

The Only Ones

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The Summer People

MARTIN MAPLE lived on an island, in a gray-shingled cabin perched on a scrub-choked cliff that plunged down into the ocean. He lived there with his father and a machine. His father was a gentle man who never yelled but also never hugged his boy. The machine was an elaborate bundle of knobs, levers, gears, motors, and propellers, and when it was turned on, it sang out with a comforting whir, but it didn't do much else, because it wasn't finished.

Next to the cabin was a ladder that led down the cliff to mussel-encrusted rocks and a crooked but sturdy dock, where Martin and his father kept a skiff for fishing. They had a small garden that gave them root vegetables and greens, and at the end of a small path was a bigger field for grains and corn. The soil was rocky, but Martin's father understood how to tame it. There were deer on the island, and Martin and his father set traps for them and ate them. From the sea, they

pulled mackerel and cod and lobster, though they were careful not to steal from lobster pots.

“They might shoot you without a thought,” Martin’s father would say as he pointed to the raincoat-clad men piloting the trawlers that bobbed along the frosty horizon. Not stealing from lobster pots was one of Martin’s father’s rules. He had many rules.

The air on the island smelled of salt and seaweed and firs, but as far as Martin was concerned, that was how the air smelled everywhere. He had never left the island. His father had never allowed it. When he asked his father what lay beyond the island, the answer was always the same: “Not what we’re looking for.”

In the cabin they had one book, a dog-eared paperback that Martin’s father had passed along after he had witnessed his son puzzling over the markings that decorated the sterns of boats. The cover was missing, so Martin didn’t know its title, but it was a collection of stories about men traveling to other planets, meeting aliens and doing fantastically strange things. Martin’s father had used this book to teach Martin how to read. When Martin asked if this was what it was like beyond the island, his father said, “No, someone just had an active imagination.”

The book was about men, but there was one story that featured the line *They piled aboard the vessel, fathers and mothers, and all of the children.* Martin knew what women were, but he had never heard of mothers.

“What are mothers?” he asked his father.

So his father sat him down and had that talk fathers have about men and women and falling in love and playing soft music and turning off the lights.

“Who is my mother?” Martin asked.

His father smiled at this and took a moment to himself. When he finally responded, he said, “Your mother doesn’t exist.”

“She’s dead?” Martin asked.

His father shook his head and said, “Have you ever seen a bubble taken up by the air from the foam of the sea?”

“Yes.”

“You know how it seems perfect? How it floats? You know how all the colors of the world seem to be dancing on its skin?”

“Yes.”

“That was your mother. But like a bubble . . .” He flicked his fingers out as if to pantomime something bursting into nothingness. He left it at that.

The summer people arrived every year when the days were at their longest. They stayed in tall houses on the other side of the island and came and went on shiny boats with steering wheels and hulking motors or blindingly white sails that reminded Martin of heron wings.

When the summer people were on the island, there was a special set of rules. You never spoke to them. You didn’t trap the deer. You stayed close to home. And you never let the summer people see the machine. You would tuck it in the cramped back room of the cabin and you would pull the blinds. You wouldn’t touch it at all for months.

They seemed like reasonable rules, and Martin followed them as much as a boy could. When he wasn’t fishing or tending the garden with his father, he would hide among the pines and rocks and he would watch the people from a

distance, though he was much too scared to approach them. The island had no shops or restaurants, or even roads. The summer people brought their supplies by boat and kept to the trails and rocky shores near their houses. There was never any reason for paths to cross, and Martin's life went on without incident. That is, until the inevitable showed its face.

The inevitable was named George.

Martin was nine years old when he met George. George was nine too, but Martin didn't know that then. He only knew that George was a summer person and he had long blond bangs and a few large freckles on his face and he stayed in a maroon house with a rowboat in the backyard and a flagpole in the front that rattled when the wind blew.

"You live here year-round, don'tcha?" George asked Martin when he snuck up on him in a thick patch of blueberry bushes.

"I'm not supposed to talk to people like you," Martin whispered.

"And I'm not supposed to talk to people like you," George said.

"What sort of person am I like?" Martin asked.

"Stranger," George said.

"Stranger than what?"

"Than anyone I've ever met." George laughed.

