Pilgrims

Julie Orringer

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It was Thanksgiving Day and hot, because this was New Orleans; they were driving uptown to have dinner with strangers. Ella pushed at her loose tooth with the tip of her tongue and fanned her legs with the hem of her velvet dress. On the seat beside her, Benjamin fidgeted with his shirt buttons. He had worn his pilgrim costume, brown shorts and a white shirt and yellow paper buckles taped to his shoes. In the front seat their father drove without a word, while their mother dozed against the window glass. She wore a blue dress and a strand of jade beads and a knit cotton hat beneath which she was bald.

Three months earlier, Ella’s father had explained what chemotherapy was, and how it would make her mother better. He had even taken Ella to the hospital once when her mother had a treatment. She remembered it like a filmstrip from school, a series of connected images she wished she didn’t have to watch: her mother with an IV needle in her arm, the steady drip form the bag of orange liquid, her father speaking softly to himself as he paced the room, her mother shaking so hard she had to be tied down.

At night Ella and her brother tapped a secret code against the wall that separated their rooms: one knock, I’m afraid; two knocks, Don’t worry; three knocks, Are you still awake? Four, Come quick. And then there was the Emergency Signal, a stream of knocks that kept on coming, which meant her brother could hear their mother and father crying in their bedroom. If it went on for more than a minute, Ella would give four knocks and her brother would run to her room and crawl under the covers.

There were changes in the house, healing rituals which required Ella’s mother to go outside and embrace trees or lie facedown on the grass. Sometimes she did a kind of Asian dance that looked like karate. She ate bean paste and Japanese vegetables, or sticky brown rice wrapped in seaweed. And now they were going to have dinner with people they had never met, people who ate seaweed and brown rice every day of their lives.

They drove through the Garden District, where Spanish moss hung like beards from the trees. Once during Mardi Gras, Ella had ridden a trolley here with her brother and grandmother, down to the French Quarter were they’d eaten beignets at Café du Monde. She wished she were sitting in one of those wrought-iron chairs and shaking powdered sugar onto a beignet. How much better than to be surrounded by strangers, eating food that tasted like the bottom of the sea.

They turned onto a side street, and her father studied the directions. “It should be at the end of this block,” he said. Ella’s mother shifted in her seat. “Where are we?” she asked, her voice dreamy with painkillers.

“Almost there,” said Ella’s father.

They pulled to the curb in front of a white house with sagging porches and a trampled lawn. Vines covered the walls and mass grew thick and green between the roof slates. Under the porte cochere stood a beat-up Honda and a Volkswagen with mismatched side panels. A faded bigwheel lay on its side on the walk.

“Come on,” their father said, and gave them a tired smile. “Time for fun.” He got out of the car and opened the doors for Ella and her mother, sweeping his arm chauffeurlike as they climbed out.

Beside the front door was a tarnished doorbell in the shape of a lion’s head. “Push it,” her father said. Ella pushed. A sound like churchbells echoed inside the house.

Then the door swung open and there was Mister Kaplan, a tall man with wiry orange hair and big dry-looking teeth. He shook hands with Ella’s parents, so long and vigorously it seemed to Ella he might as well say *Congratulations*.

“And you must be Ben and Ella,” he said, bending down.

Ella gave a mute nod. Her brother kicked at the doorjamb.

“Well, come on in,” he said. “I have a tree castle out back.”

Benjamin’s face came up, twisted with skepticism. “A what?”

“The kids are back there. They’ll show you,” he said.

“What an interesting foyer,” their mother said. She bent down to look at the brass animals on the floor, a turtle and a jackal and a llama. Next to the animals stood a blue vase full of rusty metal flowers. A crystal chandelier danged from the ceiling, its arms hung with dozens of God’s-eyes and tiny plastic babies from Mardi Gras king cakes. On a low wooden shelf against the wall, pair after pair of canvas sandals and sneakers and Birkenstocks were piled in a heap. A crayoned sign above it said SHOES OFF NOW!

Ella looked down at her feet. She was wearing her patent-leather Mary Janes.

