CARLA CRAWFORD

Irena, 2014
Oil on Linen, 18 x 22 in

COURTESY WINFIELD GALLERY

MOLLY DOYLE

Sketches of the Arctic Tundra in October

I remember my town as it was when I was younger; it was somewhat placid, the people and the houses seeming to be wrapped in a scattering of blue smoke. The school I attended there was much like the rest of the town in the way it stood by itself on the top of a small hill, enclosed in a fist of thin trees, almost indiscernible if you did not know what you were looking for. Ms. Collier taught us all the subjects, never showing preference for one area of study over another, speaking about the Iroquoian and Algonquian cultures on the Atlantic coast of North America, and simplifying expressions by combining like terms with the same lackluster approach. I imagined pulling out the strands of her hair as she talked, limp and dry and lifeless as they appeared, and how naked her scalp would look without this protective layering. Other times I used my pencil down to a nub, shading one spot of my notebook until the lead was thick on the page and looked like a metal shield. Filbert Monahan sat next to me all day long drawing miniature maps over every surface he could reach, while I tried not to look at him because his sharp green eyes made me squirm with a feeling I could not define.

Midway through the month of October, Ms. Collier decided to assign the class a fun project for the upcoming holiday. Each of us was given a biome with the idea that we would draw it in an accurate but festive manner, inserting ghosts here and there, perhaps a couple pieces of candy and a pumpkin. Filbert and I were the arctic tundra.

In October it was as foggy as it always was, except the air was crisper and you could feel its edge as it pulled itself across your bare skin. On the first day of that month I had turned thirteen, and on the second my grandmother had died. My mother spent most of the time in her room with the blinds shut, or sitting at the living room table gluing together pieces of old *National Geographic* magazines she kept in a box at the foot of her bed. I didn't know what to say to her to make her feel better, or if there really was anything I could say. I was sure there must be but that I wasn't looking in the right places. My father and I went on hikes, we sat on the couch watching out the window the family of deer that lived behind the house. At night after work he cooked food he knew my mother liked—risotto with squash, chef's salad, lasagna, while she kept on gluing pieces down. I thought about this as I walked to Filbert's the first day we had arranged to work on the project,

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about whether I could tell him these things and if he'd understand.

There were two ways to get to the Monahans' house, and that first day I took the one that wound through the park so I could sit in the gazebo. In between two places there is always a strange moment where you distinctly feel that you are not in the place you left from and you are not in the place that you are heading to. It is like slipping into a gentle void, and it helps to pause and touch something solid around you so you know that you have not ceased to exist. The gazebo was that place for me. It was old, painted mostly white, but wind had torn off pieces, and underneath were patches of a feathery blue. I liked to imagine the person who gave it its blue coat peeking out through the white, looking at me. I did not know what to expect from Filbert's parents or his house. When I thought about a boy, he didn't exist in a physical space, he didn't have his own room, he didn't cry.

The door was red—simple, flat red, the kind you think about as a child when you are told to imagine colors. Filbert let me in. His father stood with his back towards us in front of a granite countertop where two squashes were laid out side by side, their bright yellow skins decadent against the gray stone. He turned around to face me, picked up his beer, and took a sip.

"Well hello there, Filbert's fine tundra friend."

I didn't quite know what to say. "I'm Charlie."

"Funny, you don't look like a boy to me," he laughed a bit into his beer.

"I'm not," I said, and turned to follow Filbert upstairs.

Filbert was only slightly taller than me, but he seemed to grow the more I talked to him, in a strange way, not only upwards, but in every direction until he was as large as the maps that sprawled across the walls of his room. I had asked him about the maps, each one hand-drawn with intricately designed rivers and roads, some with circles that showed the close-up of a school or a person's face. Drawing them helped with his insomnia, he told me; they grounded him, and on the nights when sleep seemed to elude him, he placed himself inside the region he was creating, imagining the dusty summer air winding through his body as he stood alone on an empty highway framed by dry brush, or the snow in his hands so cold it was almost hot as he walked along the sides of a mountain. He said these things without any sort of hesitation, matter-of-factly, like if I didn't know they were real it was my loss. In the days that followed, as we worked on our tundra scene, I listened to him talk about various things, his voice lilting until I felt like I was at sea. When we were outside, Filbert would fill his hands with whatever he could find, usually gravel, and would throw bits at trees or poles, and by the end of our conversation his palms were always empty.

Our tundra began to come together slowly. Filbert liked to draw the polar bears and the wolves most, and I drew the plants, shrubs, and grasses mainly, but I didn't mind, because between the two of us he was the better artist. It all looked very surreal. Filbert had drawn a caribou wearing a mosquito costume next to the ghost of a dead arctic hare, which I was not very fond of.

