

The Thomas Farm
A Novel

by

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When a man starts pushing thirty years old, thirty pushes right back. And when a Labrador-sized rock pushed through the surface of the garden, I went for a crowbar and 2x4.

By lunchtime, there was a hole four feet wide and five inches deep at the corner of the garden. The excavation was a slippery pit of mud when I found the edge of the rock. I managed to ram a crowbar under the enormous hunk of granite, and then a 2 x 4. Working with the crowbar and another 2 x 4, the rock began to lift. Apparently, I was too busy thinking about what I could do with the rock to notice the creaking of the wood. In fact, I failed to notice the sound altogether until the wood snapped and knocked me to the ground, where I landed gracelessly with my fingers underneath the wood. In my haste to relieve the pain in my hand, I slipped in the mud and banged my right shin into the metal crowbar. The rain continued to fall, unaware of me lying pitifully in the mud—soggy, hungry, and quite grateful to be unnoticed.

The soft rain splattered against my forehead like it had splattered against the windshield on a drive down to Boston with my Dad one April afternoon twenty years earlier.

“I’m sorry we couldn’t come down for your birthday this year, Jake,” Dad said.

“That’s okay,” I said, staring out my passenger window at a landscape scattered with old houses and muddy, green fields.

“I know Bruce Hurst is pitching tomorrow, but I didn’t realize that when I bought the tickets. Mom thinks it’s bad enough I take you on a school night.”

“I know, Dad.”

Traffic increased as we neared the city. My eyes scanned the horizon for the downtown landmarks. By the time we crossed the Charles River and drove west on Storrow Drive, I was squeezing my glove in anticipation.

Dad was surprised at how easily he found a good parking spot. I leapt from the car and we bounded down the sidewalk and turned the corner onto Yawkey Way. When we saw the brick façade of Fenway Park, my Dad threw his arms in the air and then around me.

“We’re here, Jake!”

He shook my shoulders and ran his hand through my hair, smiling down on me. I couldn’t help but smile back.

“Thanks, Dad,” I said, hugging him back.

Larry Bird was playing Dominique and the Hawks in a playoff game across town while two-thirds of the seats at Fenway were empty. There were only a handful of other kids at the ballpark on that chilly Tuesday night. Nobody scored for the first six innings, and the Mariners hit a home run with two outs in the seventh. By the seventh inning stretch, we were shivering and damp, but we had absolutely no intention of leaving.

I was ten years old and at Fenway with my Dad. It wasn’t on my birthday and it wasn’t Bruce Hurst pitching, but we were watching the Sox, and our young starting pitcher was mowing through the Mariners line-up. By the ninth inning, with the Sox winning 3-1, we stood and urged him on as he walked out to the mound. Spike Owen struck out. The next batter, Phil Bradley, struck out, too—the twentieth strikeout victim of the night for Roger Clemens. My Dad and I were hugging and jumping up and down.

Strangers gave us high-fives. Grown men who I had never met were telling me to remember what I had seen.

We spent the whole drive home basking in having witnessed baseball history. We got home well after midnight, but Mom stayed up and listened patiently while I described the day's events. Neither of us has caught a major-league baseball; neither of us has seen a no-hitter; neither of us has experienced anything remotely close to what we saw a week after my tenth birthday in Fenway Park.

Twenty years later, I bought a house and fifteen acres not too far from my parents' old house, with the hope of more sons coming along and learning from their father all of the finer points of baseball, stacking firewood, and daily Scripture lessons.

I jokingly referred to my land as a farm; it was really just plans for a garden and a dream of attaining some level of self-sufficiency. The garden was in remembrance of Mom more than anything else, and I made sure to have a working woodstove that would make Dad proud.

"Dreams are like that, Jacob," Mom said as she knelt beside my bed in the middle of the night. "They rarely work out as planned, but they are usually better for it." I still remember her tired smile in the soft light, a scene that repeated every birthday after every trip to Fenway with Dad.

For years afterward, whenever that game was referred to, my Dad and I could share a wink across a room and be transported back to 1986 and Fenway Park in Boston. These days, whenever someone mentions that game, I remember all of my childhood birthdays that Dad spent driving me to a Red Sox game, buying me a Fenway Frank, and talking about the great things of life, including the beauty of a hit-and-run. Mom always stayed up late to wait for us, and stayed up later to listen to me relay every detail I could remember, and then pray over me as I fell into sleep. Mom was always so gentle, so compassionate, so gracious in every word and motion. Whenever I came in the house with scraped knees or a bloody nose, there she was.

But when I was lying in the mud in the rain with two hurting fingers and a bloody shin because of a stubborn rock in the garden, there she was not. Dad wasn't there to help with the effort; Mom wasn't there to clean up my mess. I was thirty years old and starting my own home, so, before nightfall, I extricated the rock from the hole myself, rolled it away from the garden, and planted the first stake for the garden's fence. One day of effort, a bruised shin, two swollen fingers, very muddy clothes, and a broken 2 x 4 later, I had one stake in the mud. I hoped Mom and Dad would be proud. The Thomas Farm was off and running.

Though I had lived in Swiftwater for five months, I had rarely shown my face in town because the wintertime in northern New England does not invite leisurely strolls down Main Street. I put on boots and a slicker for the half-mile walk to the green. The rivulets running down the gravel driveway were busy forming deeper troughs that I would need to refill once the deluge stopped. Wet gritty dirt crunched underneath, sticking to my boots. Once the rain ran down the driveway, it turned west toward the covered bridge. I walked down the road, sometimes on the grassy shoulder and sometimes on the cracked pavement of the road.

The Swiftwater Covered Bridge is one of the oldest structures in Swiftwater, dating to the 19th century, with renovations sometime in the late 1960s. It spans the October River, a small river that cascades in contentious rapids through the valley. The bridge is about eighty feet long and wide enough for two narrow lanes of traffic and a separated walkway on the northern side that looks out to the falls of the October. The wooden walls, unpainted and weathered from years worth of days just like this one, sit twenty feet above some swimming holes in the river. A wooden sign is affixed to the east portal of the bridge and reads, "Swiftwater Welcomes You."

I stopped on the bridge, out of the rain for a moment, and pushed back the hood of my jacket, leaning over the railing to watch the October flow underneath, running high with the recent spring rains. Standing on the bridge and watching the river was a highlight to the day. Halfway between home and town, it spanned the gap between work day and free time, public and private, one set of hopes and another.

Through the bridge lay the town of Swiftwater. Settled in the 18th century, Swiftwater is a place with the same family names in the cemetery as on the mailboxes throughout town. The local practices have become habits, the habits have become routines, the routines have become traditions, and the traditions have become a culture.

The town sits on the west bank of the October River. Coming from the east, where the Thomas Farm is, the road goes through the covered bridge like entering the gates of a city. The downtown of Swiftwater is only a few blocks wide and a half-dozen blocks long, stretching north to south along the river. The town's iconic green is a rectangle of lush green grass waiting for summer beneath a mixture of oaks, hemlocks, and the town's signature sugar maples. Benches are placed here and there, though they are empty today, and a playground collected raindrops on the north end, across from the church. In the center of it all stands a lovely gazebo, the metaphorical center of town. On Thursday nights in the summer, small concerts are held on the gazebo, with the town gathered on blankets and lawn chairs throughout the green. The occasional politician running for state office will stand on the gazebo, have his picture taken with the church steeple in the background, and promise to bring more jobs, better schools, and a white Christmas. On this day, though, the gazebo was barren, patiently waiting out another day.

On this rainy day, like the rest of town, the hatches of the church are battened down against the weather. The playground on the green is quiet; the benches are vacant. The few visible souls walk quickly, hunched over as if the rain is sitting heavily on their shoulders. The town's baseball fields are a few blocks from the green and on the banks of the October River, between the hospital and the old cemetery. The fields, just

downstream from the covered bridge, are lush and green. Puddles are forming behind the backstop and have become small ponds in each dugout.

I walked into the Shamrock Diner on the corner of the green. It is well-lit and comfortable with the small, creaky deck in the back that overlooks the October and the swimming holes. There is often a newspaper left on the table from a previous customer, but the proprietor himself is a better source for local news than any journalist.

“Mornin’, Jacob Thomas!”

“Good morning, Mr. O’Conor.”

“Lovely weather for an amble, eh?” he chuckled.

I shook the rainwater off of my jacket at the threshold before stepping toward the counter. I must have looked like a wet dog, shaking to get the standing water off of my pant legs. Once I was inside the bright shop, it was even more apparent just how gloomy the weather was. Mr. O’Conor was hospitable above and beyond the usual small-town diner; the Shamrock was one of the few places in Swiftwater where I felt known.

“It’s some weather out there,” I said. “Think it’ll ever stop raining?”

“Always has before.” He shot me a smile and added, “I guess you haven’t lived here long enough to know that yet.”

There were a few people scattered among the dozen or so tables; I chose a table with a window facing east and sat down with a coffee and a muffin. The morning rush came through the shop getting coffee to perk up a dreary drive to work at the lumberyard in town or down to the larger towns of Canton or Jefferson. Just as I was getting ready to leave, Neill O’Conor came around with his sleeves rolled up to wipe off some tables.

“Did you hear the news, Jacob?” he asked, his big eyes staring at me from behind his thin glasses. The top of his head was bald, which made his wrinkled forehead seem enormous.

“No, Mr. O’Conor. What’s that?”

“I hear the town got some money to renovate the hospital. From the state, I think, maybe even from the feds.”

“Really...” I said, turning the newspaper back to the front page to see if I had missed a prominent article.

“Oh, you won’t find it in there. It ain’t official yet. It’s just what I hear,” he said. “You have to jump up and down to get anybody to pay attention to the small towns these days, unless you’re a tourist trap.”

The hospital was really just a local health clinic, but Swiftwater Hospital was the pride of the town. Not many towns of that size could boast such an excellent facility, and several of the physicians had families in town. The building itself, though, was old and run on a shoe-string budget.

“Long overdue, I say,” Mr. O’Conor said, bustling back over to my table. “There was always the threat it would close down and everything moved to a larger facility somewhere farther away. They did the same thing with the high school—closed it up and shipped all our kids off to a different town, all in the name of efficiency.”

Mr. O’Conor shook his head and went back behind the counter, leaving me to look down on the October River and smile. He always left me good-humored and looking forward to being a part of Swiftwater, with all its problems and quirks.

Back outside, I was immediately reminded just how cozy and lovely a coffee shop can be on a rainy day. A chill ran through my body as I walked past the green. Across

the street, the church was quiet from basement to steeple. It was midweek and Pastor Jaitieu was surely working in the small house-turned-office next door. I had no idea what pastors did during the week, although I was confident that it was upstanding. Nicholas Jaitieu came to Swiftwater fifteen years ago to pastor the Swiftwater Congregational Church ever since. He and his wife and their three kids, while relative newcomers, had made this their home. We had spoken at some length quite a few times—the first pastor I could ever call a friend. I wondered what Jesus would say about rainy days; after all, I can't imagine that it rains too often in Galilee.

Among his other duties, Nicholas found the time to coach Benjamin's baseball team this summer. I like to tease him that being a pastor gives him an unfair advantage. "You always get rain delays when you need them and nobody ever gets a bad hop grounder." He got back at me pretty good, though, by asking me to be his assistant coach. He knew I would not be able to resist hanging around a ballfield on summer afternoons and he reeled me in like a caught fish. Practices start when first base is no longer submerged.

I jumped over a puddle that looked large enough to have riptides. Across the sidewalk, I stepped into Fairmont's Deli and Market. The place was relatively busy with townfolk who were anxious about having to put off outside chores for yet another weekend. People were scoping out the fruits and vegetables, poking and prodding them in those mysterious manners of discerning their quality—a trade secret known only to mothers and pot-bellied chefs. Others seemed content to grab a gallon of milk, snatch a dozen eggs without looking first to make sure that no shells were broken, pay up, and dash off through the rain to their car. In the deli, Michael Fairmont—a tall, lanky man with a babyish face—was slicing all sorts of meats and cheeses. The veggies and condiments were ready to be made into sandwiches, but the only purchases this morning were for a half-pound of American, sliced thin, and a pound of pastrami.

My cupboard was pretty full back on the Thomas Farm, but I wanted to purchase a sandwich to eat by my rainy window later. It was too gloomy a day to bother with making lunch, so I decided to treat myself. I ordered a big roast beef grinder with the works and Michael set about weighing the meat.

"Jacob, what are you doing cavorting around in this weather?"

I had been hoping to avoid being known as the eccentric newcomer. It was bad enough that I was known to be "from the city" even though I spent my first eighteen years in a small town in Vermont.

"It's just a five-minute walk," I said of my fifteen-minute walk. "Too close to drive and I like the walk anyway."

"I hope that means I can count on you still coming in. The new Shaw's up in Jefferson has taken some of my business, I'm afraid."

"That makes for a long walk," I said, drawing a chuckle from him.

"Maybe someday they'll build one here," he said. "Can't stop progress—at least not what some people call progress."

He shrugged and went back to slicing the meat.

"Maybe I'm just nostalgic," I said, "but that's not how I remember it being where I come from."

"Well how do they do it wherever it is you come from?" a gruff voice behind me asked. I turned to see a middle-aged man with an annoyed look on his face. His boots,

jeans, and flannel shirt were all dirt-stained and he wore a no-nonsense countenance. His arms were crossed and he switched weight on his feet impatiently.

“Two roast beef grinders, Michael,” he said, placing his order and, I’m hoped, forgetting about me.

“Sure, Randy,” Michael said. “As soon as I finish with Jacob’s.”

Nobody said anything, but Randy gave me a glare and crossed his arms. He mouth stopped talking, but the rest of him told me everything I needed to know. I was an outsider, taking up space and getting in his way. I was a threat to the status quo, and everyone in a small town knows that a change in the status quo usually means that things are going to get worse. His glare told me everything I didn’t want to know, and reminded me just how long it had been since I lived in a small town like Swiftwater.

Michael looked up at me and asked, “What do you want on it, Jacob?”

As I listed off each condiment, Randy grew more impatient. I could almost feel his breath on my neck. When I hesitated for a second, Michael paused as well, waiting for my answer.

“Hey, come on, pal,” Randy said, “Some of us around here actually have to work for a living.”

Part of me wanted to punch him and part of me wanted to just walk away, but I knew Swiftwater was too small a place to get very far by walking away. Michael continued to prepare my sandwich without any hint of anxiety, as if being a passive sounding board for this cantankerous man was just another part of his day.

“I’ll tell you what,” he finally said, continuing a conversation I didn’t realize we were having. “This town’s been here for a couple hundred years and it’s not going anywhere. We don’t need to be just like everybody else. If we don’t have a goddamn Starbucks or Shaw’s on every corner, that’s okay. Fact of the matter is, even having a big grocery store fifteen miles away makes every business in Swiftwater have a hard time. Michael here will be out of a job. Ain’t that right, Michael?”

Michael did not even bother looking up. “It’ll make things tougher.”

“You want that to happen?” he said to me.

“No, I don’t want that to happen.”

He squared his body to mine, looking at me for the first time. He was several inches taller than me, and thick, strong from working in lumber yards, not just from working out in gyms like me. His eyes were strong and young, but his face looked older, weathered.

Michael stuck his arm over counter and said, “One roast beef, ready to go.”

“Thanks, Michael.” I paid for my lunch and turned to go. Everything Randy had said made sense, and I agreed with him, but I still wanted to prove him wrong just for the challenge of taking him down a peg. Instead, I decided to save my breath for the walk up my driveway.

Behind me, I overheard Michael say, “He’s an all right fella, Randy.”

“I ain’t got no time for newcomers, Michael.”

I walked out of the deli and back to the bridge while the wind kicked up and made the falling rain sting just a little more. I wished that I could leave all of my problems behind, like footprints in springtime mud, but crossing the October River could not provide that relief. This was my new community and the issues of Swiftwater spilled over the October and onto my side of the river. Before I had moved here, I understood

that settling would entail rolling up my sleeves and working and mourning and celebrating with the people of Swiftwater. That seemed like a much more agreeable prospect when it was still just a theory, and before someone like Randy reminded me just how long it had been since I had lived in a rural area.

Up the hill to the east was my driveway and my house and my attempt to recapture a life I once knew, except that instead of being the happy-go-lucky kid with a world full of imagination and possibility, I would now be the homeowner and—hopefully—the husband and father. For some reason, I always envisioned my return to rural New England as triumphal, and a small community would welcome me with open arms. I had forgotten that these hearts warm as slowly as springtime. To the west, Randy and the town green and the goings-on of Swiftwater proceeded without notice or want of me. The edge of my property technically extended all the way to the shore of the river; beyond that, I was a stranger.

The bridge was a good place to stop and look around. It was halfway between home and town, halfway between familiarity and strangeness. I always took a deep breath when I crossed the bridge and headed toward town, never fully knowing what to expect in Swiftwater, or how I would be received, and I always felt the release of anxiety when I crossed back to the east and trudged up the hill to my driveway.

My hands were soft, with barely a paper cut on them. I was white-collar in an unashamedly blue-collar town. The only dirt on my hands was when I messed around in my pittance of a garden. I got a job straight out of college and was quickly making as much as my Dad ever had, working behind a desk as a “systems analyst”—a job as boring as it sounds. Still, it allowed me to buy the Thomas Farm and my company allowed me to work from home.

I could picture Randy playing poker with his pals, all of them trying to figure out what the newcomer did. Since I had no local employer, and kept such a lax schedule, they probably assumed I was living off a trust fund. I took a deep breath and headed home. When I passed through, I looked back at the sign above the road that said, “Swiftwater Welcomes You,” and thought to myself, “Not quite yet.”

Springtime in New England is a test of patience. After a long, cold, gray winter, we want so desperately to believe that the weather is turning warm and sunny. We long to walk across the yard without sinking in slushy mud, and to sit outside without an umbrella or three layers of clothes. By the time Opening Day arrives at Fenway Park, the restlessness is uncontrollable. Throughout April and May, the weather teases us with more chilly rain. Ambition is often rebuked by cold, raw hands. I sat at my window, put on a fleece sweater, sipped tea, and watched the rain make green grass greener.

In good weather, I can see the surrounding hillsides from the house. On a rainy day, though, the fog and drizzle limit the view to an acre of soggy pasture. At times I could faintly make out the edge of the trees, which appeared as a wall of darker gray against the lighter gray of the fog and the medium gray of the pasture. To the right, the north, the woods crept close to the house. Smaller birch trees were trying to grow up and I thought I should encourage them, much to the chagrin of the sumacs and goldenrod. The edge of the woods was choked with all sorts of undergrowth that I planned—on a drier day—to clear in order to make room for the berry bushes.

“Good morning, Mrs. Newmarket.”

“Oh, Jacob, call me Basye.”

I hustled across the road to greet her charming face, wrinkled yet with strong, clear eyes. Basye and Percival Newmarket lived in the house across the road from mine. I often saw them while checking mail around lunchtime.

“And just where has that dear young lady been recently, Jacob?”

I smiled despite the rain. “With the rain and all, I’ve been making the weekend trek to Jenn’s place, rather than vice versa, seeing as there is a little more to do in Portland than in Swiftwater.”

She put her hands on top of mine and said, “You know that the two of you are welcome any time. The next time she comes, I want to know about it.”

“Absolutely. You’ll be the first to know. In fact, it wouldn’t surprise me if Jenn called you before she called me.”

“She’s a nice girl, Jacob,” Basye cooed, leaning in close.

“Yes, she is, Mrs. Newmarket,” I said, saying her name deliberately. “Tell Percival I say hello.”

A relationship with a woman is a test of patience. Almost two years before I moved to Swiftwater, I met Jenn. I have a suspicion that Jenn might make for a great Mrs. Thomas, as well as being a good farmer. We have spent much of the time since I moved here walking around my fifteen acres on snowshoes, trying to figure out how to best utilize it. Rather, I should say that I tried to figure this out, all the while she tried to keep her laughter muffled as I discussed my impending farmerhood. When the snow finally melted, I began installing some fencing around the area that I thought best to begin a garden—the garden part of the farm, that is. She helped at times, but also spent time trying to spruce up the tired flower beds that had received their annual wintertime punishment from the weather. “You can’t eat flowers,” I explained to her, but I was summarily dismissed. Jenn is an aesthete. Mom always liked her flowerbeds, too.