“Your socks are nice too,” her father said, and touched her shoulder. He stepped out of his own brown loafers and set them on top of the pile. Then he knelt before Ella’s mother and removed her pumps. “Shoes off,” he said to Ella and Ben.

“Even me?” Ben said. He looked down at his paper buckles.

Their father took off Ben’s shoes and removed the paper buckles, tape intact. Then he pressed one buckle onto each of Ben’s socks. “There,” he said.

Ben looked as if he might cry.

“Everyone’s in the kitchen,” Mister Kaplan said. “We’re all cooking.”

“Marvelous,” said Ella’s mother. “We love to cook.”

They followed him down a cavern of a hall, its walls decorated with sepia-toned photographs of children and parents, all of them staring stone-faced from their gilt frames. They passed a sweep of stairs, and a room with nothing in it but straw mats and pictures of blue Indian goddesses sitting on beds of cloud.

“What’s that room?” Benjamin said.

“Meditation room,” Mister Kaplan said, as if it were as commonplace as a den.

The kitchen smelled of roasting squash and baked apples and spices. There was an old brick oven and a stove with so many burners it looked as if it had been stolen from a restaurant. At the kitchen table men and women with long hair and loose clothes sliced vegetables or stirred things into bowls. Some of them wore knitted hats like her mother, their skin dull-gray, their eyes purple-shaded underneath. To Ella it seemed they could be relatives of her mother’s, shameful cousins recently discovered.

A tall woman with a green scarf around her waist came over and embraced Ella’s mother, then bent down to hug Ella and Benjamin. She smelled of smoky perfume. Her wide eyes skewed in different directions as if she were watching two movies projected into opposite corners of the room. Ella did not know how to look at her.

“We’re so happy you decided to come,” the woman said. “I’m Delilah, Eddy’s sister.”

“Who’s Eddy?” said Ben.

“Mister Kaplan,” their father said.

“We use our real names here,” Delilah said. “No one is a mister.”

She led their parents over to the long table and put utensils into their hands. Their mother was to mix oats into a pastry crust, and their father to chop carrots, something Ella had never seen him do. He looked around in panic, then hunched over and began cutting a carrot into clumsy pieces. He kept glancing at the man to his left, a bearded man with a shaved head, as if to make sure he was doing it right.

Delilah gave Ella and Benjamin hard cookies that tasted like burnt rice. It seemed Ella would have to chew forever. Her loose tooth waggled in its socket.

“The kids are all out back,” Delilah said. “There’s plenty of time to play before dinner.”

“What kids?” Benjamin asked.

“You’ll see,” said Delilah. She titled her head at Ella, one of her eyes moving over Ella’s velvet dress. “Here’s a little tick I learned when I was a girl,” she said. In one swift movement she took the back hem of the dress, brought it up between Ella’s knees, and tucked it into the sash. “Now you’re wearing shorts,” she said.

Ella didn’t feel like she was wearing shorts. As soon as Delilah turned away, she pulled her skirt out of her sash and let it fall around her legs.

The wooden deck outside was cluttered with Tinkertoys and clay flowerpots and Little Golden Books. Ella heard children screaming and laughing nearby. As she and Benjamin moved to the edge of the deck, there was a rustle in the bushes and a skinny boy leaped out and pointed a suction-cup arrow at them. He stood there breathing hard, his hair full of leaves, his chest bare. “You’re on duty,” he said.

“Me?” Benjamin said.

“Yes, you. Both of you.” He motioned them off the porch with his arrow and took them around the side of the house. There, built into a sprawling oak, was the biggest, most sophisticated tree house Ella had ever seen. There were tiny rooms of sagging plywood, and rope ladders hanging down from doors, and a telescope and a fireman’s pole and a red net full of leaves. From one wide platform—almost as high as the top of the house—it seemed you could jump down onto a huge trampoline. Even higher was a kind of crow’s nest, a little circular platform built around the trunk. A red-painted sign on the railing read DANGER! Ella could hear the other children screaming but she couldn’t see them. A collie dog barked crazily, staring up at the tree.