Once or twice, instead of working on the project, we walked down to the river together, took our shoes off, and dipped our bare feet into the water. It passed over our skin indifferently, just as it passed over the stones and the broken branches, frigid and smooth. My best friend and I used to bring our dolls to this river, dipping their hair into the folds of water. *Samantha, I just don't know what to do*, my doll would sigh, *I'm so in love.* Mary would make her doll answer, *Oh but surely it doesn't matter, just kiss him.* And we'd laugh and kiss their unchanging faces, mushing our lips up against their plastic ones, licking their cheeks. Neither of us knew how to talk about desire. With our feet disappeared in the mud of the banks, the trees around us, it didn't seem to matter. It was strange being there alone with Filbert, almost as if I were covering up my memories of Mary and the dolls. I watched the shocking paleness of his skin beneath the water, the edges of his feet losing definition as they rippled in time with the small currents.

Around this time, I used to wander out of the house alone to try and be a writer. It was something I did occasionally that made me feel significant, like drinking a sip of my father's beer or finishing a brussels sprout—adult things. I'd write about my parents, how their relationship seemed to shift the older I became, and whether this was my fault or a result of my ever-keener perception of the world around me. Sometimes I wrote down things Filbert said to me. On days I felt empty, I'd draw outlines of leaves that I saw scattered around me, making sure to detail the veins, any holes that were there.

On the last Saturday before the project was due, we met at Filbert's house as per usual. His mother was gone on a business trip somewhere. I never knew what she did, but she was the type of mother that I thought I would find in my book of paper dolls, always put together, glamorous in the way she never relaxed. I felt that, if you inserted her anywhere in the world, she would still call people honey and drink wine with her feet up, flipping through *Reader's Digest*—so I guessed that her business brought her to some calm part of the world, with palm trees and other people to bring you the drinks. Filbert's father was in the kitchen, getting ice from the freezer and placing it into a small glass. He grabbed some bourbon and poured it slowly over the cubes, which cracked a little as the liquid coated them. He was teasing Filbert about his skinny forearms, saying that a boy with forearms that skinny would never be able to reel in the ladies, that all charm resided in the arms, and Filbert was saying that he didn't really think that that was the case.

"What do you think, Charlie?" Filbert's father turned to me.

"Um, well, I guess I would say, what about the face?"

"What about it?"

"Isn't that pretty important?"

I never knew what she did, but she was the type of mother that I thought I would find in my book of paper dolls, always put together, glamorous in the way she never relaxed.

Filbert's father grinned. "Pretty important. But those forearms…now that's where the true magic lies."

"All right, Pops, we're going upstairs. Come on, Charlie," Filbert said.

We had just been planning on adding color to the picture since we had finished all the actual drawing, and we sprawled out on our stomachs across the hardwood floor upstairs. It was hard to understand what I should be saying to Filbert's parents, what they thought was funny. I had never seen his mother and his father in the same room as each other for longer than a brief passing moment, and I wanted to ask him about this, but I avoided asking people any questions I myself wouldn't want to answer. In second grade I had asked my good friend what she wanted most in the world right then. She had looked at me and said, "For my dad to come back" (he had just left her family for Africa, a new wife, new kids)—and I remember being shaken and responding, "No, I meant like a swim pool or something." Since then, I was sure my peers had gotten better at fabricating artificial answers, bland in a good way or an offenseless way, like polenta, but I still never risked it with anyone.

"Are you hungry at all?" Filbert asked me.

"Not so much. My dad made me a grilled cheese before I came."

He walked like a broken child, stumbling this way and that until he fell onto the couch where he curled into a small ball, one sock half off his foot.

"Alright, just checking." He picked up a colored pencil and looked at the name of the color etched in the side. "Anything in this biome look like it needs Mahogany to you?"

"Maybe the sky. A wooden sky."

"But then the snow would never get through, and where would we be then?" We laughed and began coloring.

Outside, the light began to seep slowly away. The sky looked swollen with the prospect of rain. While we worked, Filbert put on a CD, something kind of twangy, a little bit lonely-sounding but not in a bad way. The music he liked was generally like that, a strange conglomeration of stuff his parents played and stuff he had found in his own visits to record stores, a lot of songs that were very wispy, almost disappearing as you listened. In the distance there was a small crashing sound.

"What was that?" I asked Filbert.

"Nothing," he said, but he got up to go downstairs anyways.

"Wait, let me come with you. You can't face a troll on your own!"

He smiled, but I could tell he didn't think the joke was very funny, and he told me that I should just stay where I was and keep coloring bushes. It was his house, so I let him tell me what to do, and I kept coloring methodically, listening to the sound of the pencil brushing against the paper, until I realized the music wasn't playing anymore. I got up to go downstairs to find Filbert even though he told me not to. The stairs of the Monahans' house were very short-lived, and consisted of seven steps altogether. I found Filbert by the fireplace with his father, except it didn't look right. His father was limp and had his head in Filbert's lap like a small child, while Filbert was humming to him, soft and low, his voice breaking into nothing occasionally, then coming back louder.