Jenn certainly is not immune to dirt and hard work, which bodes well for our relationship. I frequently think about whether she should find a permanent place on the

Thomas Farm, instead of living a couple of hours away in Portland, Maine. There is little doubt that she would make an excellent wife, but I have sincere doubts that she would agree to be mine.

When I had moved back to New England two autumns ago, Jenn and I got together every couple of weeks to go for a hike or see a ballgame in Portland or Manchester. I found out that she had been going to church virtually her entire life. I tried to impress her with the fact that I had been going to church since that August. Shortly before Christmas, I asked her on a date. She said no.

Ten months later we planned a hike with some friends, but everyone else had obligations arise, so it wound up being just me and Jenn strolling up to Mount Willard. It was a brisk autumn day with the leaves in full color under a blue sky. We sat at a viewpoint and talked for an hour about this and that. At a lull in the conversation, she said, "You know, a lot changes in a year. Remember when you asked me on a date last year?"

My stomach felt like it had been kicked. I fidgeted uneasily while her wavy blonde hair fell over her shoulders and she looked at me with clear and unwavering eyes.

"Remember I said no?" she said.

"Yes, I do."

"Well, a lot changes in a year," she said while smiling coyly.

"I suppose. What do you mean?"

"I'm a little surprised you never asked again."

"Why would I? You said no. Remember, you said that I wasn't 'spiritually mature' enough for you."

She paused for a while before replying, "A lot changes in a year, my good sir."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

She looked at me like I had spoken in Aramaic. I kept waiting for her to say something, but she just looked away like she had forgotten why she started the conversation.

"You'd go out with me *now*?" I said.

"I would have to be asked first."

"Sure. Why not?"

"Why not?" She gave me an irritated look. "Why?"

I rubbed the back of my neck with sweaty palms. "You're fun, you're pretty, you're really smart, you're kind."

There was a long pause.

"I *am*?" she said. "Jacob, are you asking me out?"

"I think so."

"Do you really want to take me on a date or are you just confused?"

"Yes. I mean, yes about the date," I said.

She never blinked. "You can pick me up for dinner on Friday at 6:45."

Jenn was unlike any girl I had ever dated. She was confident, but gentle; intelligent, but humble; beautiful, but modest. She was the most intriguing person I had ever met, and I knew that God's grace was the only reason she would ever date me.

We sat on the overlook above Crawford Notch for another fifteen minutes in complete silence before heading back down the mountainside. That Friday, I took Jenn

on a date, having recovered most of my wits in the meanwhile. We have been dating ever since. She is, and always has been, uncannily brilliant.

“All right! Let’s see a little hustle out there! Let’s see it!”

Nicholas Jaitieu looked across the ballfield from under the brim of his cap, holding a bat in one hand and a baseball in the other.

“Turn two now. Turn two. Let’s see a little 4-6-3!”

He threw the ball up and smacked it with the bat to the second baseman. The youngster got in front of the ball and lowered his glove just enough that the baseball dribbled underneath the glove and off his foot. He picked it up and threw it to the shortstop covering second. The shortstop in turn launched the baseball toward first base, the ball landing in the dirt five feet in front of the first baseman and ricocheting into the dugout.

“Okay, let’s try that again! Look alive now! Turn two!” Nicholas smacked another one, with similar results.

I stood in center field, surrounded by prepubescent boys wearing oversized caps.

“... and once you get in position to make the catch, put your glove up – like this – and your other hand needs to come up right beside it – like this. No one-handed catches!” I said. “You watch the ball from just over the top of your glove, and watch it land right here – Bam! – in the webbing. Got it?”

A bunch of young heads bobbed. For the first time since moving to Swiftwater, I felt capable. No matter how badly I bumbled through farming and civic affairs, any baseball field was as familiar as my own skin. Swiftwater had a particularly nice field, with thick grass from the copious spring rain and a high backstop protecting the cars in the unpaved parking lot. The October flowed down the right field line, a dozen yards from the bleachers.

“All right, who’s first?”

Three hands shot up.

“Okay, Timmy. Stand over there away from everyone else. Ready?”

“Ready, Coach!”

I lobbed an easy fly from fifty feet and Timmy Carter raced five feet forward, then a few steps to his left, back a few steps, raised his hands, and caught the ball.

“Easy as pie. Right, Timmy?”

The cluster of boys greeted Timmy with gloved high-fives as another boy ventured forth to shag a fly.

The rain had finally stopped and the weather was gorgeous—the perfect opening day of baseball, albeit a week later than initially scheduled. Thirty-one Swiftwater boys, aged eight to ten, wanted to play in the six-week-long summer league, so the town made two teams. Ours, the Dragons, was randomly allotted fourteen boys plus Nicholas’ son, Benjamin, who is our finest pitcher, in the humble opinion of the head coach. Given the nature of summertimes and family vacations, I expected it to be a short bench that year.

I stepped back to 100 feet from the boys, near the first base line, and picked up a bat.

“All right, Ethan, this one’s for you!”

I whacked the ball in a high arc toward Ethan and he circled underneath it. Instead of holding his glove above his head, he extended it to his side while he cringed as

if he held a smelly diaper. The ball bounced off his glove and fell to the ground with a soft plunk.

The boys bellowed with laughter in relief that they were not the first to commit such a muff. Ethan muttered his annoyance at them and threw the ball back.

“No, Ethan. You’re not done.”

“It’s Adam’s turn next.”

“But you didn’t catch it. Get back out there.”

The boys’ laughter mellowed considerably as Ethan slumped his shoulders and walked back to his spot, ten feet from the aspiring outfielders.

“All right, Andrew,” I pointed to the ringleader. “What’s he doing wrong?”

Andrew looked surprised and said, “He dropped it.”

“Why’d he drop it?”

Andrew shrugged. “Cuz he stinks.”

More rounds of laughter.

“Why’d he drop it? What could he do better?”

Andrew looked over at Ethan, who was busy looking for a hole to crawl into until he was fifteen. Andrew looked back to me, speechless.

“*Well?*”

“I dunno.”

“Come here.”

Andrew took a few small steps forward. I walked straight at him and stopped five feet in front of him, holding up the baseball.

“See this?”

He nodded.

“Catch it.”

I threw the ball straight up in the air. Andrew ran around in frantic circles, eyes wide in horror, as if I had thrown an anvil into the sky. He finally got a read on the ball, took a few steps backward, stumbled, and the ball landed in his glove as he fell onto his back.

Ethan joined in on this round of laughter. I walked over to Andrew, lying disoriented on the ground.

“Nice catch.” I took the ball from him. “Catch it again.”

I threw the ball even higher this time. I grabbed Andrew by the wrist and planted him directly underneath the ball. With my left hand on his left wrist, I raised his glove. I kept my right hand on his right wrist and knelt on one knee beside him. Beads of sweat ran down his face as the ball reached its zenith and began its plummet toward his glove. I held him steady.

“Don’t run around like a chicken with its head cut off, boys!” I shouted. “Get a good read on the ball and run to the spot. When you get under it, put your glove up like this! Then get your free hand up beside it – like this! You watch the ball right here! It doesn’t matter if it’s a five-foot toss or dropped out of an airplane. Catch it right here and it’s the best feeling in the world.”

Andrew closed his eyes and turned his head, but I held his wrists in place. I could hear the others draw in their breath, unsure if their comrade would live to see the home opener. The ball smacked in the glove’s webbing. Andrew slowly opened his eyes and realized that the ball was safely nestled in his glove.

“Nice catch.”

Andrew smiled back in relief. He caught the next one unassisted.

Nicholas called me into this because he knew that I would not be able to resist. I loved being at the ballpark. Watching, playing, coaching—it did not really matter. When I was not watching or playing, I was talking about baseball. One day this past winter, I think Nicholas finally got sick of hearing me talk about it to Benjamin at Sunday brunch and forced me to consent to being his assistant coach. He had to twist my arm for two whole seconds before I was shaking his hand enthusiastically. I had been instructing Benjamin for months, and while his father may well be his primary model in all things spiritual, emotional, and vocational, I had a firm grip on his baseball upbringing, which makes me and Nicholas nearly equal in young Benjamin’s life.

By the following day at practice, I was able to distinguish the boys in my mind—faces, names, personalities, and baseball skill. Most boys in small towns come together easily; there are not enough playmates to afford making enemies, and they are too young to worry about being cool, so friendships are made and held with ease.

One boy in particular, though, stood out—literally, in fact, as he was often standing aloof of everybody else. Steven was a goofy-looking kid who never seemed to quite understand what was happening or how to act. He followed orders perfectly, but never offered any enthusiasm whatsoever. He moved through practice casually and unconcerned. None of the boys joked with him, or even spoke much to him, but he would laugh two or three times a practice at something completely pedestrian. For a time, I thought that a prankster was afoot and he could not keep the secret, but the boys had already figured out—through years of elementary school—that the way to deal with him was to largely ignore him.

“What’s your favorite position to play?” I asked Steven during a break in the action.

He shrugged and continued to look just over my left shoulder. I squatted down to be directly in his line of vision. He looked over my right shoulder.

“Do you like playing outfield?”

“Sure.”

“How about first base.”

“That’s fine.”

Steven was not at all rude or confrontational, just matter-of-fact and unaffected, like I was a stranger on the street asking him for the time. Also, he was a terrible baseball player. He was lucky to get a glove on a fly ball, much less to catch it. He swung and missed at every pitch. He could knock down a soft grounder and catch a gentle throw, but anything with velocity would bounce off his glove. He showed no fear, but neither did he seem to care about the outcome.

Nicholas and I were gathering bats and balls after practice when I noticed a man get out of a blue pickup truck and walk toward the field.

“Nicholas,” I said, “isn’t that Randy Waterman?”

“Yeah, looks like it.”

“What’s *he* doing here?”

“Probably picking up his kid,” he said, stooping down to pick up a ball that had rolled under the bench.

“He has a boy playing baseball?”

“Didn’t you know that? Steven Waterman, right here on the roster.”

Steven noticed his father and ran over to him. Randy yelled in delight and embraced him. Randy said something and Steven nodded enthusiastically and smiled from ear to ear, followed by his father rustling his hair and putting his cap back on. Randy joked with some of the other parents and began walking back to the car with his arm around Steven, waving goodbye.

I was only thirty feet away, across the parking lot. When Randy looked up and saw me, everyone seemed to disappear and I felt almost ashamed to be standing stupidly watching him, like I had been peering in through his living room window. When he saw me, he pulled Steven to his other side.

“Hi,” I weakly offered, nodding my head.

He grunted something in reply and drove off.

By the end of the third day of practice, we had separated the boys into infielders and outfielders and we had tagged Benjamin, Ryan, and Justin as the pitchers. On Thursday, with just three more practices before our first game, we began working on hitting and baserunning for the first time. It was raining. We decided to work on sliding as well, the lesson aided by an infield of slick mud. Additionally, with the kids eager to set aside defensive drills and to play “real” baseball, Nicholas and I decided to spend the second hour of practice letting the boys hit and work through situational plays.

Dominic laid down a bunt toward first base. Zach fielded it and threw to Joshua at first base for the out. Jarrod covered second base, to where Peter Dellay advanced, and Dan stayed at third.

“There we go, boys! Well done! All right, Ethan, now get up here and drive in a run.”

Sure enough, Ethan smacked Benjamin’s pitch into right field. Danny LeClair fielded it as Peter Dellay rounded third base. Once Peter hit the wet grass around third base, though, he slipped and crashed to the ground. Danny, sensing that he might have a play at home after all, quickly threw the ball into the infield. Peter tried running for home, realized he would not make it safely, and turned back to third base, again slipping and falling in the wet grass. By this point, the infield was in hysterics, but Peter took advantage of the field conditions and the earlier sliding practice by diving toward third base, landing two feet short, and letting the mud glide him safely to the bag. Runners at the corners, yes, but an embarrassed—and muddy—baserunner on third.

Dan, the third baseman, looked down at Peter’s feet and asked, “Why aren’t you wearing cleats?”

“I don’t have any,” Peter said, mumbling and flush.

Dan shrugged. “Just go buy some.”

After practice, Peter was standing apart from the other boys, so I asked him, “You don’t have any cleats, Peter?” His sneakers were beginning to form a hole in the toes. I had him penciled in as our starting second baseman, although Nicholas was debating the merits of that decision.

“No, Coach.”

I had never noticed that Peter's clothes looked a bit worn because every other boy was wearing grass- and dirt-stained clothing as well. For the first time, I inspected his glove and found it nearly coming apart at its seams. How he managed to field as well as he did was beyond me.

"Do you know anyone you could borrow from?"

"No, Coach."

"Okay, Peter," I said, putting my hand on his shoulder and leading us back to the dugout where the other boys were changing out of their cleats and into sneakers as their parents waited in parked cars. "Maybe I'll do some looking around to see if there are some you could borrow."

Peter nodded but remained quiet. From the corner of my eye, I watched as Peter milled around the dugout, trying to blend in as much as possible. All he really did was take off his cap, put it in his shabby backpack with a book and a jacket, and trot out to a rusty car in the parking lot.

Before driving home that evening, I took a little drive up the October River to Martin Sports in Jefferson. Before Friday's practice, I announced that an anonymous donor had supplied the town with some gloves and cleats for anyone to use. They even looked pretty new. The gloves and cleats were available to be borrowed for the duration of the season if a player wanted to try something other than his own. A few of the boys checked out the gloves, but Peter stayed away and joined some other boys at the water fountain instead.

"Hey Peter," I called as I was gathering baseballs. He came over to me, with his head down. I took him aside and said, "Take this glove and grab a pair of shoes. Run around in them a little this weekend and see how they feel. Throw some pop-ups to yourself with this glove. Just give it a shot."

Peter nodded.

When Monday arrived, Peter was wearing cleats, scuffed and covered in dirt. He had a new glove on his hand, and with it he put to rest any doubts whether he should be a starting infielder.

“Hello, Jennifer, my dear.”

Jenn cringed at being called Jennifer by anybody. I stifled a laugh while Jenn and Basye exchanged hugs. Percival knew better and called her “Jenn” before being granted a hug.

“Come on in, come on in.” Basye clapped her hands together and gathered us in like a hen’s chicks. I held the door in mock chivalry.

“Go right ahead, *Jennifer*.”

Jenn thrust an elbow in my ribcage as she walked past in silence, graceful and impolite all in one motion. Jenn had driven up from Portland that Thursday afternoon, taking Friday off, so that she could experience the first summer concert on the Swiftwater town green.

“Can we get you a drink?” Percival asked.

“Do you have lemonade?” Jenn said.

Percival nodded.

“Just water for me,” I said.

“I’ll get it,” Basye said, and hurried off to the kitchen.

“So how is the springtime treating you, Jacob?” Percival asked as he led us into the living room. The furniture was a little too old and a little too worn to be very comfortable any longer, but the old sofa and settee were just ornate enough that I felt as though I should be on my best behavior.

“Lots of rain, Percival. I’m still working on getting a garden in working order. I’m anxious to get something planted.”

“Oh, don’t be anxious, dear,” Basye called from the kitchen. “Supper will be ready in ten minutes and we will have plenty of time to get to the concert.”

I gave Jenn a confused look and she stifled a laugh before calling back to the kitchen, “Basye, let me help you in there.”

“No, thank you, Jennifer. I’m quite all right.”

However, not even Basye could deter Jenn from what she had already decided she would do. Jenn and Basye chattered away in the kitchen as Percival gave me the short history of the residents of the houses along this stretch of road. The Newmarkets had lived in their house for forty years, ever since they moved to Swiftwater with three children and a fourth on the way. The house was well-worn but, as tired as the house may be, it was just as tidy and lively as ever. The hardwood floor squeaked when I stepped at just the right place and the aroma of granny smith apples lingered in the air from the apple pie cooling on the counter.

“Gentlemen,” Basye appeared in the doorway, “supper is ready.”

Jenn was beaming and gave me a quick kiss on the cheek before we sat down.

“Now help yourselves,” Basye said.

“Basye, this looks absolutely wonderful. Thank you so much.”

“Oh, now Jacob, it’s nothing at all. You just don’t recognize a square meal when you see one because you live there all by yourself.”

“I suppose that—”

“That house is too big for just one...” she sang.

“Mmm. Lovely pasta salad,” Jenn said, smiling at me.

“That’s why I’m thinking about getting a dog, Basye.”

“A dog? Jacob, a dog isn’t what you need.”

“No?”

Percival guffawed with a buttered roll in his mouth.

“Jennifer, do you live by yourself down there in Portland?”

“No, Basye. I live with my friend Kelli.”

“And do you have a dog?”

“No, but it sounds like a lovely idea, especially up here where a dog would have room to run around. Jacob,” she turned to me suddenly, “you *should* get a dog. Then you wouldn’t have to call *me* so often!”

Basye nearly dropped her fork. “And why don’t you like him to call you so often?”

“Oh, Basye, he’s so boring sometimes. Baseball baseball farm farm blah blah blah. The man needs a dog.”

I rolled my eyes and reached for some green beans. Jenn kicked me underneath the table. “A dog is good to have around,” I said.

“Jacob—”

“Basye, may I have some more water?”

“Oh certainly! No, no! Let me get that for you.”

Throughout the course of the meal, at Jenn’s prompting, Basye and Percival summarized each of their children’s most recent goings-on. Jenn had an amazing capacity to recall details about each of them that I could not recall having ever learned.

“Now who would like this last roll? Jacob?”

“Only if nobody else claims it,” I said. “Could you pass the butter, Sharpie?”

“Did you want some more pasta salad, dear? Wait—what did you call her?” Basye asked.

“What? Sharpie?”

“*Sharpie*? Why do you call her a thing like that?”

Jenn and I looked at one another. I looked back at Basye and shrugged. “Her last name is Sharp. So…”

“Now Jacob,” Basye said, “Sharpie is no way to refer to a lady. Now let me get you some more water.”

She took my glass and walked toward the kitchen. “Besides,” she called over her shoulder, “her last name may not always be Sharp.” She disappeared into the kitchen.

Percival chuckled to himself, shaking his head. I shook my head also, but Jenn lit right up.

“You know, she’s right,” Jenn said. She touched my arm and said, “Just think about it, Jacob. I could be Jenn *Smith* some day. You could call me Smithy. How about Jenn *O’Brian*, or Jenn *Redding*? There are so many options!”

“Jenn *Redding*?” Basye set my glass down. “Now just who is Redding?”

“Our friend David’s last name is Redding. I wonder, Jacob,” she said, resting her chin on her hand, “do you think David would ever marry me?”

I brought my fork up to her eye level. “Careful, Sharpie.”

“My dear,” Basye began, “I don’t know this David, but—”

“Basye,” I said, “you know how *Jennifer* here likes to go on and on. I strongly suggest that you simply ignore her.”

I shot a quick glance over to Jenn, who bit her lip and looked more than pleased with herself.

“Well, I don’t know what just happened,” Basye said, conveying a sentiment that I often feel around Jenn. “All I know is that there is apple pie getting cold in the kitchen. Percival? Will you help me clear this table? Now you two don’t lift a finger.”

The Newmarkets bustled into the kitchen. Jenn slid over and rested her head on my shoulder and put her hand in mine.

“Jennnnn Smithyyyy...” she sighed.

“I’m getting a dog.”

She giggled and squeezed my hand.

The apple pie was served on the Newmarkets’ back deck, which has a wonderful view to the south and west. The sun was still fairly high in the warm summer sky. The ground was finally drying out from the springtime deluges; wildflowers were beginning to blossom in abundance, but the heat and humidity of summer had not yet arrived, making for a pleasant, apple pie sort of evening. I had already loosened my belt once after dinner, so I opted for two scoops of ice cream with my pie.

After dessert, we all drove down in the Newmarkets’ car to the green. It was a little far for them to walk, especially in the dark after the concert. They packed two lawn chairs in the trunk while Jenn and I carried a blanket and light jackets for the cooling evening.

The green was more crowded than I had ever seen it. The playground was full of children running amok, screaming and laughing and occasionally crying over skinned knees. We sat north of the gazebo, which held the musicians. The church was behind us, standing sentinel over the evening and catching the sun’s last rays on its belltower. Jenn spent as much time watching the children in the playground as she did the musicians. “I can listen to the music; I don’t need to watch it,” she explained.