“Take off your socks! That’s an order,” the skinny boy said.

Benjamin glanced at Ella. Ella shrugged. It seemed ridiculous to walk around outside in socks. She bent and peeled off her anklets. Benjamin carefully removed his Pilgrim buckles and put them in his pocket, then sat down and took off his socks. The skinny boy grabbed the socks from their hands and tucked them into the waistband of his shorts.

The mud was thick and cold between Ella’s toes, and pecan shells bit her feet as the boy herded them toward the tree house. He prodded Ella toward a ladder of a prickly-looking rope. When she stepping onto the first rung, the ladder swung toward the tree and her toes banged against the trunk. The skinny boy laughed.

“Go on,” he said. “Hurry up. And no whining.”

The rope burned her hands and feed as she ascended. The ladder seemed to go on forever. Ben followed below, making the rope buck and sway as they climbed. At the top there was a small square opening, and Ella thrust both her arms inside and pulled herself into a dark coop. As she stood, her head knocked against something dangling from the ceiling on a length of string. It was a bird’s skull, no bigger than a walnut. Dozens of others hung from the ceiling around her Benjamin huddled at her side.

“Sick,” he said.

“Don’t look,” Ella said.

The suction-cup arrow came up through the hole in the floor.

“Keep going,” said the boy. “You’re not there yet.”

“Go where?” Ella said.

“Through the wall.”

Ella brushed the skulls out of her way and leveled her shoulder against one of the walls. It creaked open like a door. Outside, a tree limb as thick as her arms extended up to another plywood box, this one much larger than the first. Ella dropped to her knees and crawled upward. Benjamin followed.

Apparently this was the hostage room. Four kids stood in the semidarkness, wide-eyed and still as sculptures, each bound at the ankles and wrists with vine handcuffs. Two of the kids, a boy and a girl, were so skinny that Ella could see the outlines of bones in their arms and legs. Their hair was patchy and ragged, their eyes blacked and almond-shaped. In the corner, a white-haired boy in purple overalls whimpered softly to himself. And at the center of the room a girl Benjamin’s age stood tied to the tree trunk with brown string. She had the same wild gray eyes and leafy hair as the boy with the arrow.

“It’s mine, it’s *my* tree house,” she said as Ella stared at her.

“Is Mister Kaplan your dad?” Benjamin said.

“My dat-*tee*,” the girl corrected him.

“Where’s your mom?”

“She died,” said the girl, and looked him fiercely in the eye.

Benjamin sucked in his breath and glanced at Ella.

Ella wanted to hit this girl. She bent down close the girl’s face, making her eyes small and mean. “It this is so your tree house,” Ella said, “then how come you’re tied up?”

“It’s *jail*,” the girl spat. “In jail you get tied up.”

“We could untie you,” said Benjamin. He tugged at one of her bonds.

The girl opened her mouth and let out a scream so shrill Ella’s eardrums buzzed. Once, as her father had pulled into the driveway at night, he had trapped a rabbit by the leg beneath the wheel of his car, the rabbit had made a sound like that. Benjamin dropped the string and moved against Ella, and the children with ragged hair laughed and jumped on the platform until it crackled and groaned. The boy in purple overalls cried in his corner.

Benjamin put his lips to Ella’s ear. “I don’t understand it here,” he whispered.

There was a scuffle at the door, and the skinny boy stepped into the hostage room. “All right,” he said. “Who gets killed?”

“Kill those kids, Peter,” the girl said, pointing to Benjamin and Ella.

“Us?” Benjamin said.

“Who do you think?” said the boy.

He poked them in the back with his suction-cup arrow and moved them toward the tree trunk, where rough boards formed a ladder to the next level. Ella and Benjamin climbed until they had reached a narrow platform, and then Peter pushed them to the edge. Ella looked down at the trampoline. It was a longer drop than the high dive at the public pool. She looked over her shoulder and Peter glared at her. Down below the collie barked and barked, his black nose pointed up at them.