It was easy to like George. He was kind and curious and loved dirt and nonsense. It wasn't easy to see him, though. Martin couldn't tell his father about this new friendship. It had to be a secret, and the guilt such secrets carried was nearly unbearable. The thrill, however, was unbearable too. And the thrill inevitably won out.

Late at night, Martin would sneak from his room and

make his way across the island until he found himself at his friend's flagpole. If George had raised a flag that he called the Jolly Roger, it was okay to knock on his window and rouse him from his sleep. Then the two would take off into the woods together.

Martin introduced George to all the mysterious ways of the island. He showed him the hollow tree where he hid things. He brought him to the rock outcropping where he would climb up and look at stars and watch boats come and go. He taught him how to trap animals.

In return, George told Martin stories. Martin desperately wanted to know what life was like off the island, and George always satisfied with tales of chaotic schoolrooms and bicycle stunts and older kids who did scandalous things, like smoking cigarettes and kissing with open mouths. There were a million questions Martin could have asked, but staying up late was exhausting, and their time together lasted only an hour or two each night. So he simply let George talk about the things that were happening in his world, and that was more than enough for Martin.

"Why doesn't your father let you leave the island?" George once asked.

"He says there's nothing for us out there," Martin responded. "Our destiny is here."

"Why doesn't he let you talk to people? He doesn't even let you have pets, does he?" George shook his head in disbelief.

"Losing a pet will break your heart, and you're bound to lose them all," Martin said, echoing his father's words. "And people? People leave. They always have."

"Does he lie to you?" George asked gently.

“Do your parents?” Martin shot back.

“Where’s your mom?”

Martin could have told him that he didn’t know, that his father was hiding the truth about her in metaphors and silence. But he wasn’t ready for that yet. “It doesn’t matter,” he said defensively. “Just tell me more of your stories.”

George and his family left the island at the end of the summer, but he promised Martin he would be back the next year. That autumn, after the last boat of summer people took to the water, Martin celebrated his tenth birthday. Then he and his father pulled the machine out into the yard, where there was room to get at its insides. Like every year since Martin could remember, they went back to work on it.

All day, every day.

It was school for Martin. Through the machine, he learned about physics and engineering, electricity, and everything his father had the ability to explain. It wasn’t a particularly big machine. A man and a boy could fit in it, but not much else. Inside, next to a control panel, was a glass door that opened up to a tall and hollow chamber with a small shelf and a round basin at the back. His father said the chamber was the machine’s heart. All the while, the purpose of the machine remained a mystery.

“It’s our destiny, right?” Martin once asked. “But what does it do?”

“The less you understand, the better,” his father explained. “For your own protection. It’s a powerful thing, and if it’s misused, the results could be devastating.”

“I promise I won’t misuse it,” Martin assured him. “And I would never tell anyone about it.”

“Magic, then,” his father said. “It’s going to help us start

over. That's all you need to know. Life is a path, Martin, and you follow it. Sometimes you follow it blind. Maps are for doubters, and I raised a believer."

It was a typical answer from his father, astoundingly elusive, but to a boy of ten, it seemed like wisdom from a life lived. Martin knew only a few details about his father's days before the island. He knew his name was Glen. He knew he had owned a farmhouse. He knew he had even lived with a circus for a time. "It's funny," his father told him with a smile. "I didn't run away *to* it. I ran away *from* it."

"Is that where you learned to build the machine?" Martin asked.

"It's where I learned about it," his father said. "It was my father's circus. There were carnival rides there. Not many, but we had a carousel and a Ferris wheel. Basically things to spin you in a circle. I always helped the mechanic when the rides needed fixing. One day, he gave me a piece of paper. It had small ink sketches of the machine. Showed the inside, showed the outside, not much else."

"Did he tell you what it did?" Martin asked.

"He didn't know," his father said. "He'd found the paper folded and jammed in the gears of the Ferris wheel. There was one word written on it. *Hope*. That didn't explain much, so he gave it to me, thinking a smart kid with fresh eyes and loads of imagination would figure it out. I gave it a close look, but I didn't have all that much interest. A few days later, I ran away. I threw the sketches in a trash can somewhere."

"But you *did* figure it out?" Martin asked.