There were five musicians from Concord, New Hampshire, and they played folk and bluegrass music for an hour and a half. They went back and forth between acoustic guitar, steel guitar, mandolin, percussion, banjo, violin, and hammer dulcimer from song to song. The sun set as slowly as a crooning love song.

“I’m so delighted that they began Thursday Evenings again,” Basye said. “Back when I was a girl, my little town held a concert every Friday night in the summer. It was a chance for all the farmers and farmers’ kids to get together once a week. They would play old Big Band songs, I remember. I would go and my mother would hold my hand the entire night to make sure I didn’t run off like my older brother. My father would spend the night around the punch table with his friends.”

Basye was sitting beside me, but her eyes were off in a distant world of old memories. Summer evenings have a way of becoming other worlds, some of them full of soothing memories of youth, and others full of weary nights that were loud and volatile. The music could drown out any discontent from the day with a flood of soothing melody.

“Hi, Coach!”

I turned to my left and saw Peter Dellay tugging on who I presumed to be his father.

“Hey, Peter. How are you? Great to see you.”

“Coach, this is my Dad.”

“Mister Dellay, it’s great to meet you.”

“Nice to meet you, too. Please call me Peter. This is my wife, Melissa, Peter’s Mom.”

“Hi, Melissa.”

“It’s good to finally meet you, Coach Jacob. Peter talks about you all the time.”

It was hard to imagine Peter Jr. putting together more than a few sentences at a time, much less speaking non-stop about anything. He was smiling uncontrollably in the company of his parents, far more comfortable than among the camaraderie of a baseball dugout.

Peter Dellay Sr. wore blue jeans with worn-out knees and a Middlebury College t-shirt. His face looked older than he could possibly be—weathered and tired. Melissa wore a simple green top with blue jeans. She held her husband’s hand as if to keep from sinking. Her demeanor was timid and she had big, sad eyes.

“Who are *you*?” Peter Jr. asked Jenn with all of the propriety of a nine-year-old.

“I’m Jenn. Nice to meet you, Peter.”

“But who *are* you?”

“Jenn is my girlfriend.”

Peter’s chin dropped. “You have a girlfriend?”

“Yes. Why is that so hard to believe?”

“Never mind him,” Peter Sr. told me, brushing off his son, who had clapped both hands over his mouth in astonishment. “Thanks for coaching this year. Peter’s having a great time.”

“It’s my pleasure, I’m having a blast, too,” I said. Then, turning to Jenn, “Peter’s the best second baseman in the league.”

“Is that so? You’re quite the ballplayer, huh?”

Peter became reticent again and blushed. “Yeah. I guess so.”

“So is he a good coach or is he mean?”

“He’s kinda mean.”

“He’s mean?!”

Peter giggled. “No.”

“He’s having a great time,” Peter Sr. confided to me. “It’s all he talks about now that school is letting out. Summers can be long and boring for a kid without too many friends around.”

“Yeah, I understand. He’s doing a great job on the ballfield.”

The band welcomed the crowd, gave thanks for having Swiftwater host them, and then started in on “Orange Blossom Special.”

“We’d best get moving along, I suppose,” Melissa said.

“You’re welcome to sit here with us,” Jenn said.

“Oh, thank you. We always sit in the same place over by the opera house.”

They wished us a pleasant evening and walked along.

“He’s so cute!” Jenn gushed. “Wouldn’t it be great to have an eight-year-old?”

“You’re going to have wait eight years for that. At least.”

“We can still dream about it; can’t we?”

“Whoa there, Sharpie. When did this become a first person *plural* fantasy?”

She responded by squeezing my hand and putting her head on my shoulder, effectively ending the discussion.

“Who’s that speaking with Percival?”

Jenn and I were seated on the ground on a blanket while the Newmarkets were sitting in lawn chairs to our right. Since Basye’s chair was blocking me, I had not even noticed that somebody had come up beside Percival. I leaned forward to peer around the side of Basye’s chair.

“That’s Randy Waterman,” I said through gritted teeth.

“Oh. Wait, is that—”

“Yes.”

“What’s the matter with you? Why are you scowling?”

“Nothing,” I said.

“What’s wrong with him?”

“He’s just... I don’t know.”

“I’ve never seen you so bent out of shape for no good reason.”

“I have a good reason. He’s a...” I shook my head in frustration.

“Oh that’s a great reason.”

Percival and Randy were laughing about something and I repeatedly heard Basye refer to him as “my dear.” There was a woman with Randy, who was chatting as amicably as the other three. I settled back down and tried to listen to the band, content to let the Watermans pass by unnoticed. Jenn stared at me, unsure how far to push the situation. I could tell she wanted the usual social graces of introductions. Eventually, she sighed and turned back to the gazebo as well.

“Randy, have you met Jacob and Jenn? Jacob’s new here, you see.”

“And Jenn is just a dear,” Basye added.

Basye touched my arm to get my attention. “Jacob. Jenn. Have you met the Watermans?”

I pretended to just now notice them. Randy looked over, saw me, and instantly revoked his smile. He looked back at the Newmarkets and did his best to be courteous in front of them.

“Yes, we’ve met,” I said, even though I had never met his wife, and Jenn had not met either of them.

“Jacob,” Randy nodded.

“Randy.”

I stood and shook hands with clenched teeth. His handshake was firm and mine was more so. We glared at each other under the scrutiny of company and did our mutual best to appear minimally socially acceptable. He gripped my hand tightly but I did not blink.

“This is Jenn.”

“Your girlfriend, huh?”

“Up from Portland,” I said.

“Nice to meet you,” he said, with a more tender tone than I expected.

“The pleasure is mine,” Jenn said, as though she did not notice the tension.

“City girl, huh?” he said.

“Only when I have to be.”

“This is my *wife*, Elizabeth.”

I took her hand gently. “It’s very nice to meet you,” I said. Jenn and Elizabeth exchanged salutations as well.

“So you’re the Jacob I’ve been hearing about,” Elizabeth said.

Jenn jumped in quickly, “Oh, he’s not that bad. Not quite, anyway.” Jenn and Elizabeth laughed.

“No, I meant what I’ve heard from the Newmarkets, not from Randy.” They laughed again while Randy and I bristled. “Is this your first summer in Swiftwater, Jacob?”

“Yes it is.”

“Oh you’ll love it. It’s just glorious in the summertime.”

“How long you planning on staying?” Randy said.

“Randy—”

“I just moved here. I’m not planning on leaving.”

“We’ve already had the pleasure of the Newmarket’s hospitality this evening,” Jenn said. “I think I could very easily get used to this.”

“We love having Jacob and Jenn over for dinner,” Basye explained.

Jenn and Elizabeth continued to chat and enjoy each other, which annoyed me to no end. When Basye offered for them to sit with us Randy quickly said that they wanted to sit with the sun behind them, though we were shaded by trees. Jenn exchanged good-byes with Elizabeth and sat down beside me, scowling.

“What?” I said.

“You’re a stubborn jerk, I think.”

“What? Elizabeth seems nice. I hadn’t met her before.”

“Do you want me to repeat what I just said?”

“*He’s* a stubborn jerk.”

“Probably that’s so; I got that vibe, too. But you reciprocated. What do you think? He’s going to just warm right up?” She looked behind us. “In the shadow of the church and you couldn’t manage to show any compassion?”

“The shadow isn’t—”

“Not literally, Jacob.” She rolled her eyes and crossed her arms.

The last of the daylight hung in the sky as we made our way to the Newmarkets’ car under the streetlamps. People milled about; parents tried to track down their children to convince them to come home for bedtime. After we said good night to the Newmarkets and they drove away, Jenn and I strolled across the green toward the covered bridge.

“Can I hold your hand?”

“Of course you can,” she said with furrowed eyebrows. Then, realizing my intent, she slumped her shoulders. “Oh, Jacob, I’m sorry if I was harsh. I just wish I knew why you two are so sour with each other.” She leaned in and ran her fingertips through my short hair.

“Just bad chemistry, I guess. I’m sorry. You didn’t deserve to have to be in the middle of it.”

We walked slowly into the dark, away from the town green. The crowd noise lessened and then disappeared into the sound of the October River. We felt alone again; the stars in the east were our only company. We stopped at the center of the bridge, which seemed longer than it was before the concert. I looked back toward the green, sighed, and then looked eastward toward home. Jenn pinched me and smiled.

“Whatcha thinkin’?”

I shrugged, too embarrassed by my own behavior to even make an excuse. We leaned on the rail in silence for a time. The river and the stars did not acknowledge us and we could have disappeared from all existence, with all of our petty problems with us. I felt silly and small, especially since I wanted to appear so nearly the opposite. Jenn’s clear, blue-gray eyes shone in the rising moonlight. A wave of her blonde hair fell from behind her ear and brushed across her round cheek. Her smile could disarm a militia.

“If you aren’t more hospitable to Randy, God might have to kill you.”

“You’d miss me,” I said, mustering a smile.

“Probably with a freak farming accident.”

“You’d miss me.”

“Maybe.”

She turned to me slowly, putting both of her arms around my neck. She paused briefly, and then gave me a slow, wet kiss on my cheek.

Electricity traveled down the aluminum bat and into my hands while I stood on deck, trying to look poised. Under the brim of my helmet, I saw my parents sitting in the sun-soaked bleachers, almost bouncing in their seats, and whispering in each other's ears. My mother pointed in my direction, but my father took her hand and squeezed it, laughing at a joke I couldn't hear.

I swung the bat a few times and stretched my back and shoulders. Erik Hudnor flied out to shallow left field, so I began the slow walk to the batter's box, walking directly toward my parents, who sat behind the first-base dugout.

The loudspeakers belted, "Now pinch-hitting for the Hurricanes... freshman... Jacob Thomas."

I shot a quick glance to my parents and gave them the slightest of nods. My father winked back. Eighteen years old and the apple of their eye, Mom always called me their "miracle child" because the doctors said that they would never have children. When I asked why they never had another, she said, "We try to remember how blessed we are to have one child, and not regret that we couldn't have more."

They had driven two days from Vermont to watch me play my first collegiate baseball, a three-game series in Richmond. I never left the bench during the first two games. They had to drive home the next day and they wouldn't be able to see many games, since I chose a school so far away.

More than six months after I had left home, I stood in the batter's box and dug my cleats into the muddy earth, holding an aluminum baseball bat and my parents' highest hopes. The first pitch came in with such ferocity that my bat stayed frozen to my shoulder. It seemed to nearly graze my chin, though it was really twelve inches away from me. High, ball one.

It was the top of the eighth inning in a game we trailed 7-1—a good time for a freshman to make his debut. We won the first game, 5-4, and lost the second, 8-6. This one got away when they scored five runs in the seventh. Old Dick Merrell, the longtime coach, turned his head and growled, "Thomas, get in there for Berry."

I adjusted my helmet and batting gloves and readied for the second pitch. I guessed fastball; he threw a curve and I missed it by six inches. The pitch nearly hit my back foot. Strike one.

Jack Berry, a senior, had dutifully slapped my rear end and said, "Come on, rook, put one in play now," when Coach Merrell called on me to replace him. Jack was our starting second baseman, the role I hoped to fill for the following three years. There were rumors of Jack making All-Conference, though it wasn't likely he was going pro.

The third pitch was a breaking ball that didn't break. It hung on the outside corner of the plate and I got my wrists around on it so I could drive it to right field. The outfield had been playing me to pull, so the right fielder had to make a long run to track it down. I had the perfect view to watch him lollygag while I raced up the first-base line. I'm still not sure whether I audibly heard my father tell me to go for two, or whether his years of training were still echoing in my head. Either way, I sprinted around first base and stormed toward second. The shortstop, covering the bag, yelled to get the throw in quickly. I went into second base with a perfect feet-first slide. Double. One on, one out.

My parents stood and cheered in an otherwise languid ballpark. A number of heads in the dugout turned to see the freshman's overexcited parents in the stands and rolled their eyes. I bent over and brushed the dirt off my pants to hide my smile. Once the attention turned to the next batter, I discreetly nodded to Mom and Dad before taking an aggressive lead off second. Just like Dad taught me.

After the game, Coach Merrell told me that I would always remember my first hit because everyone does. He was right. I still remember everything about it—from the pitch count and the right fielder's lazy trot, to the sunlight glistening off the metal roofing of the press box and the smell of the cut grass. What I mostly remember, though, are my parents' satisfied smiles as they watched me play college ball for the first and last time.

“Jacob, where are you?”

“Wilton. I’ll be there in ten or fifteen minutes.”

“You’re the only one not here, you know,” Jenn said.

“I know. I told you I’d be there around 6:00.”

“It’s ten past.”

“And you said supper was at 6:30. I’ll be there. I’ll just be fashionably late. You like fashionable, remember?”

“Fine. Mom’s giving me that look, though. It’s always been my fault for being late for everything. Even though you’re the one who’s late, it still reflects on me.”

“This is a first, eh? You stressed out and me being oblivious? Ha!”

“Stop being in a good mood and just get here,” Jenn said. “Even my father might notice, especially if you delay supper.”

“I’ll be there in five minutes.”

Jenn grew up in the rolling countryside outside of Farmington in central Maine, a land that is tranquil even by New England standards. While I had been to the Sharps several times, I was overdue for another trip to the Sharp homestead to drink a leisurely glass of lemonade on the front porch and watch the stars come out while sitting around a campfire in the backyard. With her younger brother, Erik, taking a weekend to come home from Boston, Jenn and her older sister, Madeline, decided to bring their respective men home for a visit as well.

I pulled into the driveway and immediately smiled at the sight of the old farmhouse with the wrap-around front porch, guarded by a lazy golden retriever who raised his head at my sight, but did not bother to move. Jenn’s mother had to step around the dog on her way from the front door to my car. She gave me a big hug and a kiss on the cheek. Over her shoulder, I saw Jenn standing with her weight on one leg and her arms crossed, trying her best to disguise her pleasure.

“Sorry I’m a little late; it took longer to get away than I anticipated.”

“Don’t mention it, Jacob,” Mrs. Sharp smiled. “We’re just glad you could come.”

I presented her with a bottle of wine for her hospitality. Mr. Sharp rose from his chair at his wife’s request, folded his newspaper, shook my hand, and took the wine to their cellar.

“You’re late,” Jenn whispered in my ear before giving me a half-smile.

“You’re beautiful,” I said. She blushed and I knew that I had bought at least five minutes of her good graces.

Madeline, the more somber of the two Sharp daughters, greeted me with a hug and kiss as well. The two were nearly identical in appearance, with the exception of Madeline’s jet-black hair opposed to Jenn’s blonde. Whereas Jenn had a youthful exuberance, Madeline had always seemed older than her age, now twenty-nine, taking the responsibility as the eldest to keep Jenn and the much younger Erik in line. Madeline and I often rolled our eyes concurrently at Jenn’s antics. Madeline’s husband, Mike, worked

as a mechanical engineer in Bangor, where they had lived during their three years of marriage.

After dinner, we found ourselves spending another summer evening in the Sharps' backyard with a fire roaring in the stone-lined fire pit. Jenn and Madeline sat on the nearby picnic table while Erik, Mike, and I poked, prodded, and added more wood to the fire as we discussed the current Red Sox team. Jenn's parents came and went a few times; Mrs. Sharp always had a new form of dessert with each appearance.

Plates with brownie crumbs and empty ice cream bowls were scattered about the picnic table. Jenn and Madeline decided to clean up and leave us men to the task of analyzing the hit-and-run. After a few minutes, I noticed another bowl sitting on a rock on the edge of the firelight and decided to walk it into the kitchen where Madeline and Mrs. Sharp were washing the dishes.

"I found one more," I said.

"Thanks; I'll take that," Madeline said, extending a sudsy hand. "You okay, Mom?"

Mrs. Sharp was leaning over and had her hand on her stomach.

"Whew. I guess I ate too much."

Madeline and I both reached for her and asked her again if she was all right. She stood up and shook her as if to clear away the last of the pain.

"Not sure what that was," she said. "I'm fine."

"Are you sure, Mom?"

"Of course; it was just some cramp. Jacob, we're going to have to cut down another tree if you boys keep it up with that fire," Mrs. Sharp said, smiling.

"Okay, we'll rein it in," I said. "Where's Jenn?"

"Talking to Dad," Madeline said.

Mrs. Sharp continued drying the dishes that Madeline washed. I made my way down the hallway to the bathroom and overheard Jenn and her father in the next room. I stood silent and motionless just outside the bathroom.

"Why don't you want to come outside with us, Dad?"

"I don't want to get in your way. You guys just enjoy yourself."

"Erik and Madeline drove all the way here and you'd rather just sit and read your magazine?"

"You have a problem with me wanting you guys to enjoy yourselves?"

"No, Dad. I just want you to come outside and join us. You know, have normal father-daughter time. You ask me questions how I'm doing, I answer..."

"You're doing fine. I know how you're doing. You teach in a high school in Portland."

"Right. That's what I do."

"See?"

"Right. And Erik and Madeline? And Mike? And Jacob? Do you not like him, Dad?"

"Of course I like him. We talk all the time."

"All the time? For five minutes at dinner about baseball?"

I glanced around the corner just enough to see Jenn leaning forward with her elbows on her knees, across from her father who was still reading a magazine.

"What do you think about him and me?"

“What do you mean?”

“Do you like the fact that he’s dating your little girl?”

“My little girl isn’t so little anymore. You can take care of yourself; I’ve learned that about you.”

“Great. Thanks for the vote of confidence.”

“Don’t be sarcastic with me, Jennifer.”

“Call me Jenn, Dad.”

His voice grew stern. “I named you Jennifer.”

“Mom named me Jennifer,” she said slowly. “You wanted a boy.”

I heard him drop his magazine in his lap. “I named you Jennifer and that’s what I’ll call you,” he said. “And I have my boy.”

“And you have a girl.”

“I know I do,” he said, picking up his magazine.

“Two of them.”

“Yes, Jennifer,” he sighed, “I have two girls. What do you want from me?”

She looked down at her hands, looking lost. She shrugged and said, “I guess I don’t know, Dad.”

“Then why are you pestering me to go outside?”

There was a long moment of silence until Jenn got up hastily. I ducked into the bathroom and closed the door quietly behind me. I heard her walk past and into the kitchen, and then out to the backyard. When I stepped outside, she was sitting at the edge of the firelight with her face resting in her hands, gazing into the fire. Erik and Mike were discussing who should have made the American League All-Star team.

I sat beside her and she gave me an unconvincing smile when I put my arm around her. She seemed like a different person around her father. Instead of the gregarious, self-confident woman to whom I was magnetically attracted, she looked small and scared and unsure.

“Do you want to talk about something?” I whispered to her.

She looked at me with confused eyes and shook her head. Until that moment, I had always thought that Jenn Sharp knew exactly what she was doing with every word, every motion, and every bat of her eye. Now she looked as uncertain as anyone, and I had no idea how to remedy that.

Mrs. Sharp closed the screen door behind her and stepped outside.

“Hey, Mom, I saved the last marshmallow for you,” Erik said.

She smiled back, “No thanks, honey.”

Erik shrugged and helped himself.

Mrs. Sharp stood beside her daughter and said, “Did Jenn ever tell you about the time she nearly burnt the house down roasting marshmallows?”

“Somehow that hasn’t come up. And yet, somehow I’m not surprised.”

Jenn groaned. “Do we have to hear this again?”

Erik and Madeline’s laughter made it impossible for me to understand what they were saying. Mrs. Sharp told them to be kind, though it was all she could do to hold her own laughter back. Finally Erik managed to spit out, “Her marshmallow caught on fire and she got so upset watching it burn on the end of her stick, and she couldn’t figure out how to put out the fire, so she flung it into the house.”

Everyone but Jenn doubled over in laughter.

“I didn’t mean to throw it in the house. It came off the stick wrong. Madeline picked out the sticks.”

“So it’s my fault?” Madeline said, barely able to breathe between laughs.

Jenn finally broke out her smile and chuckled. Erik said, “This fireball shot across the yard in the dark like a comet and landed in the living room.”

“Mom ran over and threw her glass of water on it,” Madeline said, relishing in making fun of her little sister. “I think there’s still a stain on the carpet, right?”

Mrs. Sharp nodded emphatically, laughing too hard to speak. Jenn shrugged her shoulders at me innocently. “I wouldn’t say it’s a stain. It’s just a little singed.”