Benjamin took Ella’s hand and closed his eyes. Then Peter shoved them from behind, and they stumbled forward into space.

There was a moment of terrifying emptiness, nothing but air beneath Ella’s feet. She could hear the collie’s bark getting closer as she fell. She slammed into the trampoline knees first, then flew, shrieking, back up into the air. When she hit the trampoline a second time, Benjamin’s head knocked against her chin. He stood up rubbing his head, and Ella tasted salt in her mouth. Her loose tooth had slipped its roots. She spat it into her palm and studied its jagged edge.

“Move,” Peter called from above. The boy in purple overalls was just climbing up onto the platform. Peter pulled him forward until his toes curled over the edge.

“I lost my tooth!” Ella yelled.

“Get off!”

Benjamin scrambled off the trampoline. Ella crawled to the edge, the tooth gleaming and red-rimmed between her fingers, and then the trampoline lurched with the weight of the boy in purple overalls. The tooth flew from her hand and into the bushes, too small to make a sound when it hit.

When she burst into the house crying, blood streaming from her mouth, the long-haired men and women dropped their mixing spoons and went to her. She twisted away from them, looking frantically for her mother and father, but they were nowhere to be seen. There was no way to explain that she wasn’t hurt, that she was upset because her tooth was gone and because everything about that house made her want to run away and hide. The adults, their faces creased with worry, pulled her to the sink and held her mouth open. The woman with skewed eyes, Delilah pressed a tissue against the space where her tooth had been. Ella could smell onions and apples on her hands.

“The time right,” she said. “The new tooth’s already coming in.”

“Whose is she?” one of the men asked.

Delilah told him the names of Ella’s parents. It was strange to hear those familiar words, *Ann* and *Gary*, in the mouths of these long-haired strangers.

“Your mother is upstairs,” Delilah said, her eyes swiveling toward some distant hidden room. “She felt a little swimmy-headed. Your dad just brought her some special tea. Maybe we should let her rest, hmm?”

Ella slipped out from beneath Delilah’s hand and ran to the hall, remembering the stairway she’d seen earlier. There it was before her, a curve of glossy steps leading to nowhere she knew. Her mother’s cough drifted down from one of the bedroom doors. Ella put a foot onto the first stair, feeling the eyes of the adults on her back. No one said anything to stop her. After a moment, she began to climb.

In the upstairs hallway, toys and kid’s shoes lay strewn across the floor, and crumpled pants and shirts and dresses lay in a musty-smelling heap. Two naked Barbies sprawled in a frying pan. A record player sat in the middle of the hall, its vacant turntable spinning. Ella stepped over the cord and went into the first zoom, a small room with a sleeping bag on the bare mattress ticking. In a cage on the nightstand, a white rat scrabbled at a cardboard tube. A finger-painted sing above the bed said CLAIRES ROOM. Her mother’s cough rose again from down the hall, and she turned and ran toward the sound.

In a room whose blue walls and curtains made everything look as if it were underwater, her mother lay pale and coughing on a bed piled high with pillows. Her father sat on the edge of the bed, his hands raised in the air, thumbs hooked together and palms spread wide. For a moment Ella had no idea what he was doing. Then she saw the shadow of her father’s hands against the wall, in the light of a blue-shaded lamp. A shock of relief went through her.

“Tweet, tweet,” Ella said,

“Right,” her father said. “A birdy.”

Ella’s mother turned toward her smiled, more aware, more like her real self than earlier. “Do another one, Gary,” she said.

Ella’s father twisted his hands into a new shape in the air.

“A dog?” Ella said.

“A fish!” said her mother.

“No,” he said, and adjusted his hands. “It’s a horsie, see?”

“A horsie?” said Ella’s mother. “With fins?”

That made Ella laugh a little.

“Hey,” her mother said. “Come here, you. Smile again.”

Ella did as she was told.

“You lost your tooth!”

“It’s gone,” Ella said. She climbed onto the bed to explain, but as she flopped down on the mattress her mother’s face contracted with pain.

