The Farthest Point North

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A boy and his dog are heading north along a dirt road. It is late fall and the ground is covered with leaves. Occasionally they come upon a pile of leaves and the dog will run into it at full speed, digging through until she reaches dirt, then running in circles until the leaves are spread out, as if they had never been any other way.

At first the boy had found this entertaining, laughing and joining in the redistribution of leaves. But that was hours ago, when he was fresh out of bed, when the air was still cold enough to freeze his breath. Now he watches impatiently. He calls to the dog. It is a German shepherd, almost as large as the boy himself. The boy is four and a half years old, the dog is five. Brian and Rega. Brian's father named Rega when she was a day old, although he didn't bring her home for six more weeks. She was the third in a litter of eight, born to Sirius, Uncle Max's dog, on the night that the star Rega reached its farthest point north. Brian's father was an astronomer.

It is nine in the morning and Brian is beginning to wish that he had eaten breakfast. He could have fixed a bowl of Frosted Flakes or Raisin Bran, but he was afraid that he would wake his mother. Soon, though, he would be where he wanted to be. There is a circle of large stones farther up the road in the woods. Brian likes to lie in the middle of the circle and look at the sky through the leaves and branches of the tall trees.

The road has turned to rock and up ahead there is a pond. It used to be a stone quarry and Brian's mother tells him daily not to swim in it. He searches the ground for stones. This is difficult. There are many rocks, rough and sharp, but few stones. As he reaches the water Brian finds a smooth black stone, perhaps too small to be called a stone, perhaps a pebble. He calls Rega and sits down.

He has four stones. And one pebble. The first stone, brown and flat, the size of a half dollar but thicker, like an Oreo, is tossed into the water. Brian watches the ripples move in a circle across the water. As the last circle reaches the shore near his feet he throws the second stone, large and oval, almost egg-shaped, toward the same spot that he had thrown the first. He imagines the change in its color, from dry grey to wet black.

He doesn't wait for the ripples this time, but jumps to his feet and skips the last two stones, flat, smooth, and black, across the water. The first skips three times, but when the second hits the water it sinks.

Brian watches the ripples on the water. The changing shape as they move.
into each other. He fingers the small black pebble, places it in his mouth. He picks up a stick and throws it in the pond, watching Rega jump in to retrieve it. The ground at the edge of the pond is soft, and Brian can see hoof prints, like from deer, leading up to the water and then back to the road. Lots of prints.

Brian stares at the tracks for a while, and then looks around at the shoreline and the woods. He has lived near this pond all his life and he has never seen any deer. He wonders where they play, and why they are always hiding from him.

His father told him once that if you really wanted to see the deer, if you were quiet and calm and loving and you really wanted to see them, they would come to you. And sometimes at night he would do that to see his father, but when he woke in the morning it went away. It was always dreams.

When Rega drops the stick at his feet, he uses it to dig a hole in the dirt. Then he spits the pebble into the hole. Making a cross out of twigs and part of a shoelace, he marks the grave.

Brian tires of the pond and begins to walk further up the road, one shoe loose, Rega once again playing with leaves.

It is almost ten when Brian reaches the clearing of the stones. He walks into the circle and stares up at the sky through the tall trees. He spins himself around and around while he stares up at the sky and the empty branches, and when he is dizzy he lays down in the circle and closes his eyes. As he lays there, eyes closed, quiet and still, he can still see the trees and the sky going around and around. And then he can see something else.

There is a deer prancing around the circle of stones. It is a large deer, with antlers branching out in five forks. Although Brian’s eyes are closed, he sees this more clearly than in any dream. The hooves digging into the ground, large brown eyes as smooth as glass, and antlers branching out like the limbs of the trees. Around and around it goes, head held high, and Brian keeps watching it with his mind’s eye.

Brian opens his eyes when Rega begins to bark. It is her friendly bark, her way of saying, “Come play with me.” He sees the sky and the trees again, brown lines on a blue background, and thin rays of sunlight are filtering through and hurting his eyes.

He brings his gaze back to the ground, sits up and looks around. He sees tracks like the ones he had seen before at the pond, and dirt kicked up around the stones. Rega is barking and staring at a trail of tracks leading into the woods. He reaches out and touches the tracks, feels the earth in his hands, cool and damp. It was the deer this time, like his father said.
Brian follows the path back to the road. He pulls on the laces of his loose shoe, but there is not enough to tie a bow. Down the road the late morning sun is reflecting off the pond.

He is feeling hungry now. His mother made bread pudding the night before and if he is late for lunch he won't get any. Calling Rega, he begins walking south.

—Charles Faris