"Eventually. But not for a long time, not until I'd almost completely forgotten about it. You were just a baby then. We lived in a farmhouse, far away from the island. And I—it's

sad to say—was a desperate person. Completely lost, full of regret. The only thing that saved me from going over the edge was a knock on our door one evening. The mechanic, by that time an old man, had found me. He asked if I still had the sketches. I told him I'd thrown them out. It didn't upset him, but he gave me a pat on the shoulder and said, 'I think about that machine every day. I guess it's better to just imagine what it might have done.' Then he left."

"But you didn't just imagine, did you?"

"No I didn't. The realization hit me like a fist to the jaw: the machine could give us exactly what the paper had advertised and exactly what we needed—hope. I started building it from scraps of my memory."

"Where did you get the pieces?" Martin asked.

"I bought some. Stole others. I started the construction in the farmhouse, but it was trial and error. People thought I was crazy. I was a bit crazy, I suppose. I was also careless. There was a fire. I managed to save you and the pieces, but that's all. Not the house, not all the other things. We moved to this island, where I could take my time, be safe and deliberate. It was also a place where no one would bother us."

"And we have everything?"

"Almost."

Almost was the problem. They had almost everything. But on a rainy spring morning, about a month before the summer people were scheduled to arrive, Martin's father put on his coat and told him that he had to leave for a while. He had to get the final piece for the machine.

"Can I come with you?" Martin asked.

"Someone has to stay with the machine."

“How long will you be gone?”

“Hard to say,” his father said. “Could be a few days. Could be longer. No matter what, I’ll be back for your eleventh birthday. In the meantime, it’s your job to carry on.”

A few hours later, his father got into the skiff and set out onto the spitting ocean, heading to where the trawlers bobbed.

Days passed. Martin climbed up to the rock outcropping and watched the horizon. The skiff didn’t return.

He wasn’t too worried, but as the days became weeks and there was still no sign of his father, seeds of doubt were planted in his mind. How far did he have to travel to find this final piece? Was it a dangerous journey? Could he die along the way?

It was still months until his eleventh birthday, so Martin pushed those concerns aside and did what his father had told him to do. He carried on. He tended the garden and the field. He mended the frayed wires that transmitted electricity from solar panels to their cabin. He trapped deer and caught fish. He kept the machine clean and polished, and every morning he practiced the procedure of turning it on. In the evenings, when the distractions of survival were furthest from his mind, loneliness would take hold. So he would sit by a lantern and read the book his father had given him, over and over again. It provided more comfort, perhaps, than it should have.

Finally, when the summer people arrived, he used levers and fulcrums to lift the machine onto dollies, and he moved it to the back room. He spied the Jolly Roger and tapped on George’s window.

He had thought long and hard about what to tell George.

On one hand, George was the only person in the world he could trust, and Martin wanted to express how worried he was about his father. On the other, he couldn't betray his father's wishes. The more he thought about it, the more he began to believe that carrying on had nothing to do with surviving. It was all about the machine. And no one else was ever supposed to know about the machine. So he pretended that nothing had changed. The friendship was treated as a secret, relegated to nighttime meetings in the forest.

It started off as thrilling for Martin as it had ever been, but as the summer went on, he began to wonder what else there was in the world besides what George was telling him about. Martin had no idea what video games were, but they sounded soulless and flat to him. Soccer seemed like an intriguing sport at first, but then he realized that nothing happened. And school? It must be something other than just pranks played on substitute teachers and gossip involving invitations to birthday parties. Martin's father had been out beyond the ocean for over a month. There had to be something bigger keeping him there.

"Do you know anyone else's stories?" Martin asked George.

"What do you mean?" George said. "Like books and stuff?"

"You have books?"

"Sure," George said with a shrug. "I'll bring you one."

So he did. The next night, George presented Martin with a ratty paperback with a picture of a pistol and a pair of broken eyeglasses on the cover. Martin took it home, and over the course of the next day, he read the entire thing.

The plot centered on a police detective who was investi-

gating the kidnapping of a child. It didn't make much sense to Martin, but all the voices of the characters were endlessly fascinating. In this book there were people who grunted and cackled when they talked, who sneered and whispered and said inappropriate things. They were nothing like his father and nothing like George or the people he constantly talked about.

"You have any other books?" Martin asked George.

"I don't read much, but my parents have tons," George said. The next night he gave Martin another.