“When was this?” I asked. “Sometime last week?”

“Ha ha. I was like six years old.”

“You were twelve!” Erik said.

“You were twelve?”

Jenn batted her eyes at me. “Maybe.”

“I still remember her face,” Mrs. Sharp said between bouts of giggles. “She was laughing until the carpet caught on fire, and then she looked horrified, but then she was laughing at me running with a glass of water.”

“Madeline and I thought our house was going to burn down, and Jenn’s laughing like a loon over there,” Erik said. “I hope she got grounded for that, by the way. Did that happen? I got grounded for bringing a paintball gun in the house and I never even fired it.”

“You did too fire it,” Madeline snapped. “I had the welts to prove it!”

“Yeah, but not in the house.”

“I remember getting grounded for that,” Jenn said. “I remember Mom grounding me. I think Dad was just upset that my aim was too bad to play baseball.”

“Sorry, honey, but you almost burnt the house down.”

“I know, Mom. I remember you coming upstairs to read to me in my room when I was grounded. You weren’t very good at being mad at me.”

“That’s not fair!” Madeline said. “I never got off that easy.”

“When did you ever get grounded? Jenn and I got into a lot more trouble than you.”

“I got grounded at least once,” Madeline blushed.

“Tell me more about Jenn as a twelve-year-old,” I said.

“How about when she was thirteen?” Erik said with a mischievous grin.

“Oh, no,” Jenn said, shaking her head. “We don’t need to go into *that*.”

After about an hour, the fire was finally dying down and Mike and Madeline turned in for the evening while Erik and Jenn traipsed across the dark field to find their old tire swing. Jenn insisted that it was still operational after all these years, while Erik dared her to prove it.

“Jacob, come and catch me if I fall.”

I declined, but Jenn’s mother encouraged me to go with them.

“It’s okay, Mom. He’s getting pretty old; he’ll probably blow out his knee.”

“Bye,” I waved.

Jenn waved coquettishly over her shoulder as she and Erik disappeared into the dark.

“My wild child,” Mrs. Sharp shook her head and we exchanged knowing smiles.

“How are things in Swiftwater?” Mrs. Sharp asked.

“I feel like I’m just getting to know the town. I’m meeting some of the people around town, mostly parents of the baseball kids.”

“There can’t be much going on there, though, for someone who lives alone.”

“No, but I keep busy. Busier than I had anticipated, actually.”

“Life has a way of doing that,” she said.

Jenn had her mother’s enthusiastic eyes, which shined in the crackling firelight. We sat at arm’s length on the bench of the picnic table, facing the fire. The evening was still warm at the late hour, as the chirping crickets attested. I heard Jenn’s laughter and Erik’s shout in the distance through the thick, dark air.

Part of my attraction to Jenn was my attraction to her family. I loved the banter between Jenn and her siblings, the tiffs around the dinner table, and the energy created among people who at once love and irritate each other. As much as I appreciated the peace and quiet of my life, I would have given it up for the chance to sit around a campfire and get roasted by my brother and sister, or to bicker about whose fault it was that mud got tracked onto the carpet. It was not the solitude of Farmington that I cherished visiting; it was the unrelenting liveliness of a family, brimming with love and crackling with exasperation.

Sparks from the fire danced in the air with a waxing half-moon behind them. The decreasing soft glow of the embers no longer reached the side of the house; only a light above the kitchen sink marked its presence. The house had seen a few generations pass through it, plenty of summer campfires and cold winter mornings. Children had raced down its staircase and burnt the carpet with flaming marshmallows. Like the family before it, the Sharps had celebrated every season in this house, from new births to graduations to white Christmas mornings. I hoped that the Thomas Farm would become a place like that, a real home that hosted whiffle ball games in the yard and summer suppers on the deck with fresh corn on the cob from the garden.

The fire was slowly burning out; in the morning it would be ash and memory. The sun would rise again, the summer would continue to grow to its peak, only to fade into autumn. I stared into the fire, forgetting everything else for a moment. The red embers pulsed while a green log hissed and cracked as the flames danced across it. The occasional snap would send a spark into the air, quickly fading into the dark.

“Big game tomorrow, boys! Big game tomorrow! Look sharp now! Look like *ballplayers!*”

My voice roared above the baseball field. Fifteen boys were on the field—some on base, some fielding, some pitching. They were cracking jokes, playing hard, getting dirty, and yelling their heads off, away from their parents on a perfect summer afternoon. Watching their revelry gave me surprising joy.

At the end of practice, Benjamin was pitching batting practice to some of the boys while I stood at first base, heckling our star pitcher.

“C’mon, Danny, you can hit this chump! He’s throwing meatballs! C’mon now!”

Everyone was chuckling, except for Benjamin, who was trying his hardest to concentrate. Danny laced a line drive to left field.

“See? Easy double against this pitcher! Couldn’t strike out my grandmother!”

Benjamin muttered, “I could strike *you* out.”

He had cracked and a chorus of oohs went up from the field. A challenge had been hastily offered and the stage was set.

“Oh really?” I said, leaning on a bat.

Benjamin paused a moment, realizing his tactical error. But with fourteen peers staring him down, he could not back away.

“Yeah,” he said, with as much confidence as he could muster.

I stood still for a long moment, staring down Benjamin and grinning. Then I took up the bat and strode slowly toward home plate. The infielders howled in delight and the outfielders ran fifteen feet back. Martin Courchesne laughed behind his catcher’s mask.

“All right, meat, let’s see what you got.”

One brave boy managed to taunt, “Eeeeeeasy out... eeeeeeasy out...”

Benjamin’s first pitch hit the dirt beside the plate.

“Oh come on, Benjamin... You scared out there?” I teased.

Martin laughed again and Benjamin bit his lip.

“Come on, son, stuff one down his pipe!” Nicholas laughed from the dugout, just then realizing what was transpiring.

Other boys joined in the encouragement and Benjamin seemed to grow three inches in his cleats. His face became serious and Martin punched his glove and got into position. Benjamin turned perpendicular to me and began his windup, raising his left knee and dropping his arms. His right hand rose and hung behind his ear as his leg pushed off of the pitching rubber. His right arm, cocked, whipped forward. After a blur of motion, he stood statuesque—right foot in the air, right hand dangling toward the earth, eyes bent on following the ball into the catcher’s mitt. The baseball tumbled over itself, spinning its way toward Martin. I raised my front foot and began to move my hands forward, keeping my elbows locked in. I sped the bat through the strike zone and watched the ball flutter toward me.

CRACK!

Martin rose to his feet, taking his mask in one hand. I stood motionless in the batter’s box, my bat draped across me like a cape. Benjamin’s head turned to watch the flight of the ball against the blue sky. Infielders tongues hung as they involuntarily stood

and watched the baseball. Two outfielders sprung into motion, running, running, running. Well before they arrived at the outfield fence, they stopped and put their hands on their hips to watch the ball sail thirty feet above the fence and crash into the trees on the hillside.

Benjamin turned back around and scowled. "Give me another ball, Martin."

Martin, shocked, searched for a ball nearby and threw it to Benjamin.

"Okay, Ted Williams, hit this one."

I dug in and prepared for the pitch. This time, I did not hit a home run, largely due to the fact that Benjamin threw the baseball straight at the small of my back. He tried to look mean again, but before long broke into a laugh. Then I charged the mound and the benches and field cleared. An all-out brawl ensued, complete with noogies, wedgies, and water bottles being dumped down unsuspecting victims' pants. Practice, for all intents and purposes, was over.

The following day, quite a few boys wanted to try pitching, but only one volunteered to catch. Martin Courchesne was a different kind of kid, as catchers are wont to be. He was born with grass stains on his knees. Thick and tough, he never quit, even on the toughest of drills. He had a way of rallying people toward him. If an infielder made an error, Martin would stand with a hand on his hip, peering out from home plate before punching his glove and bellowing, "That's all right, Danny! We'll get it next time!" Martin put on the catcher's gear and squatted behind home plate, catching pitches from eight different boys, some of whom could not throw a pitch that did not send Martin to the backstop. After each retrieval, Martin would punch his glove. "Come on, Adam! Throw right in here! Throw it down the ole pipe!"

Nine-year-olds are wonderful. They are not quite smart enough to know when they are not cool, so they accept everything with enthusiasm.

Most parents had arrived by the time practice had ended. I kept my distance from Randy and he seemed happy to return the favor. He and Nicholas exchanged smiles and even a chuck on the shoulder. For my part, there were plenty of other kids and parents with whom to speak.

"See you tomorrow, Coach," Peter Dellay said, beaming from under his cap. He was nearly skipping and I could not understand his sudden effervescence until I saw that his father was with him.

"Bye, Peter. We'll have some fun tomorrow!"

I was walking with an armload of bats to my car and it happened that the Dellays were parked beside me.

"How's your girrrlfriend?" Peter sang.

"Jenn is just fine, thank you."

Peter Sr. pulled him into a playful headlock and tousled his hair. "Nevermind him," he said. "Excited for the first game?"

"I am. I coached a team a few years ago, but it was really different."

"How so?"

“They were suburban kids with a hundred other activities in their lives. Baseball didn’t matter much; it was just another item on the checklist. Here, it seems like it matters, like it is a total community event.”

“Our baseball matters,” Peter said, “because our kids matter. This isn’t a busy enough place to forget those things.”

With my hands full, Peter opened the car door for me and I tossed the bats inside.

“Have you always wanted to coach?”

“I played all my life, even into college. A busted up knee my sophomore year ended all that. It took a year to heal and it still doesn’t feel and move quite right.”

“And by the time it healed?”

“Life got in the way. School, then a job. The dream of playing ball died, but I still want to be around the game. I sometimes think I should have always pursued the game—playing or coaching. I chose the sure thing instead; I chose a job and money over the dream.”

Peter winced and regarded me with sympathetic eyes. “Dreams can sure be elusive,” he said.

“Yeah. They sure can.”

After we had gathered everything, I followed Nicholas home so that he could drop Benjamin off and we could still chat a while longer. I wanted to talk over a few things about the upcoming first game of the season, but I had other things on my mind to discuss with him as well.

“Yeah, that sounds like Randy I guess,” he said.

“Did I do something to get on his bad side?”

“You didn’t *do* something; you *are* something. A stranger, an outsider. You’re an unknown.”

“You make me sound like a spy.”

“Well, you are a change in the status quo around here.”

“Why is that such a big deal?”

“For some of us, whenever the status quo changes, it means losing a job or losing a loved one. It’s easy to imagine why some people get uneasy when the status quo changes, especially when they don’t know anything about it.”

“So this is Randy’s defense mechanism? I didn’t realize you were a psychologist, too,” I kidded.

“Being a pastor means being a little bit of everything,” he said. “Let’s just say that Randy tends to be a bit contentious.”

“Is contentious another word for jackass?” I said, forgetting for a moment that I was speaking with a pastor.

“Maybe. But, more often than not, it’s another word for having been dealt a rough hand by life.”

I thought that my look conveyed to him that I wanted him to explain further, but he either misunderstood or simply declined.

“Rough hand? You mean his kid?”

“What about Steven?”

“I like the kid, but he obviously isn’t on the same social level, maybe not the same mental level either. I didn’t know if—”

“Randy and Elizabeth have never had him tested for anything. In his mind, Steven is his son—no more, no less. No diagnosis will change that. In a way, there’s something admirable about that approach.”

“But maybe a diagnosis could help. It seems like he’s just stubborn.”

“Jacob,” he began, turning from baseball coach back into pastor, “Randy Waterman is in need of God’s grace—no more, no less than anybody else. Just like you and just like me.”

I had to hand it to Nicholas—he played the neutral role well. Rachel Jaitieu, faithful pastor’s wife and mother of three, stood in the doorway, calling to Nicholas in the driveway. In the background, I could hear Benjamin and Peter romping through the house, probably chasing their sister, Anna.

I waved to Rachel and said goodbye to Nicholas. I drove back to the Thomas Farm and parked in the garage. The last light was still clinging to the western sky, so I walked over to the garden with a baseball bat still on my shoulder and my glove dangling from the end of the bat.

I idly picked some stones out of the dirt and tossed them toward the driveway. The garden was fenced and ready for action. The dirt was turned over, but not quite ready for planting. I hoped to have some tomatoes planted by the week’s end, as well as green beans, cucumbers, and corn. Something told me to grab a spade and put in a half-hour of work before it got dark—to mix some garden dirt with the baseball dirt on my pants. Weariness also called to me, though, urging me to go inside for the evening.

I stood in my sullen garden under a dull sunset, poking at the dirt. Throughout town, fifteen families were settling down for supper, reviewing the day’s events and bragging about the joy of that high fly ball they caught and the joy of tomorrow’s big game. I thought I could see a few lights coming on in the valley, kitchens stoked with mashed potatoes and casseroles, and I even thought I heard a few children being called in for the evening and being told to wash their hands before supper. My own house was quiet and still. No lights were on, no supper was cooking in the oven, no kids were running through the yard. Except me—a big kid with a baseball bat on his shoulder and kicking at the stones in the dirt. I thought about calling Jenn. I didn’t have anything to say; I just wanted to sit with her on the deck, silently watching the last of the sunset and then having her fall asleep on my shoulder. Evening is always the loneliest time of day. I went inside and made some soup and tried not to think about anything.

A joy withheld is a joy unfinished.

Opening Day.

No two words quite tickle my thoughts. The Red Sox were ten weeks into the season, but it was Opening Day for the October Valley Summer Baseball League. Dragons versus Cougars—the battle for Swiftwater—complete with blood, sweat, tears, and ice cream sandwiches afterward.

The road wound along the west bank of the October River, following it upstream, away from Swiftwater. I checked the odometer and then scanned the piece of paper on which I had written the directions to the Dellays' house. Sure enough, the green sign appeared and I turned left onto a dirt road that climbed away from the river. A mile later, I eased into the Dellay driveway.

What had once been a mobile home was now permanently grounded. A rickety front porch had been added years before, but weeds grew through the cracks and up the railing. The screen door was ripped in a few places and hung unevenly under the edge of the rusting metal roof. Trees crept close to the house on the south and west, keeping it shaded even in the summer. On the other side of the house, the sun bathed a small open yard in which some scrawny tomato plants clung to a cluster of stakes near bales of chicken wire.

I walked to the front door, tentatively stepping on each board that groaned under my weight. The door opened before I reached it and Melissa stepped out.

“Oh, hi. Did you find it okay?”

“Not a problem.”

“Come on in; Peter will just be a minute.”

My eyes were still adjusting to the poorly lit house. The pines blocked much of the natural light, even though all of the shades were open. The main room and kitchen had worn furniture and appliances, but everything appeared very tidy. Melissa called to Peter and he appeared down the hallway with his excited smile that cut through the gloom.

“Hi, Coach! Big game today, huh?”

I agreed and watched him hop on one foot while trying to put on his shoe. Melissa took his glove and cleats out of a coat closet and handed them to Peter.

“We'll be there as soon as we can, Peter.”

“Okay. Bye, Mom.”

“Thanks again, Jacob.”

With both hometown teams playing in the game, the bleachers of the Swiftwater Community Ballpark were bursting at the seams. Some parents sat in lawn chairs down each baseline and even more squeezed behind home plate, gripping the chain link backstop and peering around their neighbor's shoulder. An excited murmur pervaded the atmosphere while the teams warmed up. I overheard bits of light-hearted derision among neighbors whose sons played on different teams. Many in the crowd fanned themselves while peering into the field to spot their child.

From home plate, knocking grounders to the infield, I occasionally glanced into the crowd between plays. The Watermans sat in the middle of the Dragon parents, leaning forward and shielding their eyes against the sun as they watched Steven take infield practice. Randy held court with others seated near him, gesturing wildly at times and breaking into his coarse laughter while slapping someone on the shoulder or knee.

“All right, team, hustle it in,” Nicholas called.

The boys trotted in from the field and gathered in the dugout to re-tie shoes and jostle around the water cooler. Nicholas and I walked to home plate to greet the Cougars’ coach.

“Good luck this year, JJ,” Nicholas said.

“You too, after today of course.”

“Gentlemen,” the umpire said, “do you have your line-up cards?”

Nicholas turned his in and we walked back to the dugout amidst the scrutiny and scattered applause of the parents. Nicholas whispered to me, “Nervous?”

I looked at him curiously. “Why would I be nervous?”

“I guess you don’t know how seriously they take their baseball around here.”

“I guess not,” I laughed, hoping to ease my sudden case of anxiety.

“Play ball!”

The crowd roared in anticipation and Nicholas and I could not help but smile at each other. Some of the players grinned, too, until Martin called out from behind his catcher’s mask, “All right there, Benjy, throw it down the pipe now! Look alive, infield! Here we go, here we go!”

For the first few innings, the game went back and forth, but the Cougars began to pull away in the middle innings. Still, the indefatigable good spirits of the boys made it hard to forget that baseball was fun. Even getting beat by their schoolmates did not diminish their enjoyment and they played hard despite the score. Nearly every player was grass- and dirt-stained by the end of the game and their enthusiasm spread to the bleachers where nearly every parent was hoarse from good-natured cheering.

The league required that each player be on the field for a minimum of six defensive outs, so after five innings, Nicholas put Steven Waterman in the game, our last substitute. Steven was stationed in right field, guarding the line—a fact that seemed to have no ill effect on his father, who stood with his wife in rooting Steven on. Steven never stood still, kicking at the grass and looking at the sky with his hands on his hips. The only ball that came toward him was an easy single that he managed to transform into a double. In his only at bat, he surprised everyone by making contact with a pitch—a pop out to the infield.

To accommodate the substitutions, Peter Dellay was taken out after playing good defense and getting on base twice. After each defensive play he made, I noticed him searching the bleachers and turning more downcast each time. His parents finally arrived after the fifth inning, to see their son sitting on the very end of the bench, swinging his legs absently and not even watching the game. Peter’s parents found a place on the end of the bleachers and never made a sound.

After our last ground out in the bottom of the 7th inning, the Cougars had beaten us 11-6. Within minutes they were back to being boys on summer vacation again, joking with their classmates, even the ones wearing a different uniform. Parents milled about

and discussed the game and the sticky weather. Nicholas gave the boys a quick post-game talk and then dismissed them.

“Thanks again for picking Peter up,” Melissa said.

“Oh, no problem at all,” I said. “Hey Peter, could you grab those bats and walk them to my car?”

Peter Sr. and I lugged some equipment to my car while Melissa and her son waited at theirs, across the parking lot. Peter was wearing jeans that were spattered with paint and other unidentifiable stains.

“How did Peter do out there? I’m really sorry I missed him play.”

“He did great, he really did. He took care of every ball hit near him and he got on base most at bats.”

Peter smiled at the thought of it, but did not say anything.

“The whole team played well,” I said. “The score wasn’t in our favor, but the other guys just hit the ball in all the right places and we left a lot of guys on base. Those are easier things to correct than a bunch of fielding errors.”

“Good. I hope to make the rest of the games, but when work calls, it calls.”

“Yeah?” I said, not wanting to be intrusive.

“Yeah.”

I motioned to his pants. “Doing some painting today?”

“A friend of mine is a general contractor working on a house a few miles down River Road. I’ve been helping him out. Painting, drywall, some carpentry stuff.”

“Good. That’s good.”

“How is that girlfriend of yours? Jenn, right?”

“Yeah, Jenn. She’s great. She’s really great. She teaches in a high school, so she has a lot more free time during the summer. Hopefully she’ll come up to visit frequently.”

“It’s pretty serious, then?”

I laughed, trying to remind myself that bachelors are a rare commodity in small towns. “Yes, I guess it’s pretty serious.” I took off my cap and wiped the sweat from my forehead. “We’ve talked about marriage before. She’s really a great girl.”

We smiled at each other and scratched our heads and looked around at nothing in particular.

“It’s good to be married, I hear,” I said.

“Yes, it is,” he nodded. “It’s hard, though. It’s hard when you have a lot to be responsible for and can’t do much about it.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean that I have a wife and a kid, and it’s hard enough providing for myself, much less a family.”

I rubbed my hands together and looked at him. He stuck his hands in his pockets and shrugged his shoulders.

“You never quite know what’s going to happen when you marry someone. Stuff just doesn’t turn out like you think it will.”