"Filbert…"

He turned quickly. "I told you not to come down here. Go back upstairs."

"Is everything okay," I asked. I walked closer to them but not too close.

When my father and I went on hikes and came across a family of deer, he always made me be very still so we didn't scare them, and then we would move forward with small, delicate movements until we were right there among them. I kept thinking of that as I moved, conscious of my feet, of my hands. Filbert wasn't looking at me. He had his hand in his father's hair and was gently wiping it from his forehead in sweeps. His father, who had made no movements since I had entered the room, turned over sloppily and vomited all over Filbert's legs.

"Get a glass of water," Filbert told me, still not looking at me.

I did, brought it over to the pair of them, and watched as Filbert coaxed his father into drinking the entire cup little by little, congratulating him when it was done, like he was a child who had finished a teaspoon of cold medicine.

"Come here, on the other side of him."

Together we balanced his father between us, his weight pressing uncomfortably down on my shoulder. He walked like a broken child, stumbling this way and that until he fell onto the couch, where he curled into a small ball, one sock half off his foot.

"Go upstairs." So I did.

I waited up there in Filbert's room for a while, impossibly trying to think of anything but his father's half-bare foot, sticking out over the edge of the couch, a breeze rolling over it. When Filbert came upstairs he told me to turn around while he changed into a pair of new pants. I heard his pants drop to the ground behind me, heard his skin rub against the denim of the new pair as he pulled them on. He sat down next to the tundra.

"Good job on the shrubs," he said. "They're really coming to life."

"Thank you."

He shifted some colored pencils around on the floor, then picked one of them up and broke it in half.

"Whoops," he said, "hate it when that happens." Then he did it again two more times while I watched him quietly, holding on to the toes of my right foot to ground me.

By now it was completely dark outside the window. Whenever I tried to think of how I would ask Filbert about what had just happened, I imagined shaping the words carefully and neatly in my mouth, but when I attempted to release them they came out chopped up into little grunts which Filbert pretended not to notice. He looked at me then and told me not to tell anyone what I had seen. It wasn't important, he said; it wasn't for me to be concerned about.

"I'm not worried," I said.

"Well good."

"Does he do that a lot?"

"Depends."

"On what?"

"On what he wakes up like."

"That's not very nice of him."

"It's not mean."

"Sorry."

This curt version of Filbert was not something I was used to. He seemed like an abbreviated version of himself. I thought then that he was angry at me for coming downstairs when he told me not to, but I think now that he was embarrassed and lonely, hurt that his father saved his most sloppy self for his son who did not yet scare him in the same way his wife did. We settled into a cushioned silence, we talked on and off, we colored, we changed the music. He told me about how his science teacher had put dry ice in cups of water on Friday, the carbon dioxide sublimating into a beautiful fog which came up around his face in rolls. He said he wished that he could command that fog to appear whenever he wanted it to, and that he wished all science was as beautiful as dry ice was to him. I think now that he craved the romance of the practical that his mother always spoke of, the firmness of a belief based on something you could prove. I listened and nodded.

When he went to go check on his father, I stood up and looked at the tundra from above. It sprawled out below me, our Halloween creation of this place, colored brightly and fervently, and then I jumped up as high as I could and landed right in the middle of it. It felt good squishing paper, kind of like tearing up a book, which I had done once when I was mad at the way it ended, before I knew that you didn't do that with things that didn't satisfy you—you ignored them and moved on. It was a policy I told no one about, but one that I had made up my mind to live by, and I worked diligently at engraining it into my being, waiting for it to feel as natural as breathing. It manifested itself as silence, and it grew deeper as the years went on, until I slipped up less and less, until I rarely broke my calm by ripping books or denting posters, the feigned oblivion growing inward like a vine. When Filbert came back into the room, he got down on his knees and ran his hand over the creases in the tundra, looking sideways at me as if he were waiting for an explanation. I looked back at him and said, "At least it's not ruined," and he nodded in agreement before putting it off to the side.

For a while, Filbert and I fell asleep on his floor next to each other. He fell asleep first, his breathing changing, a slight whistle sound escaping as he exhaled. I followed the roads on his walls with my eyes until I felt dizzy, and then I very carefully placed my hand in Filbert's limp sleeping one. His skin felt different than anyone's that I had been close to before. It did not give way like my mother's or feel gargantuan like my father's. It was smoother than I had imagined a boy's hand would be. I fell asleep like that, my hand on top of his, almost closed around it but not quite.

Molly Doyle recently graduated from University of California, Santa Cruz with a degree in creative writing. This is her first fiction publication. She enjoys writing both poetry and fiction and hopes to continue to do so in her travels after college.