

Alice Hoffman

How to Eat a Pie

1882

The others have all gone out. That doesn't trouble him. He likes silence, the waves of quiet, the way his thoughts are so sharp and clear with nothing to drown them out. His father must find work outside this small midwestern town or it is likely they will starve. His mother sits on a bench near the river, weeping as she prays for good fortune. His brothers and sister have ventured down the street to a house where an old woman takes pity on them and gives them warm rolls and milky tea. The children are devoted to their parents, especially this son, Ehrich, the one who longs for quiet and his own thoughts.

The parents came from Budapest. At home they speak the old language among one another. Their father is the only one in the family who still cannot master English; he is a rabbi, losing his tiny congregation, an old-fashioned man. Ehrich has heard him crying outside the back door. Even people of their own faith do not greet him respectfully on the street; instead, they glance away, worried, as if the family has brought bad fortune with them in their suitcases. The children have grown up in this country, but darkness lingers around them like ashen halos. They wear clothes that are too big on their frames; black woolen coats that American children would never wear. The older boys stay out of the house and make their own way. The younger children have a game they play in the meadow in which they tie each other to trees, then must try to escape. The rules, set out by Ehrich, insist they may not cry out or give up. Sometimes local people walking through the woods bump into them unexpectedly. In the dusk it is a startling sight, how quiet these children are, how their flesh flames with rope burns. With their black coats and dark hair they seem like creatures any normal person would flee from, even the little girl, who is too young to follow rules, and who calls out whenever she sees strangers, begging to be untied so that she might win the game.

EHRICH IS THE sort who takes matters into his own hands. He is calm and thoughtful, even at eight years old. At birth he was a quiet baby; his mother came to believe he was seeing into another world, one most people had no access to.

"You're dreaming," her husband said to her. "He's just like any other child, but because he's ours, he's better."

Perhaps she was dreaming. There were times when she would rise from her bed at night, panicked, certain her son had been kidnapped, only to find him safe in his cradle, eyes open, hands up, as if to catch the breeze coming in through the window.

Now when his parents are out and he is alone at home, Ehrich can hear mice in the corners of the room. He knows their route, and leaves them bits of crusts that he keeps in his pocket. He has trained several mice to stand on their hind legs and rub their front feet together, as if clapping. He often imagines what it might be like to be among them, how he could disappear and become unseen by human eyes, and yet still know human secrets and desires as if by magic. If he is hungry, which is most of the time, he closes his eyes and

imagines himself invisible. He does away with earthly needs, and rises above this realm of hardship. At such times, there is only a cloudy blue, no darkness, only light. He sees the world as a turning globe. Time stretches out before him, as if it were a roll of silk, fabric he has never touched, but has often imagined.

He lies in the tall grass for hours. He is not lazy, not thinking idle thoughts. He is practicing control, concentrating on what he sees and hears. There is bee-buzz from a nearby orchard and the tangy scent of wild onions, a sweet green hint of fragrance only the rabbits notice. Wisconsin is a strange territory where winter lasts too long and spring and summer flash by in a blink. In his mind Wisconsin forms the shape of a box. The box has a lid and a lock. Therefore, he assumes there must be a key. He will be free if he figures out the puzzle of the trap they have fallen into, a town named Appleton. People here do not like outsiders, and by that they mean folks from Milwaukee. Nearby is the Fox River, more than 30 feet across in some places. There are tall reeds on thin stalks, alongside blooming yellow and scarlet wildflowers. Ehrich can hear the thrum of the river's motion rising up through the grass. He likes to memorize all manner of things, train schedules, algebraic formulas, recipes, some of which cause him to gasp with hunger. He could walk into the hotel restaurant and instruct the chef, for he has memorized the recipes for pot roast, dumplings, corn bread, trout with mustard sauce. People comment that he looks as if he knows too much for his age. It's the color of his eyes, the stunning deep-set pale blue in his dark face. He plays memory games to pass the time. He knows how long it takes to travel from Appleton to New York City, and to Buffalo, and to San Antonio and Los Angeles, California. He can recite the mileage as a crow flies and as a man walks and as a horse rides. He practices seeing inside common objects, imagining the milky threads wrapped around the heart of a seed pod as it blows across the meadow, the gills lining a trout's silver skin as it skims along the river, the petals and stamens of a single blossom, the bones that form his own hand.

HE FINDS A wonderful book in the library. He often sits for hours, perched in the shadows so the librarians won't notice him and tell him he is too young to be in the medical textbook section. In this book there are drawings of every part of the body. Tissue, muscles, bones, veins. He memorizes these as well. He goes over them as he falls asleep at night, beside his brother, Theo. Ehrich sleeps beside Theo on a mat on the floor, his sister in a small bed near the window. His father travels from town to town, looking for another congregation, and is often gone from home. Ehrich hears his mother crying. He puts his ear to the floor and catches her sobs in low bits of vibration, the blue of her cry pulling at him, breaking through the chambers of his heart.