“How long have you been married?” I asked.

“Eleven years this fall,” he said. Peter looked across the empty ballfield again, squinting even though we were standing in the shade. I leaned against my car and mumbled something cursory.

“Well,” Peter said, looking at Melissa and Peter, “I’d better get going. Good talking to you. We’ll get ‘em the next game.”

“Yeah, Thursday’s our day,” I smiled.

Peter walked over to his car and his son perked up at his approach.

“I wish you could’ve seen me play,” Peter said, looking up at his father.

“I wish I could have seen you, too,” his father said gently. “I wish a lot of things.”

“Now stand up straight, Jacob; quit slouching. Oh, it’s not that bad. Sheesh, you’re like a little kid. Let’s see... A little tight in the shoulders, but not bad. I’ll let you wear it.”

“Oh thank you, gracious granter of wardrobe approval.”

“Don’t get grumpy, my good sir,” Jenn said. “If you’re going to attend this wedding with me, I have to make sure that you look presentable. I don’t want all my college friends to think I’m dating some *unrefined* farmer.”

“I look fine. This jacket fits fine.”

“A little tight in the shoulders. I’ll let it pass, though. You’re just so big and strong, you mighty farmer, you.”

“Quiet.”

“Now let’s see those dress shoes. Oh, no, no, Jacob. You need new shoes.”

“What? These are fine.”

“No, they’re not. We’ll spare no expense to make even you look nice—if we can afford that. Ha ha ha. To the shoe store with you!”

“Jenn, these are fine.”

“Wrong again, Mister Grumpy Farmer.” She skipped to the end table and swiped my keys. “I’ll drive.”

Jenn drove down to the shoe store while I sat slumped in the passenger seat with my arms crossed and rolling my eyes at the window. I preoccupied myself by thinking about everything else that I would rather be doing. The small store, a few blocks south of the town green, was crowded with mothers dragging children who lamented the loss of a free Saturday morning.

“These look fine,” I said, pointing to the first pair of dress shoes that I saw.

“Ready to go?”

“No, let’s look around.”

“They’re fine. I’ll try them on.”

I sat on a bench in my stocking feet while Jenn brought me box after box of nearly identical shoes. With each suggestion, I sighed demonstratively and dropped my head.

“So which one do you want?” she asked.

“Which ones will you allow me to purchase? Let’s start there.”

“It’s about time you realized that strategy. Now, I think you should get one of these three.”

“Fine. This pair. Ready to go?”

“Did you even try them on? Walk around in them a bit.”

“Jenn—”

“Coach? Hi, Coach!”

I turned and saw Peter Dellay walking in hand with his mother.

“Peter! Mrs. Dellay, how are you?”

“Oh,” she said. “I didn’t expect to see you here. I’m fine. And you?”

“We’re fine. We’re just fine.”

“I’m getting new shoes today!” Peter said, sticking up one foot in the air. I could see the toes of his socks sticking through his shoes. “Mom says I can get new shoes because Dad’s finally working again.”

“Oh...”

“Peter—” Melissa Dellay looked down at her son. Then, turning to us, “Well, don’t let us keep you. Nice to see you again.”

“Yes, you as well,” I mumbled.

“Bye, Coach. See you at practice!”

“Bye, Peter,” I said. Jenn smiled and waved.

I looked back at Jenn, whose eyes had grown heavy. She sat on the bench with her hands folded in her lap. I sat beside her and leaned my elbows on my knees. The crowd in the store had thinned so I could see Peter Jr. and Melissa out of the corner of my eye as they browsed the boys’ sneakers. I heard Peter ask, “How about these?” while holding up a display shoe. Melissa turned over price tag after price tag, the concern on her face growing as she shook her head.

Jenn nudged me, looking at me, and then at the shoes at my feet. I put the shoes on and stood in them for a minute before walking in the opposite direction of the Dellays. I came back and stood in front of Jenn.

“Good enough?” she said.

They were, and I sat to take them off. From down the aisle I heard Melissa say, “Sorry, honey, these prices are just too much. We’ll have to drive to the Wal-Mart in Canton.”

“But that’s an hour away.”

“When we have to get some other stuff, we’ll go.”

I saw Peter’s head drop and I looked back down at the shiny black dress shoe in my hand. Jenn had returned the stack of boxes to the shelves while I put on my old shoes.

“Bye, Coach. We’re going to try another store.”

I did my best to force a smile but could only manage to say, “Okay.”

Melissa put her hand on his shoulder to lead him out. We exchanged awkward smiles and they left. Melissa walked out with stooped shoulders, avoiding eye contact with the cashier.

“Ready to go?” Jenn said.

The Dragons were holding their own with two wins and two losses. The fifth game of the season occurred on a drizzly Friday afternoon. The weather was cool under the gray clouds, but the rain was light enough to play the game despite the damp grass. Being the stubborn New Englanders that they were, most of the parents in the crowd did not even bother with umbrellas or rain jackets. Only half of them even wore long sleeves.

We were in the home ballpark of the Canaan Catamounts, a small field tucked between a steep hillside and the Parks River. Nicholas had let me know a few days prior that he had to be away for a long weekend, so the managerial tasks were temporarily bestowed on me. For the first time, I was nervous about being the coach. Nicholas, the long-time Swiftwater resident and wily veteran, had been the visible coach, taking responsibility for everything, while I was merely an assistant helping out with some rudimentary tasks. His decisions were largely unchallenged by the local baseball community. Now I was the newcomer tasked with the entirety of the baseball team's operations. I could already envision the throngs calling for my head after a botched hit-and-run.

To quell my anxiety, I asked Jenn to attend her first October Valley Summer Baseball League game. She was in her summer break time, or, as she referred to it, "the administrative portion of her teaching vocation," and found it convenient enough to leave Portland around lunchtime. Her presence, though, made me even more agitated. At times I imagined her chastising me for being heavy-handed and stern with the kids; at other times I imagined her chiding me to take their young formative years more seriously and instill them with a greater work ethic.

Dominic had to ask me twice where the scorecards were before I heard him. My palms sweated in the cool, damp air while I watched the team warm-up. I glanced into the crowd just under the brim of my cap and saw Jenn enter the ballpark and seat herself at the edge of the bleachers. Before long, she was chatting gaily with strangers-turned-bosom buddies. More than once, I heard her laughter above the din of the crowd. I found myself wondering—as the team warmed up without their starting pitcher or their head coach, off to a Jaitieu Family Somethingorother—why I had ever agreed to help Nicholas at all. The soft rain splattered on the dugout roof and I numbly gave cursory encouragement to the team.

Peter Dellay led off the game with a double to left-center on the very first pitch. His parents applauded reticently while I congratulated myself on a well-engineered batting order that I had thankfully crafted the night before when I was far more lucid. By the time I finished patting myself on my back, Justin Kearney, the next batter and the boy I had dubbed as our starting pitcher in Benjamin Jaitieu's absence, struck out. Fortunately, Dan McGuire followed by lacing a single to right field, scoring Peter.

"Atta boy, Danny Mac!" I shouted, surprised at how worked up I had been. Seeing the game from the coaching side of things was drastically different than my playing days. I enjoyed it, but it did make me long for being able to suit up again.

Peter drew high fives in the dugout as he walked toward the end of the bench where he could wave to his parents in the bleachers. His grin stretched from ear to ear as he put on his glove, slapping it with his other hand. I saw Jenn mouth, "He's so cute!" to

the parent beside her. Martin Courchesne followed with a line drive double to score Dan, and the Dragons had an early 2-0 lead.

Justin allayed my fears about my personnel decision by keeping the first three Catamounts batters off of the basepaths in the bottom of the 1st. Additionally, he smacked a double in the 2nd inning to put us up 4-0.

The Catamounts only scored one run in the bottom of the 2nd and I had survived Steven Waterman's six defensive outs and one at bat and still led 4-1. Nicholas had first adopted the strategy to leave our better players on the bench the first few innings to let the others play, and then have our strongest team on the field at the end of the game. Since being substituted out of a game did not preclude a player from being substituted back into a game, it was a strategy that had worked so far. Steven Waterman was now our starting right fielder, but Danny LeClair was inserted into the lineup in the 3rd inning. I had changed the strategy a bit, though, inserting only Steven into the starting lineup, to hide him among our better fielders and batters. Managerial decisions in this league were a matter of striking a balance between competitiveness and allowing kids the chance to simply play baseball.

I tried to give each kid at least three innings a game, if not four, but Steven did not seem to care about riding the bench; he never gave any indication whether he was upset or content in any situation. He politely went about his business, following instruction, and operating on a wholly different plane than anybody else. He accepted his role without question or emotion and sat mostly quiet on the bench until he would burst into laughter for no good reason once or twice a game, oblivious to the fact that nobody shared his humor. After he struck out on three pitches in the 2nd inning, he walked nonchalantly back to the bench, acknowledging the rules of the game but not its emotional engagement. When I told him that Danny would be taking his spot in right field he said, "Okay," as blasé as possible and continued watching the game indifferently while swinging his legs.

The rain came down more steadily and we went into extra innings for the first time that season. I mixed and matched the defensive alignment and thought I was okay until I saw Steven Waterman sitting at the end of the bench. I was under no obligation to insert him back into the game, having played his six defensive outs.

Adam Integlia led off and Justin warmed up on deck. I paced the dugout and stole glances at the crowd. Randy Waterman sat cross-armed and staid. I thought that I saw him glance at me but I kept him so far to the corner of my eye that I could not be sure. Maybe he was looking at Steven. Maybe he was wondering whether or not Steven would be sent out to play right field in the 8th. I could already hear him chewing me out for not letting his son play ball, for treating him like a nuisance. Steven was not a nuisance, of course; he was a ten-year-old kid. Why he ever wanted to play on this baseball team was beyond me, but here he was, showing up to every practice and every game and responding to every direct instruction. He could not possibly be as indifferent as his demeanor suggested, not with a father who was indifferent to nothing.

After not scoring in the 8th, I put Steven in right field; better to err on the side of being too egalitarian with everyone's playing time. Justin managed to keep the Catamounts from hitting to right field; the one lefty grounding out to third base. "Just keep pitching those lefties outside," I told Justin, looking gravely into his eyes before he took the mound.

The 9th inning followed suit; neither team able to score although both had runners in scoring position. Steven came to bat with two outs and runners on second and third in a still-tied game. His teammates were already prepared to go into the field and only offered token encouragement. I had already decided to allow him to play out the 9th inning, regardless of the situation, setting aside the strategic aspect of coaching. Many people seemed surprised that I did not call for a pinch hitter, and I was among them, second-guessing my decision with every pitch that Steven watched go by for a strike. Randy Waterman himself looked disconcerted when Steven walked to the plate. The first pitch went for a called strike, the second for a ball, and the third for another called strike.

“Come on, Steven,” I heard Randy yell. “Be a hitter out there!”

The dugout rumbled with half-enthused encouragement, hoping for the miraculous. The Catamount pitcher did not even bother with his menacing glare, instead looking dismissively at the batter and throwing a meatball over the plate. Steven swung awkwardly, rattling his helmet around his head and his bat missed the ball by six inches.

“Let’s hold ‘em, boys. We’ll get ‘em in the 9th,” I said as they already took the field. Someone brought Steven’s glove to him and handed it to him gruffly. Steven stoically took the field; his father sat cross-armed and scowling. I tried to read the boys’ faces to see if they were upset at my personnel decisions, but they simply took the field, spurred on by Martin’s constant encouragement.

After the Catamounts failed to score in the bottom of the 9th, I put Danny back in the lineup and put Ethan in right field where I intended to keep him even if the game went for fifty innings. In the 10th, the Dragons pushed across two runs and led 15-13 going into the bottom of the inning.

The drizzle had turned into a steady light rain that made the field increasingly sloppy, but the umpire, the Catamount coach, and I had decided to finish it out. Players on both sides were slipping in the basepaths and sliding in the grassy outfield. With a two-run lead, I was confident that it would soon be over. The Catamounts had not scored since the sixth inning and their lead-off batter popped up. Dan McGuire, playing third, slipped in the grass but made the catch. One away.

Ryan dug in again and delivered a belt-high pitch that the batter crushed and carried all the way to the fence, the abysmal conditions notwithstanding. He stood on third base and breathed life into the Catamounts. The wet grass turned the next batter’s innocent single into a double when our center fielder slipped and the ball went past him. We led 15-14 with one out, but they had a man in scoring position. Reaching the bottom of the order, Ryan threw away, walking the first batter but striking out the next for the second out. With their lead-off man at bat, Ryan lost his grip on the ball and sent it to the backstop, advancing the runners to second and third. The Catamount rooters were on their feet hoping for a Texas-league single to propel them to victory; the Dragon fans sat on their hands and rocked back forth, hoping for our starting infield to come through again.

The left-handed bat cracked and sent a sharp grounder toward second. There stood Peter Dellay. The ball skipped across the grass but Peter tracked it to his left, moving toward the hole. Zach headed for first base, expecting the throw. Then, just as the ball was about to nestle in the soft webbing of his new glove, it jumped and hit Peter in the wrist and bounced into his chest. The batter sped down the baseline toward first base with a fire behind him. Peter searched frantically for the handle of the baseball; the

runner would score and tie the game if he could not find it. There! Peter grabbed the ball and threw, but his wet hands could not grip the muddy ball and it careened past Zach to the dugout.

“No!” Ryan cried. The Catamount coach, seeing the ball rolling away from Zach, jumped up and yelled for the second runner to come home, scoring the game-winning run. Zach pounced to the dugout for the ball, whirled, and threw home to Martin. It was too late.

The Catamounts poured onto the field and mobbed the home plate area. Parents hugged in the stands and laughed in relief, their echoes reverberating off the valley walls. On our side of the diamond, some parents bit their lips or put their head in their hands; nobody dared to speak. Jenn sat unfazed by the rain, head tilted to one side and her big eyes staring across the infield. I glanced at Randy Waterman and I saw the rain pour from the brim of his hat. I could just make out his mean little eyes, glaring right at me.

Peter remained frozen in a crouched position between first and second base, staring at the ground while the rain began to fall heavily. The rest of the team walked toward the dugout in stunned dismay. Every face was hidden behind the brim of a ballcap and nobody said a word.

16-15 in 10 innings. It was quite a game.

Most of the parents were impatient to gather their children, while some decided to just wait in their vehicles. The increasingly heavy rain shook the lethargy of disappointment from them and the kids hustled off to waiting cars. Steven Waterman, though, was as oblivious to the rain as he was to everything else.

When I returned to the dugout after making two trips with baseball equipment to the car, only Steven and Randy remained. Jenn stood by my car, holding an umbrella in one hand and waiting to open the door for me with the other. I dumped out the ten-gallon water jug—the last item left in the dugout—and started to walk to the car. I felt like I should say something to Randy or Steven, but I could think of nothing that was less awkward than pretending to not notice them. Besides, I mostly just wanted to get back home and have dinner with Jenn. Just as I stepped through the gate, Randy spoke.

“First time coaching, huh?”

“First time coaching in this league,” I said.

Randy grunted. “Extra innings are a whole different strategy.”

“Yes, they—”

“So let me give you a tip.”

What I thought might be a hint of sympathy in his voice quickly turned to disdain. I cringed at his forthcoming suggestion and had already decided to disagree with him.

“Steven plays the first two innings. That’s the deal. Ask Nicholas. It’s not a hard concept, but at least Nicholas can figure it out.”

“Yeah, that’s just fine for a seven-inning game—”

“It’s always fine,” he said. “Steven, why don’t you go join Mom in the car.”

He patted Steven on the shoulder and he ran through the rain to the car. I gripped the water jug tighter and took a step away.

Randy took two steps toward me and yelled, “Don’t embarrass my son!”

“What the hell are you talking about? I’m trying to get him fair playing time. I’m not embarrassing anybody.”

“You put him up there with two outs in extra innings and runners in scoring position in a tie game. What did you think would happen? You set him up to fail in front of his peers.”

“I didn’t decide to put him up there. It was his turn in the lineup.”

“You ever heard of a pinch hitter?”

“And taking him out because he can’t hit a piñata *wouldn’t* embarrass him?”

As soon as I said it, I was sorry. I never meant to insult Steven, but I was too riled up to backtrack. Randy steamed and turned to me.

“He shouldn’t have been in there in the first place. He plays the first two innings and that’s it.”

“Then why is he even playing at all?”

I kept walking toward the car where Jenn was waiting, hoping that her presence would calm at least one of us down. Randy walked alongside, moving closer and closer.

“He’s playing,” Randy said, through gritted teeth, “because there’s not much else for a boy to do in this town.”

“Well,” I said and stopped in my tracks, “Nicholas will be back by the next game, so all your problems will be solved.”

“You goddamn prick.”

“What the hell do you want from me?”

“Don’t come down here in your new goddamn overalls thinking you can fit in. You don’t know the first goddamn thing about coaching this team.”

My hands involuntarily clenched and I took a step toward him. He had a few inches and probably thirty pounds on me, but I was younger and quicker.

“I know twice as much about this game as you’ll ever know.”

“You don’t know nothing about these kids. Goddamn know-it-all with your goddamn coaching techniques. These kids are trying to play ball, not make the big leagues.”

“You don’t know the first thing about what goes on with this team.”

“You don’t know the first thing about what goes on in this town, city boy.”

“Piss off,” I said, and walked away.

Randy stepped toward me and grabbed my shoulder. I turned on my heels, still holding the water jug and getting soaked in the rain. Jenn was twenty feet away and woke up from her trance.

“You got a lot of nerve,” Randy said.

He put his finger in my face and I shoved mine right back.

“Listen, you son of a bitch,” I said. “I’ve had enough of you telling me what I can and can’t think or what I can or can’t do. You don’t like it? Coach the damn team yourself.”

“This isn’t about coaching the goddamn team,” he said.

He puffed out his chest and bumped mine.

“I know what this is about. This is about—”

“You have no goddamn idea what this is about.”

“Jacob!”

Jenn’s cry pierced through the rain and the argument. Randy and I both stopped and turned to her. She was shaking her head and her lips quivered, trying to find the words to say. Her eyes implored me; her hand was on my elbow, pulling at it gently.

Finally she whispered, “Jacob...”

I was breathing heavily, sending clouds of vapor into the cool air. Jenn’s eyes met mine and I shrank at the sight. There was disappointment and fear and pleading all at once.

I took a step back, and Randy followed suit. We maintained eye contact for several paces until Jenn tugged on my arm again and I turned to the car. I set the water jug in the car with trembling hands while Jenn got in the passenger seat. Her head was bowed—in shame or prayer or both. I did not look up, even when I heard the Watermans’ car drive past. The rain was very lonely. I stood outside the car door and listened to the drops dance on the roof for a long moment before I got inside. Jenn looked up at me briefly and lowered her head again. For ten minutes, we drove without speaking, allowing the windshield wipers to pace the time.

“Jacob,” she said softly, sitting up and looking straight ahead, “I don’t want to be a nag or to tell you something you already know, but—”

She paused for a while, as though she had forgotten what she meant to say.

“I just wish you wouldn’t— Why do you let him get so under your skin?” Her voice had a twinge of fear mixed with sadness, like my mother’s exasperation when I was

child and came running into the house, crying over skinned knees for the umpteenth time. She looked like she might cry. “What were you really thinking?”

I was thinking how terrible it is that a man’s emotions and his tongue can carry him far beyond the reach of reason and self-control. I was thinking about how it took every available fiber of my willpower to keep from brawling with a man in front of his wife and son. I was thinking how irreversible small-town relationships can be, and how irrevocable a tarnished image can be. I was thinking how this would be perceived among the residents of Swiftwater, among the churchgoers at Swiftwater Congregational, and among my neighbors. But I did not tell any of that to Jenn. I thought how terrible it was that this wonderful young woman was sentenced to be stuck with me—how she deserved so much better and how it pained me to see her so agonized. I was thinking what a buffoon I was, not just for arguing with a lout, but for failing to be all that she desired and deserved. I was thinking how fortunate I was to have her patience, her grace—to have her. But I did not tell any of that to Jenn either.

“We should have won that game,” I said.

“HUR-RUMPH!”

I threw a fifty-pound rock to the ground. Sweat oozed from every pore, from my bare chest to my steel-toed boots. I panted, almost gasped, for breath in the thick air. I raised my arms to the warm sun like Andy Dufresne and felt perspiration run over my closed eyes. My hands clenched into fists and I drew them back in to my chest, flexing for all I was worth.

