ry didn't ignore it. He sought it out. It was far away, but it couldn't be that far if he could see it. He could walk there, if he could see it.

Reassured, he pulled his phone out of his pocket.



IT SEEMED TO RY AT THIS MOMENT THAT HAVING A CELL PHONE IN MONTANA WAS LIKE HAVING A CANOE ON MARS

There was one bar of reception.

Ry called his own house first, where his grandfather was staying, along with the dogs. It was nice to hear another voice, even if it was his own, on the answering machine. He listened, then left a message that he hoped sounded urgent (“Something unexpected has come up and I need to talk to you to figure out what to do about it”), without sounding too alarming (“Don’t worry, I’m okay”). His grandfather was an old guy. He didn’t want to make him panic.

Wondering if his grandfather would remember to check the answering machine, he called his parents’ cell phone. Another thing he didn’t want to do was to wreck their Caribbean Sailing Idyll, but this seemed like a circumstance they would want to know about.

“Come on, you guys, answer your phone,” he said as it rang and rang.

What was left of the battery was fading from searching so hard for the faint signal, so he turned the phone off. It sang out its good-bye and turned out the lights.

“Okay,” he said aloud.

He looked again at the town. He would walk. He would walk along the train tracks. The tracks probably went through the town, or near it. The river was nearby, at least here, so he could take drinks. There would be people in the town, and he would figure out what to do next.

Unless it’s a ghost town, he thought, which almost made him laugh. But not quite. He was in the West. That could happen here.



WALKING TO TOWN

It was not long before Ry felt that the sun and dry air might be baking his brain. He thought he could feel it begin to shrivel and misfire, maybe even vitrify, inside his skull. But when he walked over to the river and waded in and splashed his face and stood in the shade for five minutes, his brain seemed to reconstitute and he could go on.

He came to a place where a road crossed the tracks, and he had to think, Road or tracks? Road or tracks? Tracks won because they looked straighter. Very, very straight.

On one of his forays into the river, something brushed against his leg as he stood there. He looked down to see a number of fish, each one about the size of his forearm, all swimming along. He didn't know what kind they were. He fingered the pocketknife in his pocket and mentally pictured himself sharpening the end of a stick and trying to spear one of the fish. He could picture sharpening the stick but in his mind's eye every time he took a stab, he either missed or just knocked the fish off course. How long would it take you, what was the learning curve on fish stabbing? Maybe he should give it a try while he still had strength. Then there would be the whole starting-afire-with-a-stick thing. Unless he ate the fish raw.

"I think you can go for pretty long without eating," he said aloud. "As long as you have water to drink."

He sat on the bank, putting his boots back on, and a white shape in the weeds caught his eye. He picked it up. It was the skull of a small animal. He laughed softly as a thought struck him. The thought was that he had expected to spend his summer hiking and looking for bones. He had wanted to do it because it seemed like it would be doing something real. And here he was, hiking, and here was a skull. And it all felt pretty real, right?

The difference was that instead of hiking with a small group of people and a guide who knew where to go, he was utterly alone and not one person in the entire world knew exactly where he was, including himself. And he hadn't expected his hike to be along a railroad track.

But although the track didn't make for the most interesting hike, it was not interestingness he needed most. He just needed to get somewhere.

Ry turned the skull over and looked at it from various angles. What was it? Looking into its vacant eye sockets he said, "You were probably a large rodent. I'm guessing not that long ago."

He held it in one hand as he got to his feet, then slipped it into a side pocket of his shorts. He would find out later what it was. It might be cool to put it on his dresser at home. The truth was that it made him feel a little less alone.

He took inventory of what else was in his pockets. It was a short list: pocketknife, next-to-useless cell phone, wallet. The list of what he didn't have at the moment was longer.

"But at least I have my health," he said. It was a joke.

The wallet had eighty-three dollars in it, a hundred bucks less the cost of some Amtrak food. He looked around for a place to spend it. “Where’s the 7-eleven?” he asked. This was a joke, too.

He said his lame jokes aloud, to keep his spirits up. He didn’t know if he should panic or not. Well—he knew he shouldn’t panic. But he didn’t know how dire his situation was. It was the moment when the elevator drops and you don’t know whether to laugh or get started on the screening of your whole life passing before your eyes. Only a lot longer than that moment. It was that moment stretched into hours.

Periodically, he felt the urge to text someone.

Nowhere, he imagined typing.

Still nowhere.

Each time, without thinking, he pulled out his phone, looked at its blank face, remembered, and shoved it back down in his pocket.

“It’s not like I’m the only living thing, though,” he said. “Look. Cows.” Black ones grazed on a hilltop in the distance.