“Please don’t bounce,” her mother said. She touched the place where her surgery had been.

Ella’s father gave her a stern look and lifted her off the bed. “Your mom’s sleepy,” he said. “You should run back downstairs now.”

“She’s always sleepy,” Ella said, looking down at her muddy feet. She thought of her tooth lying out in the weeds, and how she’d have nothing to put under her pillow for the tooth fairy.

Her mother began to cry.

Ella’s father went to the window and stared down into the yard, his breath fogging the glass. “Go ahead, Ella,” he said. “We just need a few minutes.”

“My tooth,” Ella said. She knew she should leave, but couldn’t.

“It’ll grow back bigger and stronger,” her father said.

She could see he didn’t understand what had happened. If only her mother would stop crying she could explain everything. In the blue light her mother looked cold and far away, pressed under the weight of tons of water.

“I’ll be down soon,” her mother said, sniffling. “Go out and play.”

Ella opened her moth to form some protest, but no words came out.

“Go on, now,” her father said.

“It fell in a bush!” she wailed, then turned and ran downstairs.

The other children had come in by then. Her brother stood in line at the downstairs bathroom to wash before dinner, comparing fingernail dirt with the boy in purple overalls. Hands deep in the pockets of her velvet dress, Ella wandered through the echoing hall into a room lined from floor to ceiling with books. Many of the titles were in other languages, some even written in different alphabets. She recognized *D’Aulaires Greek Mythology* and *The Riverside Shakespeare* and *Grimm’s Fairy Tales*. Scattered around on small tables and decorative stands were tiny human figurines with animal heads: horse-man, giraffe-man, panther-man. On one table sat an Egyptian beetle made of milky green stone, and beside him a real beetle, shiny as metal, who flew at Ella’s face when she reached to touch his shell. She batted him away with the back of her hand.

And then, just above where the beetle had fallen, Ella saw a shelf without any books at all. It was low, the height of her knees, with a frayed blue scarf pinned against its back wall. Burnt-down candles stood on either side of a black lacquer box, and on top of this box stood a glass filled with red water.

Ella reached for the glass, and someone behind her screamed.

She turned around. Claire stood in the doorway, dress unbuttoned at one shoulder, her face smeared with mud.

“Don’t touch that,” she said.

Ella took a step back. “I wasn’t going to.”

Claire’s eyes seemed to ignite as she bent down and took the glass in both hands. She held it near a lamp, so the light shone through it and cast a red oval upon the wall.

“It’s my mother,” she said.

For dinner there was a roasted dome of something that looked like meat but wasn’t. It was springy and steaming, and when Mister Kaplan cut it open Ella could see that it was stuffed with rice and yams. Benjamin tried to hide under the table, but their father pulled him up by the arms and set him in his place. He prodded his wedge of roast until it slid onto the tablecloth. Then he began to cry quietly.

“The kids aren’t vegetarian,” their father said, in apology to the men and women at the table. He picked up the slice of roast with his fingers and put it back on Ben’s plate. The other men and women held their forks motionless above their own plates, looking at Ella’s mother and father with pity.

“Look, Ben,” said Delilah. “It’s called seitan. Wheat gluten. The other kids love it.”

The boy and girl with almond-shaped eyes and ragged hair stopped in mid-chew. The girl looked at Benjamin and narrowed her eyes.

“I don’t eat gluten,” Benjamin said.

“Come on, now,” their father said. “It’s great.”

Ella’s mother pressed her fingers against her temples. She hadn’t touched her own dinner. Ella, sitting beside her, took a bite of wheat gluten. It was almost like meat, firm and savory, and the suffering was flavoring with forest-smelling spices. As she glanced around the table she thought of the picture of the First Thanksgiving on the bulletin board at school: the smiling Pilgrims eating turkey and squash, the stern-faced Native Americans looking as if they knew the worst was yet to come. Who among them that night were the Native Americans? Who were the Pilgrims? The dark old house was like a wilderness around them, the wind sighing through its rooms.