“YAH!”

Jenn looked at me absently and then turned away to continue weeding, rolling her eyes demonstratively.

“I should have been a Viking,” I said.

“What does being a Viking have to do with anything?” she said without turning around. “Vikings rape, pillage, and burn. I don’t think that’s Biblically justifiable.”

“You take the fun out of everything. Come on, you know I’d make a good Viking,” I said, flexing again.

Jenn turned and watched me, shaking her head. “What on earth do you think you’re doing? Are you trying to impress me?” She stifled a fake laugh.

“You know you’re impressed. And I’m building a fire pit with rocks from the streambed. It’ll be the perfect place to burn deadwood and underbrush as well as cardboard and paper. We can throw the ashes right into the garden.”

“What a great farmer you are.”

“It’s going to be a great fire pit. Just wait until we sit around it some evening and then you’ll thank me. YAH!”

She turned back around at the sight of me flexing, but I came toward her in the garden and put my arms around her from behind. She squirmed and put up a token resistance.

“Stop it!” she laughed.

“You love it.”

“Whatever. I want to weed the garden more than I want your gross, sweaty, dirty body all over me. Eww. Get away from me. You have a piece of moss in your hair.”

“Come here, Sharpie.”

I put my arms around her waist and pulled her in close, rubbing my sweaty face against hers. She tried to push me away and threw her head back, telling me to stop, all the while laughing.

“Are you just upset because I won’t tattoo your name on my bicep?”

“I don’t care about your bicep, I—” she grabbed my arm and brushed some of the dirt off it. I felt strong with her in my arms, stronger than carrying the heaviest rock. “I, um—” She gripped my flexed bicep and smiled at me. “Shut up.”

I kissed her, playfully at first and then more passionately, lifting her just slightly off her feet. Her laughs died away as she kissed me back. I could feel every curve of her body pressed against mine. Her sweaty shirt stuck to her back. I ran my hand slowly down her spine, pausing on the small of her back. More than adrenaline pushed through me, drawing my tingling hand further down her spine.

“Easy,” she whispered, leaning back from me.

“Easy?”

“No further,” she said.

I did not say anything, but slowly released her from my tight grip. She stepped back, brushing past my fingertips.

“Now go back to work,” she said. “And don’t come near this garden until you have finished your work, you nasty ole Viking.”

I assented. When I was only a few steps away, Jenn threw a stone that hit me in the rear end. Spinning around, I found her smiling at me.

“Put that in your fire pit.”

“Jacob, it’s Peter Dellay. How are you?”

“I’m well, thanks,” I said while cramming the phone between my ear and shoulder. “How are things on your side of the river?”

“Just fine. Are we on for Sunday?”

“12:30 still work for you?”

“That’s fine. We’ll see you then. Peter’s really excited to have you over.”

I was not as eager as young Peter for my Sunday lunch with the Dellays. In contrast to his anticipation, I had a measure of trepidation as I drove slowly to their home, not quite sure why I hoped for a convenient excuse to arise. A hundred thoughts buzzed through my head, from visions of how the day might unfold to reminders to be polite but not too refined, and casual but not indifferent. I wished Jenn was with me. She could make any hovel seem like a palace and any mansion seem like a cozy cottage. I wondered where the Dellays and I would find common ground.

Peter Jr. was tossing fly balls to himself in the yard when my car pulled into the driveway. There was a pine tree leaning to its side, with a few dead branches reaching toward the house, like they were stretching to touch the roof. For a split-second, I wondered why Peter had not hired someone to take the tree down before it toppled on the house with a strong wind.

“Hi, Coach!”

Peter Jr.’s head popped up in the car window, startling me.

“It’s awesome you could come over!”

“I’m glad I could make it, Peter. How’s the glove treating you?”

“I really like it,” he said, turning it around in his hand. He stuck his head inside the car and inspected it eagerly. “This is a cool car. I wish we had a car like this. You must make a lot more money than my Dad.”

I looked at the rusty Dellay car and heard the disappointment in young Peter’s voice. “Your Dad works hard,” I said. “The rest is mostly luck. Come on; let’s go inside.”

He trotted alongside, whipping a baseball repeatedly into his new mitt. Peter Sr. opened the squeaky screen door and let it slam shut behind him.

“Beautiful day, isn’t it?” He looked up and squinted at the sun. “One of those days that makes you think it’s not all that bad, living in New England. It feels extravagant having weather this nice, like housesitting for a rich uncle. I guess we New Englanders never feel quite comfortable with serendipity.”

“That’s why we root for the Red Sox,” I said.

Peter led me inside where Melissa waved timidly from the kitchen and went back to putting the final touches on a spaghetti casserole. Peter poured me a glass of lemonade while I sat on a couch in the living room area. There were three tall bookshelves filled to the brim. They did not seem to be organized in any fashion and many were stacked horizontally.

“Tolstoy, Hemingway, Twain, Rhodes... You have quite a few books,” I said. “You could use another bookshelf, too.”

“Yeah,” he laughed, “but I haven’t read many of them in years. Some I haven’t read at all—old college assignments I never got around to.”

“I didn’t realize— Where did you go to school?”

“Middlebury,” he said, handing me the glass and sitting in a chair across from me. Peter Jr. flopped down on the couch beside me and slouched back, feet off the floor.

“Did you go to college, Coach?”

“I did, but not to Middlebury. I went to a state school a long ways away. Guess I wanted to go farther away.”

In fact, I had applied to Middlebury College, but had been rejected. At the time, I had tried to convince myself and everyone else that I did not want to stay in New England for college anyway, and instead took a baseball scholarship at a state school hundreds of miles away. Besides, I reasoned, they could not offer the free ride that a Division I school could. I spent the better part of the following decade trying to convince myself that I did not want to be in New England anyway.

“What did you study?” I said.

“Political science. I wanted to teach, actually, more than get into politics directly. I was offered a position at a private high school near Chicago where an aunt of mine works, but I declined. I didn’t want to leave this area of the country. At the time, I figured something would come up sooner or later that would keep me here, so I just waited while swinging hammers and turning wrenches, like I’d done to pay my way through school.”

“Still waiting?”

“Twelve years out of school, people wonder why you haven’t used your degree before they want you to use it for them.”

“Casserole’s in the oven,” Melissa said, wiping her hands. “It’ll be another forty-five minutes till it’s ready. Why don’t you boys go and play catch a while. It’s outside weather.”

Peter Sr. scrounged up an old glove and I grabbed mine from the back seat of my car. The three of us stood in a triangle—Peter Jr. in the grass and Peter Sr. and I in the driveway. Peter Jr. would request of us to “throw me a grounder,” while we were otherwise content to have a lazy catch. Peter Jr. swept up each grounder with surprising aptitude in the uneven, rocky lawn.

“For a while, I was satisfied to work with my hands, doing carpentry and some car repairs and some odd jobs. In fact, I still like working with my hands,” Peter said. “The first year or two, it was a nice break from academia. It actually got to be pretty good income, too, once I had a steady client base. After a few years, I was offered a position at the community college in Jefferson. Not much, but a solid start, so I left a steady business and moved here. Melissa and I were still practically newlyweds and

Junior came along shortly after. Two years later, they dropped the Political Science Department at the college—both of us.

“Nobody in Swiftwater knew me or my work, so being a mechanic or carpenter hasn’t gone far. There was just enough potential to stick around and job search from here, but nothing ever panned out. New wife, new child, and bills to pay. Two years turn into six or seven before you know it and a holding pattern turns into a lifestyle.”

“Are you still looking for teaching gigs? What about returning to school to freshen up, or at least seem more current to employers?”

He shrugged and his countenance fell.

“What about wanting to teach?”

“After four or five years of promising leads falling through, I decided to make ends meet the best I could here. I guess somewhere along the way I just stopped trying. The creditors were getting less friendly.”

“What’s a creditor, Dad?”

“Oh, just people we have to pay bills to. Here—catch this pop up!”

We played catch for some time, Peter Jr. keeping us entertained with stories from the past school year until Melissa called him in to clean up.

“You don’t ever think about pursuing academics or teaching anymore?”

“Sure I do. Every time a bill comes in the mail, I think about it. I catch myself wondering what might have been if I hadn’t done this or that, hadn’t gotten married, hadn’t had a kid, or if I had just made better use of my time when I was younger.”

He looked away when he spoke, like he was expecting someone to appear from the corn patch. The table was set in the dining area and Melissa and Peter Jr. were in the hallway bathroom washing hands. We walked into the living room to retrieve our lemonade glasses.

“Did you ever think—” Peter began, but froze.

“Think what?”

“What’s that smell?”

We both stopped and tried to place the smell. It was faint, but soon enough it was unmistakable.

“Shoot!” Peter yelled and dashed into the kitchen. A haze of smoke danced on the ceiling. He opened the oven door and smoke poured out in a wave. Melissa bolted into the room from the bathroom and let out a shriek.

“Look out! Back up!” Peter said, frantically reaching for oven mitts. “It spilled over onto the heating element. Look out now!”

He grabbed the casserole dish and scuffled outside with it at arm’s length. A trail of smoke followed him. He set it on the gravel driveway where it could burn itself out safely. The casserole looked like a large piece of charcoal and the smoke rose like an offering to the gods.

“How did it get so overdone?” Melissa said, folding her hands under her chin.

“Why didn’t you take it out when the timer went off?”

“I never heard it go off.” Her mouth was agape. “It was in there twice as long as it should have been.”

The four of us looked back at the house, smoke lazily drifting out the windows. I stood at a distance, dumbfounded.

“Did you even set the timer?”

“I don’t remember, but I always do. Why wouldn’t I? It just didn’t go off. It wasn’t my fault.”

“I’m not saying it was your fault.”

“The oven is so old, Peter, it—”

She turned to go back inside, tears welling.

“*Now* what are we gonna eat?” Peter Jr. cried.

“I don’t know,” Melissa said. “We don’t really have anything else.”

“We gotta have *something!* Coach is here!”

They all turned to look at me as if they had forgotten that I was there, and I felt as self-conscious as a teenager. I wished I had not witnessed the previous five minutes and could hide in a hole. Melissa slowly reached for the door.

“Mom, what are we gonna eat?”

“I don’t know,” she said, as loud as I had ever heard her. She made no attempt to dam the tears as she vanished into the house.

“Fine! I’ll just go hungry again!” Peter stormed into the house and slammed his bedroom door with as much might as his slim frame could muster.

It became so still that I could hear the sunlight fluttering between leaves of oak trees. Any sound would have been welcome; any distraction at all—a gust of wind, a car driving past in the road, a squirrel scampering, a sneeze, or anything else that could be managed—would have been embraced with open arms. The small house was frozen in a haze of lingering smoke. Neither Peter nor I spoke for fear of having to acknowledge what was already plainly obvious. I stood with my thumb hooked in a belt loop, staring at my feet.

He made the first movement, rubbing his forehead with his hand. I could tell he was searching for the right explanation, but it never came. His slow sigh exhaled years of disappointment. His head rested in his hand like it would never answer the bell again, not to face another round of beatings at the hands of lost employment and unfulfilled promise.

After what seemed like an hour, I spoke cautiously. “Maybe I’ll take a rain check on lunch.”

“Yeah,” he mumbled. “Sorry.”

“It’s all right.” I shuffled toward my car, not wanting to look too anxious to leave. “We have all summer; we’ll find time.”

“Okay.”

Peter followed me to my car. We walked without speaking, but I could tell that he had something on his mind that he wanted to say. Or maybe he just wanted to get out of the smoke. He craned his neck back and squinted his eyes.

“I could just sit in the sun all day long,” he said. “I could sit at a beach or in a park or on a mountain and sit in the sun forever. No worries at all, just sitting in the warm sun.”

I nodded and opened my car door.

“Sometimes going over the edge is just plain easier than trying to stay on it,” he said.

“What do you mean, Peter?”

He looked at the house and shrugged. “I don’t know.”

I looked at the clock on the wall every few minutes on Friday afternoon, each time more perplexed at time's refusal to pass quickly. I listened intently for the sound of tires moving up the gravel driveway, but the only noise I heard was a breeze blowing through the oak leaves. It was not a particularly warm day, but the air was muggy.

Promptly at 5:00, I heard Jenn's car and I leapt to the window just in time to watch it come over the rise of the driveway. I was down the stairs before she had turned off the ignition. I carried two glasses of lemonade onto the porch just as she was closing her car door.

"Welcome," I said, beaming.

Jenn stretched like a cat and smiled back. She met me at the edge of the gravel, took the cold glass, and eased into my arms.

"Hi," she said, her head resting on my chest. "It's sticky today."

"That's why I made you some lemonade."

"Thank you."

I put my cheek to her forehead while we swayed silently. Her skin glistened in the humid air. After a moment, my lips found hers and greeted them to another weekend in Swiftwater.

"Are you okay?"

She took a deep breath. "Yeah, I guess. Mom said she hasn't been feeling well lately."

"Is it serious?"

"I don't think so. I just don't want my Mom to have a stomachache."

I kissed her forehead. "Neither do I. Do you want to sit on the porch a bit?"

"I've been sitting. How about standing on the porch?"

"Deal. Go on and drink the lemonade; it's good."

I took her hand and we walked onto the porch, looking southwest across the garden and field, and farther down the valley where a few distant hillsides rose above the trees at the far end of my field.

"How was the drive?"

"Oh, same old same old. I avoided the Swiftwater rush hour."

"That's good. Sometimes those cows take forever to get off the road."

I put my arm around her waist and she pressed the side of her head against my shoulder. We sipped on lemonade and simply enjoyed each other's presence. There were a few bugs that we lazily swatted, but otherwise the breeze died off and the scene was still as a photograph. It took a long while before either of us finished our glass, at which time we seemed to snap to attention like waking from a daydream. I brought in her suitcase and set it in the guest bedroom while she changed into shorts and sandals. In quick order, per usual, we began rummaging through my kitchen and pantry to determine the menu for dinner. We settled on spaghetti with meatballs and salad.

"Won't it be nice to have salad straight from the garden?" Jenn said. "Fresh lettuce, fresh tomatoes..."

"Fresh spaghetti..."

She gave me a look and turned back around to the salad. "Yep. Do you want cucumbers in the salad? How about carrots?"

“Cukes, yes. I’m not a big fan of carrots, though.”

“Why don’t you have any peapods in your fridge?” she said.

When supper was ready, we sat inside to avoid the mosquitoes and black flies, but afterward took a bottle of wine to the deck once the sun was lower and the bugs would hopefully abate. We managed to last over an hour before the moths appeared, attracted to the lights inside the house.

“Okay, they win. Let’s go inside,” Jenn said, waving her arms around her head.

I took the wine glasses and followed her inside, shutting the screen door behind.

Jenn yawned and stretched her arms to her side.

“I think I’m ready for bed, my good sir. This humidity makes me drowsy.”

“Are you sure you don’t want to stay up a little longer? The stars are just coming out.”

“I know, but it’s nearly ten-thirty.”

“Are you sure...?”

I stepped to her and put my arms around her and nuzzled her neck with my nose.

“Come on, Sharpie, let’s stay up a little later. It’s a nice night and I haven’t seen you in a long time.”

She giggled and twisted away from me.

“No,” she said. “We said we would go to bed no later than eleven when I am staying here, or when Kelli isn’t around when you are staying with me.”

She gave me a wry smile and stepped toward me again, leaning into me.

“It is a nice night, you’re right,” she said, “but I really should get to bed. We have all day tomorrow.”

“Okay,” I said.

I hugged her tight and kissed her forehead. She disappeared in the bathroom to brush her teeth and I made sure all the lights were out.

“Good night,” I called through the closed bathroom door. “Breakfast will be ready at five-thirty.”

“Sounds great. I’ll make myself something at eight. Good night.”

“Good night, Jenn,” I said, more to the door than to her.

I wandered into my own bedroom, using the bathroom there to brush my teeth. I listened to her finish brushing and then walk to the guest room. The light stayed on for another thirty minutes, though. I lay in bed and listened to the occasional breezes outside my open window.

As it had been for thirty years, the pillow beside me was empty. Until recently, it had never bothered me to be alone, preferring the independence to the companionship. Since moving into the Thomas Farm, though, the empty pillow stared back at me every night. There was no one with whom to share the day’s event—the frustrations, the dreams, the moments that would have made me laugh had there been someone around. The empty pillow seemed so much lonelier with Jenn nearby, as if taunting me that my desires were just past my fingertips. My eyes stayed on the empty pillow, while I remembered the smell of her hair, the way it fell over her shoulder, the sound of her voice when she spoke quietly in the late evening, the feel of my arm on her side. The memory was so poignant that when I woke up in the middle of the night, I was confused to find myself alone, until I saw the empty pillow and fell back asleep.

“It’s not eight o’clock yet,” I said, wiping crust from my eyes.

“I know, but the sun’s up. Goodness, you look like you fell off a moving train. What happened to you?”

“Morning happened to me.”

She danced across the kitchen floor and gave me a peck on the forehead and then stepped back as if to study me.

“Yes, I do believe I like the post-coffee version better.”

I grunted and helped myself to a cup that she had already brewed.

“I always forget how curmudgeony you are in the morning. I think if we get married some day I am going to vote for having separate bedrooms. Or maybe you should just keep a coffeemaker in your bedroom.”

I glared at her over the rim of my mug. She stuck out her tongue and proceeded to make pancakes. Once the caffeine percolated through my body, we had a nice breakfast in the cool morning air. The day promised to be warmer than the previous, and the humidity threatened to produce thunderstorms, so we promptly grabbed our hiking boots and drove twenty minutes to the Moose Mountain Trail, which leads up to a firetower. The hike was barely a mile long, and we got to the firetower on the summit in about forty easy minutes. The October Valley lay beneath us through the haze. The thunderheads were already building, but we lingered until the bane of the bugs outweighed the comfort of sitting atop the forest. We were back to the Thomas Farm before lunchtime.

Living in the city, Jenn appreciated the opportunity to be outside in country air, even if it meant doing yardwork. I thought it was a fabulous arrangement, and we often spent Saturday afternoons working on the Farm when it was not my week to visit her in Portland. It reminded me of countless Saturdays spent helping my parents with the weeding, mowing, stacking, and painting of the old Thomas house.

The edge of the field was riddled with saplings and thistles that needed a close trim. Around the house itself, though, was nothing but some sickly bushes that couldn’t grow in the thin soil and some worn grass. Jenn saw to it that the house was landscaped with flower beds, or, “at the very least, some bushes to hide that ugly foundation.” I had tried to keep her focused on the garden, but since we had planted all that we had hoped to plant, Jenn was become determined to turn my bachelor pad into something resembling a home.

I attacked some sumacs at the western end of the field and tried to tame some wild blackberry bushes. I could see Jenn from that distance—maybe 150 yards away—working the soil around the back of the house. She had a rototiller, spade, and pitchfork propped against the house. She looked to be setting flagstones at the moment.

“How do you feel about periwinkle?” she had asked me over the phone on Thursday.

“Can I eat them?”

“No; it’s a flower. They grow well in shade and they are perennials, so they would be perfect on the north side of the house.”

“Go for it, Jenn,” I told her, and she did.

By the time I came back to the house to look for the scythe in the garage, she had broken fifteen feet of soil along the house and lined it with flagstones.

“Ready for a break?”

“In a minute,” she said, not bothering to look up.

She wore blue jeans with fresh dirt stains on them and she had her blonde hair pushed back in a green kerchief. She worked on the Farm as if it were her own. She would say that she simply enjoyed the work and the chance to be out of the city; she would say that it reminded her of her childhood, but I knew better. It was not the past she was looking to.

I propped the scythe next to the pitchfork and took a step toward her, rubbing shoulders. I ran my fingers down the back of her sweaty neck.

“Periwinkle, huh?”

“Yes,” she said, wiping her brow, “and you can’t eat them. And don’t ask me what the point is then.”

“I’m sure they will look marvelous, Jenn. I’ve always wanted purple flowers under my bedroom window.”

She sighed aloud and stood up, arching her back.

“Look you,” she said, walking toward me, “how do you expect to woo a wife to this place unless you have some purple flowers?”

“I thought that my rugged good looks would suffice.”

“I’ve got bad news for you.”