Because his heart often pounds, he has learned to slow his heart rate, concentrating so thoroughly he can will it to beat more slowly, controlling the blood flow. Mice do this when you spy them, they freeze their tiny hearts, their breath slows to a hush and their presence in this world evaporates to a dull mist. He has held them in his hand, felt their still bodies, nearly convinced they were dead, only to take delight when he placed them back on the tabletop to find they were very much alive as they safely darted away. If he can manage this trick for himself, he believes he will be able to slow down time as well. In doing so, he might be allowed the hours he needs to make things right. He will fly through the sluggish world around him, his ideas pulsing. He is filled with ideas and that eases his hunger. He wonders

if other people think as he does, dissecting the world to understand it, if they hold blades of grass up to gauge the direction of the wind, if they have also memorized how many bones are in the human hand, becoming so familiar with each one that it is possible for him to shrink his hand from the ropes that he and his brother and sister use for their game in the woods. Nine times out of ten, he can set himself free, but, because it is a game, he pretends to need to be rescued. He waits in the twilight and watches clouds of mosquitoes rise from the grass. When he sees his brother and sister racing toward him, he fits his hands back into the knot of rope.

He does not know what other people see when they gaze at a coffee pot, but he sees cylinders and bolts because he has taken this very pot apart and put it back together. Now when he looks at the battered metal pot on the stove, he knows it in a deep way, how it fits together, what it's made of, just as he knows his mother is made of grief, that it runs beneath her skin. He is the sort of individual who is never bored. His brother calls to him to play catch, but catch is interesting only for so long. Complications intrigue him. He takes the door handles off the cabinets and replaces them; he unwinds a sweater to understand how it was knitted together.

THERE IS A great mansion called Hearthstone House on a bluff above the river, the first house in town to be lit by electricity. It glows and calls to him, a firefly on the hill. He follows one of the handymen around, trying to make himself useful. Eventually he's allowed to assist in some of the work, holding the doors steady as the handyman puts in the new locks. When the workmen break for lunch, he sits cross-legged and takes a lock apart in order to examine the pieces. When caught, he's cuffed on the head and told to be more careful. "This cost money," the handyman grouses. "Can your old man pay me for this lock?"

The workmen laugh. His father in his black coat is a joke, how he mutters to himself in a dark language when he walks through Appleton, as if lost in a distant country. Ehrich is chased off the worksite, and he regrets this, for he's come to love the house. Luckily, he has already memorized the fittings of the lock, and in doing so the lock has become a part of him, like the grass, or the scales of the fish he catches in the river, or the bones in his hand that he can contract at will. He goes home, shares in a meager supper of potatoes and onions, then reads to his sister, all the while aware that he is not finished with what he needs to know. He goes out the bedroom window and down the path while everyone else is asleep. He has no fear of the dark even though his brother Theo sometimes cries at night because he's certain there are hidden monsters creeping into the corners of their room. The younger boy is more sensitive, a natural worrier.

"An owl can see through the dark," Ehrich tells his brother. "Imagine you're an owl." He has been reading about nocturnal creatures, how owls process light differently. "What you see you cannot fear," he tells his six-year old brother.

He returns to the Hearthstone house. He wishes it belonged to him, that he had already changed his life and the lives of those in his family. He climbs the steps of the porch, lightly and with grace. The door lurches open, as if to greet him. For an instant it seems that it is indeed his house, and that if he walks inside his mother will be there, the grief beneath her skin dissolved. But it is only the wind. The handyman has forgotten to lock the door.

Later, when he climbs back through the window of his bedroom, Theo is still awake,

waiting for him.

“Where did you go?’ he asks. “Did you see owls?”

“I saw the kind of house we’ll live in one day,” Ehrich tells his brother. “You’ll be able to turn a switch and the whole house will be filled with light.”

“But did you see an owl?” Theo wants to know, not giving up. They call Theo *Dash* sometimes, because he is always trying, and failing, to keep up with his brother.

“I was an owl,” Ehrich tells him. “And now I’m your brother again.”

IN SEPTEMBER THE leaves are already fringed with yellow. Summer is something you imagine here, a few days of golden light. He is in a meadow. Appleton is still a box, but the box has slowly become invisible; he can see through it, into the future. His father has to go back to Milwaukee again, to search for work. “Tell your mother I won’t be back,” he told Ehrich when the boy walked him to the train station. “I’ll send for you.”

As his father waited for the train, children threw clods of dirt at them. The rabbi didn’t move; his black coat was sodden with dirt.

“Imagine they’re not there,” his father advised him.

For the first time Ehrich understood he and his father have this skill in common. They practiced the same tricks. They looked straight ahead, past the train station, past Appleton, into the blue sky. They stayed that way until the children tired of their game. It was as if those boys had never existed, as if there had only been sycamore trees smacking at them with their loose branches, urged on by the wind.