“I jumped on the trampoline,” said the boy with ragged hair, pulling on the sleeve of the woman next to him. “That boy did a flip.” He pointed at Peter, who was smashing rice against his plate with his thumb. “He tied his sister to the tree.”

Mister Kaplan set down his fork. He looked sideways at Peter, his mouth pressed into a stern line. “I told you never to do that again,” he said. He sounded angry, but his voice was quiet, almost a whisper.

“She made me!” Peter said, and plunged a spoon into his baked squash. Mister Kaplan’s eyes went glossy and faraway. He stared off at the blank wall above Ella’s mother’s head, drifting away from the noise and chatter of the dinner table. Next to him Delilah shuttled her mismatched eyes back and forth.

Ella’s mother straightened in her chair. “Ed,” she called softly.

Mister Kaplan blinked hard and looked at her.

“Tell us about your Tai Chi class.”

“What,” he said.

“Your Tai Chi class.”

“You know, I don’t really want to talk right now.” He pushed back his chair and went into the kitchen. There was the sound of water and then the clink of dishes in the sink. Delilah shook her head. The other adults looked down at their plates. Ella’s mother wiped the corners of her mouth with her napkin and crossed her arms over her chest.   
 “Does anyone want more rice?” Ella’s father asked.

“I think we’re all thinking about Lena,” said the man with the shaved head.

“I know I am,” said Delilah.

“Infinity to infinity,” said the man. “Dust into star.”

The men and women looked at each other, their eyes carrying some message Ella couldn’t understand. They clasped each other’s hands and bent their heads.

“Infinity to infinity,” they repeated. “Dust into star.”

“Matter into energy,” said the man. “Identity into oneness.”

“Matter into energy,” everyone said. Ella glanced at her father, whose jaw was set hard, unmoving. Her mother’s lips formed the words, but no sound came out. Ella thought of the unusual Thanksgivings at her uncle Bon’s, where everyone talked and laughed at the table and they ate turkey and dressing and sweet potatoes with marshmallows melted on top. She closed her eyes and held her breath, filling her chest with a tightness that felt like magic power. If she tried hard enough could she transport them all, her mother and father, Benjamin and herself, to that other time? She held her breath until it seemed she would explode, then let it out in a rush. She opened her eyes. Nothing had changed. Peter kicked the table leg, and the collie, crouched beside Claire’s chair, whimpered his unease. Ella could see Claire’s hand on his collar, her knuckles bloodless as stones.

Mister Kaplan returned with a platter of baked apples. He cleared his throat, and everyone turned to look at him. “Guess what we forgot,” he said. “I spent nearly an hour peeling these things.” He held the platter aloft, waiting.

“Who wants some nice baked apples?” he said. “Baked apples. I peeled them.”

No one said a word.

After dinner the adults drifted into the room with the straw mats and Indian goddesses. Ella understood that the children were not invited but she lingered in the doorway to see what would happen. Mister Kaplan bent over a tiny brass dish and held a match to a black cone. A wisp of smoke curled toward the ceiling, and after a moment Ella smelled a dusty, flowery scent. Her mother and father and the rest of the adults sat cross-legged on the floor, not touching each other. A low hum began to fill the room like something with weight and substance. Ella saw her father raise an eyebrow at her mother, as if to ask if these people were serious. But her mother’s shoulders were bent in meditation, her mouth open with the drone of the mantra, and Ella’s father sighed and let his head fall forward.

Someone pinched Ella’s should and she turned around. Peter stood behind her, his eyes small and cold. “Come on,” he said. “You’re supposed to help clean up.”

In the kitchen the children stacked dirty dishes on the counter and ran water in the sink. The boy and girl with almond eyes climbed up onto a wide wooden stepstool and began to scrub dishes. Peter scraped all the scraps into an aluminum pan and gave it to Claire, who set it on the floor near the dog’s water dish. The collie fell at the leftover food with sounds that made Ella’s sick to her stomach. Claire stood next to him and stroked his tail.