It became an addiction. At first, he took one book a night from George, but after a couple of weeks, he was demanding three or four. All day he would sit on the rock outcropping and read about pirates and doctors and magicians and lots of people who kissed and lots of people who killed and lots of people whose lives changed in an instant. As far as Martin was concerned, all the books were classics, because they were all full of such surprises. They distracted him from life.

The meetings with George became less about friendship than they were about exchanging books. By the end of the summer, George didn't even bother leaving his yard. He would simply place an old wooden lobster pot full of books next to the flagpole, and Martin would grab what he wanted and return what he had finished.

It didn't even occur to Martin that this arrangement might bother George. After all, George had his own family and his own life full of stories, and if those things bored him, then he could always pull a book off the shelf. Martin had taught him everything he could about the island. What more was in it for George?

One night, Martin got his answer to that question. When he opened the lobster pot in search of books, he found just an envelope with his name written on it. Inside, there was a single sheet of paper. On the paper was an address.

It meant nothing to him, so he quietly made his way to George's window and gave it a tap. Almost immediately, George's face appeared. He had been waiting.

"It's his home," George said.

"Whose home?" Martin asked.

"Your dad's. Before he came here."

Martin stared at the address. It was a simple string of numbers and the names of a street and a town. He assumed it was the farmhouse where he and his father had lived when Martin was a baby. It was impossible to picture a place, though. It was impossible to imagine them anywhere but on the island.

"I told you about the Internet, right?" George went on. "You can find all sorts of things with it."

"Thank you . . . I guess," Martin said.

"He left, didn't he?"

"How do you know that?"

"You taught me the island," George said. "How to watch people. Some of us don't sit around all day reading books, you know."

"Oh."

"I haven't told anyone," George assured him. "People try to ignore you and your dad."

"I know."

"Is that why you try to ignore us?"

"What do you mean?"

"I was your friend, Martin. Your only friend."

"You still are."

“We’re going home tomorrow. I know it’s been a while, but I’m gonna miss telling you stories. Helping you out.”

“I’m gonna miss—”

George stopped him right there. “Do you wanna come with us?”

This was the question Martin had dreamt about being asked. Now that he was being asked, it was also the most frightening thing he could imagine. The world he had read about was so big and so strange and so unlike the island he didn’t know if he could handle it. Besides, his eleventh birthday hadn’t come. His father had promised to be back by then. Together, they would finish the machine.

“No,” he told George. “No thank you. But can you do me a favor?”

“Maybe.”

“Go to the address,” Martin said. “Tell me what you see there.”

“It’s on the other side of the country,” George explained.

“Is that far?”

Then George looked at Martin as if this were the first time he had ever laid eyes on him, and asked, “You gonna be okay here, all by yourself?”

“Of course,” Martin said, less than convincingly. “I’ve already done it for months. Besides, my father will be back and everything will be fine.”

“I’ll be back too,” George assured him. “Next summer. Count on it.”

On a morning in early autumn, after the summer people had left, Martin celebrated his eleventh birthday. He did so by climbing up to the rock outcropping and watching the ocean. For the last time, he waited for his father.

It was midday and the tide was high when Martin saw a smudge of white on the horizon. It was his father's skiff, its bow pointed toward the island. A rush of pure joy grabbed Martin, and he hurried down from the outcropping, into the woods, past the cabin, to the ladder. He almost slipped on the ladder's steps, but he made it to the rocks unscathed and just in time to see the boat floating a few hundred yards offshore.

He waved his arms and called for his father, but there was no response. The skiff, flat-bottomed and wooden, with slats for seats, rocked back and forth on the water. There was no cabin, so Martin could see why no one waved or called back: it was empty, except for a leafy branch of a tree that was resting on the seats, as if it had broken off and fallen inside during a storm.

Martin dove into the frigid water. The tide was on its way out, a wind was picking up, and the current was pulling the skiff back to sea. Martin couldn't let it get away. He had to know if there was anything else inside, any clue that his father had recently been aboard. But as hard as he swam, it was not nearly hard enough. Before long, the skiff was near the horizon, disappearing almost as quickly as it had come.

Defeated, wet, and cold, Martin returned to the cabin. He lit a fire in their wood-burning stove. Sadness didn't sit with him. Anger did. To be teased by the skiff! His father was an experienced mariner. Was Martin to believe he had fallen overboard? As soon as Martin was dry and warm, he went to the back room, where the machine was hidden. He hoisted it onto the dollies and brought it out into the yard.