HE HAS NOT been able to go home and tell his mother the rabbi will not be returning. He thinks he may stay in the field all night rather than face her cries. He gazes up to spy a circle of red, not the sun, but a perfect apple. He sees through to the core and seeds inside the fruit, imagines all the many strands of pulp inside the shiny skin. He leaps up, energized. He climbs the tree and shimmies far out on the branches to shake the boughs. Starlings flutter up from the leaves, all in a rush. He is a good climber, agile, with a natural grace. He is an athlete without even trying to be so. All summer he swam in the river on warm days, even though the currents are dangerous and have taken many lives. He doesn’t fight against the movement of the water the way boys who drown do. Instead, he becomes the current. He slips inside it and knows when to dive beyond the churning waters into a clear, smooth pool.

Only last week, as summer was ending, he attended the funeral of two older boys who drowned on a hot afternoon, teen-aged boys who looked like men once they were dead. His mother forbade him to go, the service was at the church, which they have never entered. “They’re not our people, they won’t let you in.”

Ehrich listened to her, then kissed her and told her not to worry, and was down the road before she could call him back. He stood in the last pew in his black coat, his hair combed back with water. The coffins were open. The drowned boys’ skin was tinged blue. Their mothers sobbed. They called out, breaking the silence, asking why God would do this to them.

Ehrich did not ask such questions, nor did he believe he deserved answers. He knew that the heart expanded when air is cut off and the lungs fill with water, and that a drowning

person is killed from the inside out. Ehrich often swam with Joe and Charles; though they were nearly grown men, neither was as strong a swimmer as he. "Dang," Charles had said to him when they tested who could stay underwater longest and Ehrich won easily. "You must be half fish." Charles and Joe had come up sputtering, but Ehrich had been counting off the minutes in slowed-down time. He slowed his heart, his lungs, and stayed beneath the water twice as long as they had.

"How do you do that?" Joe had asked. "Seriously. Is there some trick?"

He should have told Joe the truth, but he didn't think he'd be believed. A person's mind could control his heart. Instead he'd shrugged and went home. He didn't mention that before he went swimming in the river he practiced faithfully out in the yard of their house, ducking his head into a bucket and holding his breath. He thought of fish as he did so, their glimmering fins, their pale eyes.

ON THE DAY his father leaves them for Milwaukee saying he won't return, Ehrich gathers apples in his shirt. The sun is warm on his skin. He is shirtless in the autumn air. It doesn't matter that the temperature is chill; such annoyances are part of the real-time world. He simply steps through such things. Hunger, cold, thirst, none of it lasted if you moved in your own time. He wishes Charles and Joe had known this; maybe they wouldn't have panicked beneath the surface and breathed in river water and drowned themselves before they were men. They might have counted and calmed themselves so they could watch time filter past.

That evening when he goes home he is grateful for the look on his mother's face when he empties his shirt-full of apples on the tabletop. He will remember her face at that moment for a very long time. She calls him brilliant in a language no one in their city understands, but he knows exactly what she says.

HIS YOUNGER BROTHER and sister help make the dough, sprinkling flour across the tabletop before the crust is rolled out. He thinks of ingredients, how they are one thing if kept separate and something entirely different when sifted together. His father has told him he is difficult to keep. He is growing too fast, eating too much. They can't afford him much longer. It's a simple fact. He has tried his best to be smaller and take up less room. He fits himself into cabinets, under his sister's bed, inside a broom closet. He does not need much air if he concentrates on each breath.

They have a wood-heated oven that they fill with logs. His mother bakes the pie and the scent is overwhelming. His brother and sister cry with hunger and anticipation.

"Darlings," his mother says in the language they share. "Quiet. We will wait until your father gets home."

She doesn't know he won't return that night. Ehrich has been to Milwaukee with his father on two occasions and has worked beside him sorting rags. He knows exactly how many miles it is to San Antonio and Houston. He dreams of places where there is no winter, where he will not own a coat. His brother and sister look at him, beseeching him. He knows what they are saying without words. They are hungry and if he can't help them, who can? His father in Milwaukee who can't speak English? His mother who has baked a pie, then stored it in the cabinet under lock and key so it will not be eaten before her beloved

husband comes home? She often locks up the food, not knowing that she cannot hide it, not from the mice and not from Ehrich.

Upon Ehrich's signal, the children pretend to sleep.

"There's an owl in the house," Ehrich says to them when at last their mother dozes off by the door, still waiting for their father.

Ehrich carries a thin piece of wire in his pocket, taken from the cast off building supplies from the firefly mansion. He works it into shapes as a pastime. A mouse, a fish, a key. He leaves his brother and sister and goes into the front room. He sees the box that is Appleton unfolding, as if it were made of cards. He uses the wire to work the lock on the cabinet, and it quickly falls open in his hands, spreading out like a bird's wings. They eat the pie in their bedroom, in silence, not bothering with plates or forks. In the morning, Ehrich will be sent to Milwaukee to find his father and work beside him. Soon after he will run away; he'll get on a train and leave Wisconsin, even though he is far too young for such a journey. He will change his name to something more American and call himself Harry. His mother was right. He is not like other people. But for now, there is the pie, made from apples gathered in the orchard beside the Fox River where the water is cold nearly all of the year, except for the miraculous days when it isn't.