She put her finger to my chin, smiled, and then walked right past me.

“You have lemonade in the fridge, right?”

“Thomas, party of two,” I called out. I set two plates on my cheap plastic patio table and sat next to Jenn. We said a quick prayer and dove into our sandwiches. Jenn’s glazed-over eyes fixed on something at the far end of the field. I noticed beads of sweat running across her shoulders and down her neck, and a smudge of dirt on the side of her face. She looked elegant even when messy. Had it not been so hot and humid, I would have been tempted to put my arm around her and press against her.

Jenn belched rather loudly and woke us both up from our respective trances.

“Excuse me,” she giggled, looking stunned and embarrassed. “Not sure where that came from. It wasn’t very ladylike.”

“Ladies never burp?” I said.

“Usually not so loudly,” she laughed. “If you had a sister, you’d know girls do many of the same things guys do, just usually more discreetly.”

“I don’t think I ever heard my Mom burp,” I said. A sudden memory rushed through me of Mom excusing herself for some unheard body function. A faint smile came onto my face and I averted my eyes from Jenn. She reached over and squeezed my hand, and then continued eating.

“I don’t know if she was too embarrassed,” I said, “or if she got into the habit of being modest around her little boy and never got out of it. Even when I was in college, she never would acknowledge a little burp or fart or trip to the bathroom, like those

things didn't really happen. That's weird for someone who lives around here, where you can't pretend to not be sweaty or shivering or muddy sometimes."

Jenn turned to me and smiled politely, putting down the last bit of her sandwich. I looked back and laughed to myself.

"Kind of a dumb memory to have of your mother, huh?"

Jenn shrugged and smiled softly again. "What do you *want* to remember?"

I took a sip of milk. "Oh, I don't know," I said, dismissing the question.

Jenn persisted though, "You bought this place to help you remember, didn't you?"

"I bought this place to start over."

"What do you mean?"

"I lived near Hartford for almost ten years—college and then most of my roaring 20s. There aren't many good memories there. College just reminds me of knee injuries and wasting my life and money drinking and partying. I met you on that backpacking trip, and Claire and Paul and David, and I knew it was time to come back to New England." I stopped to wipe a band of sweat that was getting into my eyes and stinging them. "Growing up in Webster is a good memory. That's why I bought this place—to start making good memories again, and this is the only way I know how."

Jenn's smile grew larger. "Are you like your Dad?"

"I wish," I laughed, shaking my head. "He got his life together well before he turned thirty."

"You're only thirty," Jenn said. "And God's grace is plenty sufficient. He has plans for you."

I leaned back in the plastic chair and folded my hands in my lap. My thighs were stuck to the seat.

"Do I remind you of your Mom?"

"A little, I guess," I said, smiling at her. "But not that much. You have different personalities. Mom was soft-spoken and gentle and calm."

"What's *that* supposed to say about *me*?" she said, flinging a potato chip at me.

"Nothing!" I laughed. "No, it's just that you are more lively. Mom was passionate, but reserved; you were your enthusiasm on your sleeve," I said. "Okay?"

She crossed her arms in mock offense. "Okay."

"You do remind me of her, Jenn. The way you sit on your hands and bounce in your seat when you're excited about something is exactly like her. The way you lean your shoulder into me and let me put my arm around you after working all day is exactly what Mom used to do to Dad. The way you start reciting a Psalm at a random moment reminds me of Mom." I dropped my gaze again. "Random things, I know."

Jenn's voice was calm and steady. "Would it surprise you to know that in the last five years, I've become much more soft-spoken and gentle and calm?"

"Not really," I said, not looking up.

"Would it scare you?"

I looked right into her blue-gray eyes. "Not at all."

"Are you sure?" she said.

"If we weren't in the middle of lunch, I'd convince you with a kiss," I said, and winked.

She tilted her head and looked at me from the corner of her eye. "Should we just have dessert and hurry things along?"

“Ha! That’s my girl.”

To walk off lunch, we ambled down to the covered bridge and looked at the appetizing swimming holes. Temptation got the better of us and we scrambled down the bank on a well-worn path, took off our shoes and stood in the knee-deep eddies on the shore, then hopping from rock to rock. Eventually we sat in the shade of the bridge, close enough to the falls that it was difficult to hear anything beyond our sporadic conversation. Jenn squeezed my arm after several speechless minutes.

“At lunch, you said you could convince me with a kiss,” she said. “I’d like to know about that kiss.”

I looked around to make sure we were alone, playfully wiped my mouth with my sleeve, and convinced her.

It is hard to work in a house that has windows. When I moved onto the Thomas Farm, I initially arranged my office in the loft of the house, so that my desk overlooked the field to the west in which I have since made my garden. After a time, I found myself staring out the window too often, thinking about what the garden needed and how much I would rather be standing in dirt with blisters on my hands than analyzing the spreadsheet on my computer screen. I moved the desk so that it looked east, over some sumacs at the edge of a stand of spruce trees. Then I stared out that window thinking about clearing the sumacs and making room for the blackberries. I spent an antsy Monday morning moving my office back to its original set-up, with my view of the garden, the driveway, and some distant hills. I stared out the window, considering how to best mend the split-rail fence and mulling over the health of the tomato plants. The field was ablaze with black-eyed Susans and goldenrod and Queen Anne's lace, swaying in the breeze.

Before breakfast, I stood pouring orange juice and began thinking about my Dad making pancakes on a Saturday. The memory was so thick that I could smell the homemade syrup. Only when I looked up to where Jenn had stood making pancakes did I realize that the orange juice was overflowing my cup and spilling onto my feet. Brushing my teeth and checking my email reeked of existential ennui. Any phone call that was not from Jenn was mundane, and several times I caught myself staring out the window, wondering what she was doing at that moment.

None of the unanswered questions I had about existence or romance could alter the fact that my peas needed attention, so I took a break from my office and walked outside to tend to them. Promising to shoot upward by the day, the peas were becoming the prize accomplishment of the Thomas Farm. I had ten feet of pea plants reaching heavenward for help. I don't even like peas, but of course Jenn loves them from pea to pod. The seeds came with a sale on green beans, which I love, and which, of course, were barely poking above the soil, like curious children not quite sure if they wanted to keep going.

I hoped Mom would approve of my garden, or at least of my noble effort. I wondered what she would think of Jenn. I wondered if they would kneel side-by-side in the garden, pretending to weed and discussing me. I hoped they would think that I was great. By the time I got to the tomatoes, I wondered what Dad would think of Swiftwater. I wondered how he would handle Randy and coaching the baseball team.

In deference to Jenn and my mother, I found a section of chickenwire and broke two five foot lengths of wood from an old trellis that had been leaning against the back of the garage since before I bought the place. I shoved the two wooden stakes into the soft soil at either end of the row of peas and strung the chickenwire between them, power-stapling wire to wood. The peas were happy. Now their tendrils could grab onto the chickenwire and pull themselves higher and higher, producing more and more peapods that would cast shadows over the row of pitiable green beans.

If only women were so easy. They tend to not be satisfied with ten feet of chickenwire, no matter how altruistic the motive. They require more diligence and cultivation, though at least they are seldom covered with aphids. Still, a relationship with a woman is far more satisfying than a row of peas, or even a row of green beans.

I did doubt, though, that I knew what I was doing—with Jenn or with a garden. Our relationship's fate was still as unknown as the fate of my green beans. I did know, however, that my farm was empty when Jenn's witticisms and cheer were absent. I would have given my left arm and a row of green beans for her. Instead, I stood in my peas and rehearsed lines that I hoped to have the courage to say.

The early morning air was already thick with humidity, as though the weather had finally admitted it was summer. The black flies were coming out for the season, opting to race in circles around my face. The soft dirt was still cool and damp and felt good in my hands.

What was once a tired patch of crabgrass was now a garden—an incubator for new life, sprouting from dirt and elbow grease. Beans and tomatoes and corn were poised to explode upward. Within weeks, the garden would be a menagerie of vegetables and berries. It is a simple process: put a seed in the dirt, let the rain and sun come, and then new life is borne, flourishes, and reproduces. My role in the matter was merely to keep an eye on things—to be a vigilant steward of the process, planting seeds in a bed of upturned dirt, still moist from the spring rains. Then I would just need to wait until harvest.

By late morning it was warm and muggy and a glaze of sticky sweat oozed from every pore. My work pants clung to the back of my legs. The whole world seemed inclined to slow down and to watch the day pass with a glass of lemonade in the shade of the front porch. I was beginning to wonder why I was not following suit. I stood and stretched under the hazy sun and my lower back thanked me for the short reprieve. I took a long, slow draw of water and surveyed my little kingdom. The house and land that had cowered through a cold winter and a rainy spring was now active. The thickets of blackberries and raspberries were growing exponentially while sumacs and goldenrod spread along the edge of the field, straining for every last ray of available sunlight. Groundhog holes were becoming prevalent in the field and the buzzing insects crawled and fluttered about ceaselessly. I was doing my best just to keep up.

I heard a car slowing down in the road and for a moment turned around, hoping to see Jenn pulling into the driveway. Of course it was a ridiculous hope that she would drive two hours from Portland on a weekday without telling me, but it only reinforced how far apart we were. Probably Basye had returned from shopping in town and she and Percival would soon be on their deck overlooking the valley and sipping lemonade. I looked at my deck with its two empty chairs and remembered Charter Day and looking for someone to stand beside. I was weary of adjusting to new places and new people and new situations. I wanted the Thomas Farm for what I could make it, Jenn for who she was, and Swiftwater for what I thought it had always been.

But you can't just throw out thirty years of bachelorhood like a weed from the garden.

Dad said it was two-thirteen. I'd been wicked excited all day and tried staying up as late as I could, but eventually I just fell asleep. This bench isn't too comfortable and all the lights and beeping things make it hard to sleep. My imagination kinda runs wild in a place like this. Dad was still sitting beside me, reading his book, but his eyes looked pretty tired. I guess he was as excited as I was for my baby brother to finally be born.

I asked Mom and Dad why I didn't have any brothers or sisters sooner and they said they tried but it never worked out. Neither of them had brothers or sisters, so they really wanted me to have a lot. Making up for lost time, I guess. I kinda remember once Mom having a baby in her tummy, but then it went away one day. I don't know where, but Mom must've missed it 'cause she cried a lot. That was a few years ago, when I was three or four, and I can't remember a lot of stuff from then.

Mom kept saying, "I'm early, I'm early," like she knew something was wrong, but I was just excited. His name was gonna be Stephen and his bedroom was right next to mine. I was supposed to stay with our neighbors when Mom and Dad went to the hospital to have the baby, but since we were still on vacation at Newfound Lake, Dad drove us all to the hospital when Mom started grabbing her tummy and yelling about being early. Dad wanted to go with Mom to some special room in the hospital, but said something about me not being able to come along. They put Mom on a cart and started wheeling her away. She was wicked sweaty, even more than normal for summer. I've never seen my Mom hurting so much and it kinda scared me, especially when Dad seemed so helpless. He's usually right there to fix anything and make everything feel better. I kept expecting him to give Mom a hug or something, or start whispering in each other's ears like they do when it seems like they forget I'm around. Then they laugh and kiss and then Dad usually runs over and picks me up and throws me on the couch to tickle me. But there weren't none of that. Just Dad standing there looking confused and Mom getting wheeled away down a hall, with a bunch of doctor people all in a hurry.

They had some lady nurse in a white suit sit with me awhile when Dad went to go "check on" Mom and see if I had a brother yet or not. "His name's gonna be Stephen," I told the nurse. She didn't seem too interested in me, like she was bored or something. I wished I had brought a game to play because she wasn't much fun and nothing in the hospital seemed like much fun. And I still hadn't seen where Mom went and that's weird 'cause she's always around. Mom and Dad always come check on me real often, so when Dad didn't come back awhile, I felt real lonely, especially since there was just that boring nurse to talk to. She said her name was Diane and she was from Boston. I asked if she liked the Red Sox and she said she didn't follow baseball. I don't know what she followed then. I didn't talk much to her after that.

Dad finally came back and I asked where my brother was. "He's not here yet, Jacob," he said and sat down. "Why don't you try to get some sleep?" But I was way too excited, especially since Dad was back and the boring nurse left. Dad and I talked about the Red Sox for a long time, especially Yaz. I remember waking up and I was lying on the bench. I guess Dad didn't hear me because he was staring out the window, or at least I thought he was, but then I saw his eyes were closed and his head was resting on the glass. I thought maybe he fell asleep that way, but his lips were moving too. All of a sudden I got a real sick feeling and I knew something was wrong. Dad looked small and

scared, which made me scared, but he could do anything I could think of. If he couldn't do it, then it was way out of control.

Now I'm awake again and it's two-thirteen. There's a doctor standing in the room, holding a clipboard. He looks like the nurse's brother. "Mr. Thomas," he says to my Dad, and tells him to follow. Dad picks me up and sets me on the floor. He holds my hand and starts walking behind the doctor. The doctor's saying stuff I don't understand, but it makes Dad walk faster and faster till I can barely keep up. We turn a corner real quick and then Dad stopped so sudden that I ran into his leg. There was Mom on the cart again, getting wheeled across the hall in front of us and into a room. I almost called out to her till I saw the blood. I just froze. Her face was all sweaty still and her hair matted down. She looked real pretty with all the lights glistening off her like she was on stage. But down farther, the sheets were red and wet with all that blood. "Dad," I said, pointing at it, "Isn't that where the baby comes out?"

Next thing I know, Dad's driving me home. Our neighbors are there and they help me get into bed. Once it's quiet, though, I can see the first glow in the sky out my window. It's June, so it's still wicked early, and wicked quiet. I tiptoe across the floor and down the hall to Stephen's room. He's not there. I guess Dad went back to get him. Then I remember. All that blood. It should have been Stephen, but it wasn't, and now I got the willies thinking about all that blood. I hear a sound behind me, so I close the door and hide in Stephen's room, in the corner with some of my old stuffed animals. All that blood took Stephen's place and it will take me and Dad can't stop it. Dad can't stop Mom from hurting or crying and he can't stop the doctors and he can't stop me from feeling lonely. I'm grabbing stuffed animals and squeezing them against me and all of sudden I'm crying, but real quietly 'cause I don't want nothing to hear me. I don't want nothing to know I'm crying. I don't want nothing to find me or know me. It was all just a big trick. They keep saying I'm getting a brother and then nothing happens. Just all that blood. And Mom crying, and she doesn't stop crying for weeks. And Dad can't do everything anymore. Seems like more and more he can't do anything. And nobody seems to care as much about me, they just talk about Stephen who isn't even here. Then they start telling me how much they love me. But I don't know if I believe it any more. They tell me God loves me too, and I know I don't believe that.

“Good morning, all!” I emailed my co-workers, most of whom sat in an office building from which, if they were lucky enough to be within sight of a window from their desk, looked across a parking lot and the rooftops of shorter buildings. I liked to make a special point of this in my emails to them. “How’s the big city today? I have an appointment this morning that I am going to walk to. I’ll be back online around 9 if anybody calls or needs me.”

Such was the freedom of “working from home.” Leaving for an hour to go for a walk or have lunch on the deck on a nice day was more than feasible; it was encouraged.

My appointment was a meeting with Nicholas. I met with him every two or three weeks, usually on Wednesdays. The intent was not for him to keep track of what was going on in the dugout or on the Farm, but in my heart and soul and mind. He was a pastor, after all, although I sometimes had to remind myself of that fact. Occasionally I would be amused or surprised when he got up in his shirt-and-tie to deliver a thundering sermon at church, accustomed as I was to his far more informal persona when he was coaching baseball and taking his family for a night at the lake after his Sunday duties concluded.

We generally met at 7:30 at Mr. O’Conor’s for breakfast, but this week he wanted to meet in his office instead. This made me apprehensive because I still did not feel entirely comfortable in his small office that was stacked with large tomes, teetering ominously and threatening to crush me under the weight of their theological treatises. Mainly, though, I feared that Nicholas—Pastor Jaitieu—intended to ask me some deeply personal questions. More than once at Mr. O’Conor’s, he had casually brought up issues in such a way as to make me wonder if he had any sense of the existence of other people who were easily within earshot.

“Working at home all day, alone but hooked up to the outside world,” he would begin. “Do you ever struggle with surfing the internet for pornography?”

“What?” I would glance frantically around the room and mumble something while taking a bite from my bagel sandwich.

Or, only slightly better: “Are you honoring your employer with your time?” I would like to say that I am so busy that I can hardly leave my desk, which would explain the pittance of a ‘farm’ that I have, as well as exonerate me for extended ‘lunch’ breaks. I would rather not admit that the garden represented the best of my efforts, for, despite the raging success of the peas, much of the garden looked like an arboretum for weeds. Admitting all of that would be to confess my ineptitude as a farmer as well as being dishonorable as an employee. But how does one lie to a pastor? I really hated those questions.

Today, I could only imagine what Pastor Jaitieu had in store for me in his office. I stopped on the covered bridge just long enough to remember joking to him after one particularly grueling session, “You know I have to walk past a high bridge with rocky water below on the way home, right?” I walked dutifully to the church, though, because in spite of the terror that vulnerability causes me, I always feel free afterward.

If I only knew Nicholas from baseball, I would think he was just one of the guys. He was in his late-30s; I heard him speak sardonically about turning 40 before too long. He had three kids and a wife and a slightly receding hairline. He generally exuded calm

and benevolence at all times, except for the occasional burst of enthusiasm while preaching. He did not hide from expressing weariness with his own shortcomings, like doubting his own usefulness as a small-town pastor, or worrying about providing for his family.

“Hey Jacob,” mumbled the man of God, wiping crust from his eyes. I pictured a grumpy Jonah or a weeping Jeremiah suffering the same ignominy of needing coffee to face the day, locked inside fallen flesh. He sat down in his chair, thick Bible commentaries to his left, a picture drawn by his eight-year-old daughter to his right. The early summer sunlight fell over my shoulder and lit the room. Nicholas opened the window behind him and the singing of birds filled the room. God always seems more accessible in the morning.

After a few minutes of talking about the wonders of coffee, especially the highly-caffeinated variety with just a touch of cream, Nicholas jumped right in.

“I’ve been meaning to ask: Where does Jenn stay when she visits?”

“Where does she stay?”

“Yeah, as in, where does she sleep? She can stay with us, you know. Rachel and I don’t mind and the kids would love it.”

I felt myself getting warm. “I have a guest room, Nicholas. She sleeps in there, if that’s what you mean.”

“I understand,” he said, and took a slow sip of coffee. “I just wanted to let you know that she could stay with us, that there are other options. I’m sure when you first moved here you didn’t want to impose on anybody, but you wouldn’t be imposing on me and Rachel.”

“Okay, thanks,” I stammered. “I never thought about that. It’s just easier for her to stay in my guest room, though, since we are usually at the house anyway.”

“It’s not a matter of easier.”

“What are you saying? Are you saying—?” I wanted to be indignant, but his demeanor was relaxed, which took me even more off-guard. He took another slow sip of coffee, appearing unaware that I was agitated whatsoever.

“I’m not saying or suggesting anything, Jacob. Only that I was guessing you were torn between the imposition of asking someone to host Jenn and the wisdom of having her stay elsewhere overnight.”

“I wouldn’t say I was torn.”

“She never brought it up?”

“I guess I never really even thought about it.”

“I guess now is the time to think about it, then,” he said.

“Why is this such a big deal? I mean, we’re not... you know.”

“Not what, Jacob?”

He stunned me. I could not imagine that he did not know, and I could not understand why he wanted me to be so frank. Either way, I was glad we were not at Mr. O’Conor’s.

“We’re not having sex. We’re not even coming close. Never have. And we don’t plan to until we’re married. Don’t worry.”

“Okay, okay,” he said, as if I was somehow evading his question. “I’m not questioning what you are doing or not doing. And I’m certainly not trying to be your wet blanket.”

“Okay then,” I said, taking a deep breath.

“I think it’s in your best interests,” Nicholas said, “and Jenn’s. Why bring unnecessary temptation into the situation? Why create a false sense of intimacy that is not and should not be there? Also, you have to consider your place in this town. This is a small town and it doesn’t take long for people to know that a pretty young woman is spending the night at your house. You think they can’t put two and two together? Or at least draw their own conclusions? That would be a hard rumor to quell.”

