

Dear Reader,

The story thus far, as you may have forgotten: Even as a young boy, Billy Argo showed an uncanny talent for solving puzzles of almost every configuration, arrangement, and design.

That is all.

No – it was more than a talent. It was a kind of very sad genius, so that in the end, the very sad genius appeared on the boy detective the way a child born with a deformity – a missing hand or one leg shorter than the other – might make the same adolescent distant and dreamy; like a birthmark in the shape of an elephant smack dab on the forehead, it led Billy to be somewhat shy, somewhat withdrawn, though not at first. No, at first the boy was at play: happy, daring, secretly cunning.

In the stark world of Gotham, New Jersey – small white houses and green, murky woods surrounding a modern factory town, home to both the Mold – O – Form Plastic and Harris Heating Duct plants, a burg bustling with both Prosperity and its companion Crime – Billy would run hand in hand with his younger sister, Caroline, and behind them, their childhood friend, a husky neighborhood boy by the name of Fenton Mills, would often come calling.

Through the nearby grassy field, with the chimneys of the plastics factory churning black clouds in the distance, the children would hurry, shouting, trampling the fuzzy white puffs of dandelions and sprawling knotty underbrush. Their hideout was an abandoned lot which was wide and silver and green with enormous, expressive daises. The lot had remained unsold – being too filthy with lead after an explosion during the days when the land had been home to the old Drip-Less Paint Factory. Above the dirt of an unmarked grave and beneath the shadow of the abandoned refinery, the children would play their own made-up games: Wild West Accountants! In which they would calculate the loss of a shipment of gold stolen from an imaginary stage coach, or Recently Divorced Scientists! In which they would build a super-collider out of garbage to try and win back their recently lost loves. Together, forever, they would explore the near-dark world of wonder and mystery.

The boy detective in his youth was pale with dark wispy hair and was generally a nervous child, both short and strange-looking for his age. There was an incident in the boy's elementary school cafeteria involving a bully named Wayne Meany III concerning Billy's unusually large eyes. One day, Billy, sitting unsuspecting beside his younger sister, felt a pronounced thump at the back of his head. When Billy turned, the back of his cranium sore, his face red, he discovered a knotty green apple lying there on the floor. Wayne Meany III laughed and pointed, then remarked, "How do you like them apples, owl-eyes?" Billy pandered the question for a moment but did not have a proper answer. His eyes were indeed large and wise, and yes, somewhat unbecoming, but with his sister and their one true friend, those same eyes would be central in examining a collapsed ant hill or measuring the size of a wrecked nest of speckled robin eggs, carefully held amongst all three pairs of their small dirty hands. His sister, Caroline, both blond and petite, was the charming one: always taking notes in her white-and-gold diary, a perfect record of all their discoveries; always curtsying; always learning French, or so it seemed. Her favorite word? *Jejune*, as in: "What they force us to wear as school uniforms is very *jejune*."

Their neighbor friend, Fenton, short and chubby, sweaty, and always out of breath, followed last in his small red beanie, his mother's solution for the boy's persistent psoriasis. The portly boy always reminded the others when it was getting too dark, admonishing them when he thought what they were doing might somehow make their parents worry.

It was a summer that never ended for the three of them: a summer of games and puzzles and surprises.

It was a summer that, lying in bed, we wish we had once had.