Then Benjamin came into the kitchen carrying the glass of red water. “Somebody forgot this under the table,” he said.

Again there was the dying-rabbit screech. Claire batted her palms against the sides of her head. “No!” she shrieked. “Put it down!”

Benjamin’s eyes went wide, and he set the glass on the kitchen counter. “I don’t want it,” he said.

The boy in purple overalls squinted at the glass. “Looks like Kool-Aid,” he said.

“She gets all crazy,” said Peter. “Watch.” Peter lifted the glass high into the air, and Claire ran toward him. “You can’t have it,” he said.

Claire jumped up and down in fury, her hands flapping like limp rags. Her mouth opened but no sound came out. Then she curled her fingers into claws and scratched at Peter’s arms and chest until he twisted away. He ran across the kitchen and onto the deck, holding the glass in the air, and Claire followed him, screaming.

The ragged-haired brother and sister looked at each other, arms gloved in white bubbles. In one quick movement they were off the stool, shaking suds around the kitchen. “Come on!” said the boy. “Let’s go watch!”

Benjamin grabbed Ella’s hand and pulled her toward the screen door. The children pushed out onto the deck and then ran toward the tree castle, where Claire and her brother were climbing the first rope ladder. It was dark now, and the floodlights on the roof of the house illuminated the entire castle, its rooms silver-gray and ghostly, its ropes and nets swaying in a rising breeze. The children gathered on the grass near the trampoline.

Peter held the glass as he climbed, the red water sloshing against its sides.

“Come and get it,” he crooned. He reached the first room, and they heard the wall-door scrape against the trunk as he pushed it open. Then he moved out onto the oak limb, agile as the spider monkeys Ella had seen at the zoo. He might as well have had a tail.

Claire crawled behind him, her hands scrambling at the bark. Peter howled at the sky as he reached the hostage room.

Benjamin moved toward Ella and pressed his head against her arm. “I want to go home,” he said.\

“Shh,” Ella said. “We can’t.”

High above, Peter climbed onto the platform from which they had jumped earlier. Still holding the glass, he pulled himself up the tree trunk to the crow’s nest. High up on that small, railed platform, where the tree branches became thin and sparse, he stopped. Below him Claire scrambled onto the jumping platform. She looked out across the yard as if unsure of where he had gone. “Up here,” Peter said, holding the glass high.

Ella could hear Claire grunting as she pulled herself up into the crow’s nest. She stood and reached for the glass, her face a small moon in the dark. A few acorns scuttled off the crow’s-nest platform.

“Give it!” she cried again.

Peter stood looking at her for a moment in the dark. “You really want it?”

“Peter!”

He swept the glass through the air. The water flew out in an arc, ruby-colored against the glare of the floodlights. Claire leaned out as if to catch it between her fingers, and with a splintering crack she broke through the railing. Her dress fluttered silently as she fell, and her white hands grasped at the air. There was a quiet instant, the soft sound of water falling on grass. Then, with a shock, Ella felt in the soles of her feet, Claire hit the ground. The girl with the ragged hair screamed.

Claire lay beside the trampoline, still as sleep, her neck bent at an impossible angle. Ella wanted to look away, but couldn’t. The other children, even Benjamin, moved to where Claire lay and circled around, some calling her name, some just looking. Peter slid down the fireman’s pole and stumbled across the lawn toward his sister. He pushed Benjamin aside. With one toe he nudged Claire’s shoulder, then knelt and rolled her over. A bare bone glistened from her wrist. The boy in purple overalls threw up onto the grass.

Ella turned and ran toward the house. She banged the screen door open and skidded across the kitchen floor into the hall. At the doorway of the meditation room she stopped, breathing hard. The parents sat just as she had left them, eyes closed, mouths open slightly, their sound beating like a living thing, their thumbs and forefingers circled into perfect O’s. She could smell the heat of them rising in the room and mingling with the scent of the incense. Her father’s chin rested on his chest as if he had fallen asleep. Beside him her mother looked drained of blood, her skin so white she seemed almost holy.