He turned all his attention to the machine. By studying it, he hoped that he would understand what exactly his father

was seeking, why it was taking so long to find it, and why the skiff had appeared on Martin's birthday in the guise of a gift when it was merely an empty box. He took the machine apart, and he put it back together. He searched the book his father had given him, underlining passages about machines, hoping they would reveal something. They revealed nothing. The blank spaces in the machine were blank spaces in his mind, and he realized the painful truth: he didn't have the ability to know what might fill them.

Martin fell into a deep depression. Every day he regretted his decision to stay on the island instead of leaving with George. As the winter winds blew in and then blew out, the only thing that kept him going was the knowledge that when the days got long, the boats would show up, and so too would his friend. He would have his second chance.

"Of course I'll go with you," he would tell George. "My father's not coming back. I have this machine, but I don't care about that anymore. You were right. You're always right about everything."

So he waited again, only this time he waited for George. He climbed the rock outcropping and looked for boats. He watched the horizon for a long time, but no one came. It was hot, but there was no music playing across the open water. The sun was high, but there were no families fumbling along the rocks with picnic baskets in their hands. It was summer, but the summer people just weren't there.

The lobster trawlers should have clued him in. He hadn't seen them since before that horrible eleventh birthday. While his father used to tell him that "someday the lobsters will run out and the trawlers will disappear," he'd probably meant they would trickle away, with fewer trawlers appearing every

year, until one day there would be none left. He probably hadn't meant it would happen all at once. But that was what happened. One day they were there. The next they weren't.

Now the summer people hadn't come, and this went against everything his father had predicted. "They will keep coming," he had said. "There will be more and more of them, until the place becomes a theme park."

"What's a theme park?"

"It's torture, son. With roller coasters."

His father was wrong. *This* was torture. Alone, clueless, Martin was trapped. His body throbbed with anxiety. He slept very little. As strange and cruel as it might have seemed, the loss of Martin's father paled in comparison to the loss of George. Devastation was worsened by desperation. He needed to know what had happened to everyone. When the summer ended, he had to make a choice. He could go on just as he had been, wallowing in self-pity. Or he could prepare.

He thought about something George had once told him: "There are all sorts of people in the world. With all sorts of ways of seeing stuff."

With this in mind, Martin formulated a plan. He would start breaking into the island's houses. He would search them front to back. He would gather every book he could find. From that point on, he would do little else but read.

So he did. He went from house to house, living in each until he finished every title inside. He continued fishing, gardening, and trapping, but only for a couple of hours a day, only for long enough to keep himself going, to keep himself reading.

From the books, he came to realize that the world had

plenty of joy in it, but also some terrible things. Bombs that wiped out cities. Savage landscapes full of people willing to fight you at the drop of a hat. Diseases and vengeful gods and science gone mad. Whether it was fiction didn't matter. This was how the people out there saw their home. If he was going to survive among them, he needed to speak their language.

Eleven years old became twelve years old. Fall tumbled into winter, and winter raged into spring. Another summer arrived and Martin still hadn't seen a single person, but his head was now rattling with a hoard of stories and dialogues. And when that summer neared its end, he confronted a fateful day. He read the last of the books on the island.

So he returned to his cabin. He grabbed the grubby mass of paper that was the book his father had left him. He found the sheet with the address George had given him and slid it into the pages of the book. He placed it all in a canvas bag, which he slung over his shoulder. And he didn't think much about what he did next. Thinking often leads to second thoughts, and he certainly didn't need those. He simply headed straight across the island.

Martin's body could have withered during his year of bookish solitude, but a recent growth spurt had gifted his muscles with an unexpected bulk and had forced him to scavenge a new wardrobe from cardboard boxes in the summer peoples' closets. It had also granted him the strength to drag the rowboat out from behind George's house and over the rocks. He placed it into the ocean. With oars on his shoulder and the bag on his hip, he climbed inside. He looked up at the sun. He looked back at the island he had called home for as long as he could remember.

“They come from where the sun sets,” Martin’s father had once said about the summer people. “That’s why we do our fishing where the sun rises.”

Martin leaned an oar into a rock and pushed off. He would head toward the sunset. If he wasn’t ready now, then he never would be.