It was probably a great place to be a cow. Or a pheasant. One of which fluttered up from the grasses at his approach.

He walked past a field where cylindrical bales of hay were sprinkled like giant corks spilled on a tabletop. A dilapidated long-ago schoolhouse. A conglomeration of rusted buildings. A cluster of newer silvery ones. Ry stared for a long time at a small house painted bright orange with about twenty cars parked behind it, in varying states of decay, along with discarded bathroom fixtures and a windowless bus that seemed to have melted into the ground, faded to an almost greenish yellow, vegetation thriving around it and up through it. He decided to keep walking toward the little town.

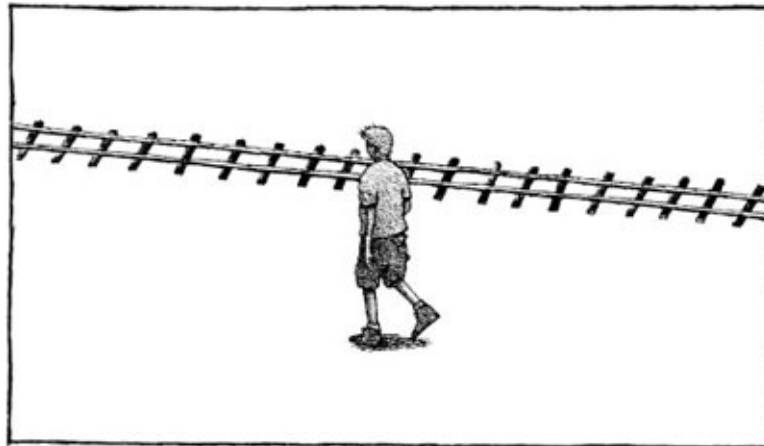
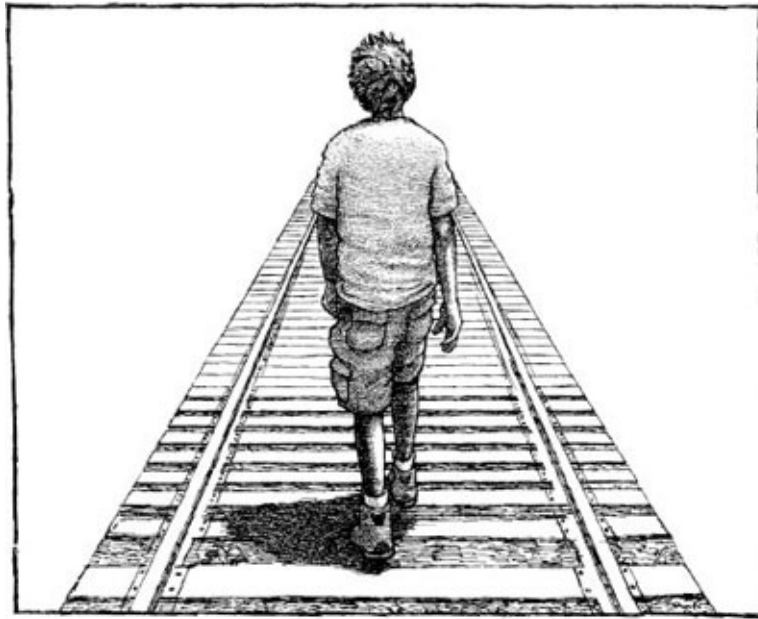
Down here in the bottomlands, Ry couldn’t see it. It had to be just beyond those next hills, though. Should he use his energy to climb up high again? What if night fell before he got there? No. It couldn’t be that far. How often did trains come along, and would a train stop and pick up someone waving their arms? He didn’t think so. Would a train stop if the engineer saw a dead body near the tracks? Maybe the engineer would tell someone. But maybe he would be looking the other way.

The track split into two tracks now. That could be a good sign.

His stomach made the sound effect for a cartoon character hurtling through outer space in a spiral trajectory. The bones in his legs were softening into rubber bands. His forearms were covered with tiny scratches that were more painful than they looked.

Ry felt a sudden trickling from his nose, and then a flowing. He turned his head and lifted his arm wipe it on the sleeve of his T-shirt and saw that it was blood. His nose was bleeding. Lifting the hem of his T-shirt and pinching his nose shut with it, he plodded along, breathing through his mouth, checking every few minutes to see if the bleeding had stopped.

The sun was beginning to lower in the sky, shifting its strategy from beating down on his head and shoulders to blinding him. Ry started over to the river again and, without intending to, found himself sitting down halfway there. He loosened the laces on his boots and then, without intending to, found that he was lying flat on his back. A large bird traced a silent circle high above. Was it a vulture, or a hawk? He wondered if he looked edible. He should not fall asleep out in the open. He was tired, though.



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