“Mom,” Ella whispered. “Mom.”

Ella’s mother turned slightly and opened her eyes. For a moment she seemed between two worlds, her eyes unfocused and distant. Then she blinked and looked at Ella. She shook her head no.

“Please,” Ella said, but her mother closed her eyes again. Ella stood there for a long time watching her, but she didn’t move or speak. Finally Ella turned and went back outside.

By the time she reached the tree castle Peter had dragged Claire halfway across the lawn. He turned his eyes on Ella, and she stared back at him. The sound of the mantra continued unbroken from the house. Peter hoisted Claire again under the arms and dragged her to the bushes, her bare feet bumping over the grass. Then he rolled her over until she was hidden in shadow. He pulled her dress down so it covered her thighs, and turned her head toward the fence that bordered the background.

“Get some leaves and stuff,” he said. “We have to cover her.”

Ella would not move. She took Benjamin’s hand, but he pulled away from her and wandered across the lawn, pulling up handfuls of grass. She watched the children pick up twigs, Spanish moss, leaves, anything they could find. The boy in purple overalls gathered cedar bark from a flower bed, and Peter dragged fallen branches out of the underbrush near the fence. They scattered everything they found over Claire’s body. In five minutes they had covered her entirely.

“Go back inside,” Peter said. “If anyone cries or says anything, I’ll kill them.”

Ella turned to go, and that was when she saw her tooth, a tiny white pebble in the weeds. She picked it up and rubbed it clean. Then she knelt beside Claire, clearing away moss and leaves until she found Claire’s hand. She dropped the tooth into the palm and closed the fingers around it. A shiver spread through her chest, and she covered the hand again. Then she put her arm around Benjamin and they all went back inside. Drawn by the sound of the chanting, they wandered into the hall. All around them hung the yellow photographs, the stony men and women and children looking down at them with sad and knowing eyes. In an oval of black velvet one girl in a white dress held the string of a wooden duck, her lips open as if she were about to speak. Her eyes had the wildness of Claire’s eyes, her legs the same bowed curve.

At last there was a rustle from the meditation room, and the adults drifted out into the hall. They blinked at the light and rubbed their elbows and knees. Ella’s mother and father linked arms and moved toward their children. Benjamin gave a hiccup. His eyes looked strange, the pupils huge, the white flat and dry. Their mother noticed right away. “We’d better get going,” she said to Ella’s father. “Ben’s tired.”

She went into the foyer and pulled their shoes from the pile. Mr. Kaplan followed, looking around in bewilderment, as if he could not believe people were leaving. He patted Benjamin on the head and asked Ella’s mother if she wanted to take some leftover food. Ella’s mother shook her head no. Her father thanked Mister Kaplan for his hospitality. Somewhere toward the back of the house the dog began to bark. Ella pulled Benjamin through the front door, barefoot, and her parents followed them to the car.

All the way past the rows of live oaks, past the cemetery where the little tombs stood like grounded boats, past the low flat shotgun houses with their flaking roofs, Benjamin sat rigid on the backseat and cried without a sound. Ella felt the sobs leaving his chest in waves of hot air. She closed her eyes and followed the car in her mind down the streets that led to their house, until it seemed they had driven past their house long ago and were moving on to a place where strange beds awaited them, where they would fall asleep thinking of dark forests and wake to the lives of strangers.

About the story, Orringer writes: "When I was eleven, almost a year after my mother was diagnosed with breast cancer, we attended a macrobiotic Thanksgiving feast at the home of some friends in New Orleans. The mother of the host family had died of cancer not long before, and the daughter, a girl close to my own age, showed me a glass of red water and insisted that it contained her mother's essence. That image remained with me ever since, and fifteen years later it became the inspiration for 'Pilgrims.' As I wrote the story I found myself remembering the strange foods we ate, the vast, rickety tree house outside, and the general sense of disconnection between the sick parents and their bewildered, frightened children. My own mother died when I was twenty. Eight years later I continue to be surprised by how fresh that loss feels and how much I wish I could know her as an adult."