“But we’re not—” I stammered. “Do you really think people think—?”

Nicholas shrugged. “I don’t know what people think. Either way, they might not even care, given this world we live in. But the idea is to not have even a *hint* of immorality between you.” He took another sip of coffee before adding, “I know Rachel and I had to stay a mile apart from each other before we got married. Heck, we almost always went on double dates just to ensure that we’d keep off of each other.”

I shook my head at the imagery that popped into my mind’s eye. In the back of my head, I saw his advice for what it was: a damn good idea; I knew all too well how difficult it was to part ways with Jenn. But I hated to think of losing even more time with her; it was hard enough only seeing her once a week and having to drive several hours to do even that.

“Do you really think that many people even care about it?”

“I suppose not,” Nicholas said. “I guess caring about things like purity is pretty old-fashioned. But, it’s not Swiftwater you should be trying to please. You’re accountable to God, not the folks at the Diner.”

“All right,” I shrugged. “I’ll think about it. And I’ll ask Jenn if she wants to stay with you.”

My face was warm, but I hoped Nicholas did not notice my agitation. I suddenly looked at Swiftwater with distrust, wondering what rumors were circulating throughout town about the newcomer and his pretty girlfriend from the city. Nicholas’ concern seemed reasonable, but it left me feeling embarrassed and dirty.

Fortunately, within five minutes, the conversation devolved into baseball again. When I walked across the bridge on the return home, instead of throwing myself in, I contemplated throwing Nicholas in. After stewing all day, I spoke to Jenn on the phone that afternoon.

“It sounds like a good idea, Jacob,” she said.

“You really think so?” I was partially pleased with her sense of modesty, but I wished it took her longer to tear herself away from me.

“Of course. Mostly because we both know Nicholas is a man of God, but also because it is simply sound advice. Don’t you think so?”

“I don’t know. I suppose. It seems so childish, though, like you have to make the walk of shame to the Jaitieus’ house each night because we can’t keep our hands off each other.”

“It’s not a walk of shame; it’s quite the opposite, in fact. Look, I love staying at your place, too, but Nicholas has a point.”

I tried in vain to hear any disappointment or regret in her voice. She could mask anything with her levelheaded self-confidence so well that I could not discern her sincerity.

“I know he has a point. But I still—”

“Besides, it would be great to spend time with the Jaitieus.”

“But I still—”

“And if you don’t want me to be inconvenienced by having to get up and drive down to the Jaitieus right when I’d rather be settling into my pajamas and going to bed, then, well, we can spend the evening at the Jaitieus so that you’re the one who has to be inconvenienced.”

“But I still—”

“It’s a win-win situation, Jacob,” she giggled. “I love messing with you.”

“But—wait, what?” I was certain that I still had four or five legitimate objections to make, but at that moment I could think of nothing that would dampen her enthusiasm.

“It’ll be great, Jacob,” she said, more seriously. “I really think it’s a good idea.”

“I just don’t understand why you are so happy and willing to spend less time together. It doesn’t strike me as a development in our relationship, but a regression.”

“It’s not a regression,” she said, “and I’m not saying that I am particularly happy about it, but I am willing. I don’t want to spend less time together.”

The phone was silent for about a minute while I glared out my window.

“I want to be with you, at the Farm,” she said. “Forever.”

The weight of her last word crushed every word on the tip of my tongue. I looked out at my measly garden and the unkempt field. I listened to the quiet house, the only noise being a humming refrigerator. Finally, after a few minutes, she spoke.

“What’s that they say about if you love something?”

“Let it go?” I said. “I think that’s stupid advice. What the hell does letting go of something you love mean? How does that help?”

“I don’t know exactly,” she said. “But maybe it means that you give it to God and trust that He can strengthen our relationship despite all this.”

“I know,” I sighed. “But I still want to grouse about it first.”

“Okay,” she said. “You grouse; I’ll sulk.”

Jenn drove up to Swiftwater the following Friday. After eating dinner at my house, we drove to the Jaitieus. The kids—especially Anna, the only girl—were ecstatic at the thought of Jenn’s company. It took Nicholas and Rachel an extra thirty minutes to finally get them all to bed, and only with promises to Anna that Jenn would be present for breakfast in the morning. The four of us adults then proceeded to have dessert while playing spades at the kitchen table. The Jaitieus proved to be better company than spades players, and Jenn and I won decisively.

After the last trick, Rachel yawned demonstratively as Nicholas gathered the cards. “My! It is certainly past my bedtime, even for a weekend. You two stay as long as you like, but pancakes will be served at 8:30.”

Jenn smiled. “Thanks again. Pancakes sound terrific.”

“You’re welcome, hon. Anytime you’re in town,” Rachel said. “Good night, everyone.”

Nicholas followed right behind her, leaving Jenn and me to sit in the low light of the Jaitieu kitchen. I slid my chair around so that we sat beside each other. Both of us had our elbows on the table while we recounted the hand that we set Nicholas going nil.

We could faintly hear them getting ready for bed, the ceiling squeaking as they went to and from their bathroom. Soon enough, the house turned perfectly quiet and our voices fell to whispers before falling silent. Jenn scooted toward me and put her head on my shoulder; our elbows stuck together in the humid air.

“Hey,” she said playfully and nudged me.

“Hey there.”

Her eyes were downcast, though.

“What’s on your mind, Jenn?”

She picked her head up. “Mom’s not feeling well again. She called me on my drive up. She thinks she has an ulcer.”

“An ulcer?”

“There’s no way my Mom has an ulcer. She’s the least-stressed person I know.”

“I’m sorry she’s not feeling well.”

“She’ll be fine,” she said, upbeat.

I could have sat forever with her head on my shoulder, speaking in whispers, our fingers touching lightly. I hated saying good-bye to Jenn; I would spend the next several hours thinking about things to do with her, things to say to her, and plans to make with her. There was not enough time in the week to be with her as much as I wanted, especially since we rarely spent more than weekends together.

“I guess I should go,” I whispered.

“I guess,” she sighed.

We sat in silence another five minutes before I finally got up. We kissed good-night, and I stepped out the door. Even though the night was warm, it felt like getting out of bed in winter and cringing when my feet hit the cold hardwood floor, clutching my sides while scurrying for warm clothes in the dark. The sound of my feet walking across the gravel driveway was the only noise in the dead-quiet of night. There were no birds, no crickets, no buzzing insects, and even the moon was hidden from sight. My car door sounded like gunshot when I closed it behind me. Through the windshield of my car, I saw the kitchen light go out.

My eyes fell to the empty passenger seat. Back home, only an empty pillow awaited me in a quiet house. Everything seemed cold; the wind coming through the window was bitter, the October River looked icy in the moonlight. I stayed in the car after I turned off the ignition and looked across the driveway to the house, imagining Jenn waiting inside, imagining a warm bed in which we would talk and kiss and fall asleep together. Instead, I nodded off in the car, only waking up when my head banged against the steering wheel.

I had walked past J Brown Jewelers a dozen times while shopping in Jefferson and had never given it much thought. The last few weeks, however, I caught myself taking long glimpses at the display window. The next Monday, I sat down with a sandwich on a bench across the Jefferson town green and faced the storefront.

After considering a myriad of possible scenarios, I strolled across the green, made sure nobody I knew was looking, and snuck into the store. Sparkly and shiny things seemed to jump at me from every corner of the room. There were words and prices that overwhelmed and confused me, like I was trying to read tax forms in German.

“Can I help you?” said a voice from behind a display counter.

I thought about turning around and running, or saying, “Sorry, wrong store,” and never coming back. A well-dressed woman stood up from behind the counter with a dignified posture and a slightly amused look on her face.

“Uh...” I panicked, “I’m just looking.”

The clerk, friendly enough, said, “What are you looking *for*?”

There were thousands of rings in the store, in hundreds of varieties. I had no idea what kind of ring Jenn would prefer. It didn’t seem to make any difference what kind to me, but I had an instinctive sense that I could irrevocably doom myself to a lifetime of sleeping on the couch.

“Uh, I’m thinking about getting a ring.”

“For yourself or somebody else?”

“Good God,” I told Nicholas that night, “the woman surely knew why the hell I was in there. I swear she was just messing with me, like she was curious how her sad sack of a husband bought her engagement ring twenty-five years ago, and thought I could provide a telling visual demonstration.”

Nicholas struggled to keep from spitting out the water he was trying to drink, turning bright red from laughter and asphyxiation.

“So I told her, ‘For someone else,’ and she gave me this terrible smile. I stuttered and said, ‘For my girlfriend, maybe.’ I never felt so stupid.”

Nicholas coughed a few times, cleared his throat, and said, “It’s part of the game, my friend. Everyone wants a little amusement at your expense when you’re in love.”

I shook my head. “So she says in this sing-songy voice, ‘I assume you want it to be a special ring...’ I wanted to say, ‘No, I want the most boring, dull ring you have.’ Sheesh.”

We were downstairs in Nicholas’ basement, which had become the de facto play room for his kids, sitting around an old card table.

“You were smart to not let my wife hear about this,” he joked, motioning upstairs. “She would ride you incessantly. So, did you buy a ring?”

“No, not yet. I think I’ll place a call to her friend Claire first, to run it by her.”

“Well at least you escaped with your life. And your wallet.”

“But not my dignity. It was hell. It was like watching a chick flick interrupted by commercials for feminine hygiene products and then doing laundry. I was just glad there was nobody else in the store.”

“I think women who work in jewelry stores just live for the day when they get to ask clueless guys what they want in a ring.”

“She *did* ask me that. I wanted to say, ‘Cheap.’ I should have gone with some crap like, ‘Something as beautiful as her,’ and hope to get a discount out of it.” I took a long swig of root beer. “I never thought there was so much to know about engagement rings.”

“Do you feel enlightened?” Nicholas said.

“Try numb.”

“Good thing we have another baseball game to play,” Nicholas said with a smile. “Nothing like being around a bunch of nine-year-olds to slow the rush to marriage.”

The Dragons had played eight of their scheduled nine games and sat with an even 4-4 record—four wins and four losses. As expected, our pitching and defense had turned out to be the team's strength, giving up the second-fewest runs in the league. The race for the fourth and final playoff spot in the ten-team league came down to the last day of the season. The Swiftwater Cougars—our crosstown rivals—and the Jefferson Tigers were each 7-1; the Newport Black Bears were 6-2. Three teams were battling for the last playoff spot: us, the 4-4 Fisher Cats, and the 5-3 Catamounts.

Entering the final day, all the Catamounts had to do was win their game, and we and the Fisher Cats would be left out. The Fisher Cats were playing the worst team in the league, who were winless for the year. Since the tie-breaker was the fewest runs allowed, and we had allowed sixteen fewer runs than both of them, we stood to win the playoff spot if we won and the Catamounts lost.

It was a sunny Friday afternoon at the Swiftwater Ballpark. The sunshine, the final ballgame, and the impending weekend all served up a crowd of parents who were more animated than usual. There was a general sense, Nicholas assured me, that having the crosstown rival Cougars in the playoffs would make it doubly disappointing for the players (who would have to endure the ragging of their classmates in the fall) and the parents (who would have to endure the ragging of their neighbors).

"The Cougars hit well, but we pitch and field better," Nicholas scowled. "Defense should always win. We should win just to teach them a lesson about the right way to play the game—that defense and fundamentals matter."

"Somehow I doubt the baseball gods see it so clearly," I said.

He shook his head at me; I had never seen him quite so worked up over something outside of his preaching duties.

"Come on, boys! Let's get 'em today!"

The opposition came in the form of the Lakeland Engines, who Benjamin Jaitieu shut out in a scoreless first inning for us, and then drove in two runs at the plate. The team was already crazy with playoff fever, but the Engines came chugging back, putting up two runs in the 2nd inning, and another in the 3rd. The lead changed hands several times in the back-and-forth affair. The score was 7-6, Engines, after the fifth of seven innings.

In the sixth inning, trailing the Engines by a run, Nicholas put our starting defense back into the game. Justin Kearney was on the mound and the first batter hit a sharp line drive to the right side of second base. Peter Dellay took two quick steps to his right and sprung after the ball, flying horizontal through the air. Smack! The ball slapped the web of his glove and he hit the ground squeezing the ball, holding it above him like a trophy. But he did not get up. The ecstatic cheers died off.

Nicholas was already out of the dugout, calling time to the umpire. I ran after him to second base. Peter was on his chest, rolling around in the dirt. Eventually he pushed himself off the ground using his gloved hand, but his right arm looked plastered to the side of his body. Peter reached into his glove and threw the ball back to the pitcher awkwardly; the ball barely made it to the mound.

"Peter, you okay?" Nicholas said.

"Uh... I think so. I landed on my shoulder, though. It kinda hurts."

“Can you make windmills? Try this—” I said, raising my arm and making large circles by swinging it down to my knee and back up. Peter tried, but he could not get his arm to go straight up without grimacing.

“Maybe you should sit out a while,” Nicholas said.

I saw the Dellays in the crowd. Peter Sr. looked sick to his stomach, and Melissa was ready to burst into tears. Most everybody else sat on their hands and waited, except Randy Waterman, who stood with his arms crossed like he was atop a watchtower.

Peter rubbed his shoulder and tried to move it around like he was wearing an uncomfortable shirt. The other players stared, their feet glued to the ground. Only Martin, our sturdy catcher, came over.

“You okay, buddy?” Martin said.

Peter nodded.

After more prodding, Peter still insisted he was okay. When Nicholas and I stepped back and returned to the dugout, both sets of fans clapped, although the concern never left the Dellays’ faces.

“Atta boy, Peter! Atta boy!” Randy cried.

The Engines scored twice in the 6th to go up 9-6, but we got them both back in the bottom half of the inning. In the 7th, the final inning, Justin Kearney managed to set the Engines down 1-2-3 in short order. Down to our last three outs, Justin batted first and hit a sky-high pop-up on the first pitch that was caught in shallow center field.

“Come on, boys,” I said. “Be patient up there. Just get on base any way you can.”

Timmy Carter, our speedy center fielder, poked a ball into right field for a single. Martin Courchesne came up next and confidently smacked a double to left field, but Timmy had to wait to make sure it was not caught, so he only ran to third base instead of coming home with the tying run. To make sure a base hit would win the game, I had Ethan Gunn pinch-run for Martin. Dan McGuire came to bat with the spirited crowd urging him on, sensing the moment. Peter Dellay was on deck, dragging his bat behind him.

“Is your shoulder okay?” I said.

He nodded, but never took his eyes off Dan.

“Take a few warm-up swings, Peter.”

Dan took two quick strikes while Peter warmed up with the energy of a dispassionate slug. Dan worked the count to 2-and-2, fouled off a few more pitches, and then sent a sky-high pop-up to the third baseman. Two outs.

“Hit it over the fence, Peter!” Martin yelled from the dugout, causing more concern than hope. The players knew that the game—and the season—was hanging by a thread and they gripped the chain-link dugout fence a little tighter. Parents of the Engines who had already gathered their things to head to their cars were standing in anticipation, shifting their weight from foot to foot. They muttered, “Come on...” in annoyance while the Dragon parents pleaded, “Come on...” in expectation. Peter dug in.

“Strike one!”

“Come on, Peter, you can do it!” “Let’s go, Peter!” “Knock it up the middle now!”

“Strike two!”

Peter's bat looked heavy as lead on his shoulder. He stepped out of the batter's box with a worried look. The next pitch came right down the pipe; Peter barely stuck his bat over the plate to graze the ball, sending it to the backstop and keeping our chances alive by the slimmest of margins. The pitcher smelled blood and threw the next pitch outside, hoping that Peter would swing futilely.

Ball one.

Readying for the fifth pitch, I saw Peter's eyes nearly pop out of his head and his legs gave way under him. The pitch nearly hit his chin and he collapsed in the dirt. He stayed down for a moment, so I hurried out to him. The umpire called time while I checked Peter over.

"I'm okay; it didn't hit me," he said.

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah," he said, surprisingly lucid, taking off his helmet to bang some dirt out of it. His fog of fear had been knocked clean away and his voice was clear. "Hey coach, I have an idea."

"What's your idea?"

"I think it'll work," he said, stepping away from me and entering the batter's box without a word, sporting a strange smile.

I walked back to the dugout, wondering if he had not been hit in the head. Both crowds came to life again, standing and cheering. The players in the dugout began to clamor, shaking the fence in excitement. Just as the pitcher settled into his wind-up, Peter turned quickly and squared to the pitcher. "Bunt!" their coach roared. The pitcher paused and looked confused; the third baseman rushed in, panicky, as did the first baseman. The cheering waned, confused, the crowd holding its collective breath.

Finally, the pitcher broke into his delivery and Peter turned back into his regular stance. The corner infielders stood up, unsure whether or not to retreat. "Get back! Get back!" their coach bellowed, motioning frantically. It was too late; the pitch was en route, and Peter swung with all his might. We all watched in amazement, including the third baseman who was backpedaling desperately. Crack! The ball sailed through the air, seemed to float for a few minutes, and then began its dive earthward. The third baseman and shortstop nearly tripped over themselves trying to sprint to shallow left field while Timmy trotted home and Ethan raced around third base. Peter danced in the first base path like Carlton Fisk as everyone watched the chaos in shallow left field, watched the ball drop, watched the infielders stick out their gloves, watched the ball drop closer, closer, closer to the earth.

"YEAH!" the dugout exploded in cheers as the ball plopped to the ground. Peter stood on first base and Ethan sprinted toward the plate, waved on ferociously by our third base coach, Dominic. The third baseman, shortstop, and left fielder all hesitated, unsure as to who ought to pick up the ball that rested in the middle of them. The left fielder, seeing Ethan, picked it up, but it was much too late.

The players rushed out of the dugout and swarmed home plate, pig-piling on Ethan, hugging, laughing, and slapping Ethan's helmet. The parents on the bleachers were in an uproar, too, and Nicholas and I jogged out to the pig pile to join in.

"We did it! We did it!" the kids yelled to each other.

Nicholas threw an arm around my shoulders and shook me. We stood beside the pile of little bodies and distributed high-fives liberally.

I looked up from the chaos and noticed that two players had not joined the celebration. Peter Dellay stood on first base, one foot on the bag and one as if he was waiting for the next batter to advance him to second base. He had his eyes fixed on the celebration at home plate and grinned from ear to ear. Steven Waterman had stood up slowly from the bench in the dugout when everybody else had rushed home plate. He sauntered out of the dugout, and over to first base. Peter noticed Steven walking up to him and broke his gaze from home plate. Steven raised his hand mechanically to Peter. Peter looked back and forth between Steven and home plate and took a step toward the pigpile when I saw Steven say something to him and point to his upraised hand. Tentatively, Peter gave Steven an awkward high-five. Steven smiled and jogged toward the ongoing celebration. About at that time, one of the players finally noticed Peter standing at first.

“Peter!”

The celebration paused, and then broke like a wave toward first base to mob Peter. They got him up on Martin’s shoulders, and Peter’s smile shone in the sun. Steven walked up to me with the same mechanical hand movement.

“Good game, Coach.”

“Good game, Steven,” I said, and gave him a high-five.

Parents had gathered at the entrance of the dugout and Nicholas waved them onto the field so they could hug their children. The field did not clear until someone reminded the kids of the tradition after the last game of the regular season to head to a local ice cream shop to celebrate. They cleaned up the dugout faster than ever and before long a caravan had departed for ice cream.

I had been trying to call the coach of the Catamounts to update one another of our respective games, as was customary, but he was not answering, so I inferred that the game was still underway. We were now 5-4; they were 5-3, but we would win the tie-breaker.

At the shop, I wandered from parent to parent, chatting amicably, and they all congratulated me on a fine season. It was a blur, albeit an enjoyable one. In the midst of speaking with Martin Courchesne’s parents, my cell phone rang, and I excused myself. It was the Catamount coach.

“Hi, Jack. How’d it go today?”

I was sitting at the very edge of the shoppe’s deck, trying to get as far from the noise as I could in order to hear Jack clearly. Peter Dellay Jr. spotted me from across the way and wandered over, holding a monstrous ice cream cone and beaming. It took a few minutes for him to negotiate the maze of people while the ice cream balanced precariously on the cone.

“Okay, Jack,” I said. “Talk to you later.”

“Hi Coach! Whatcha doing over here?”

“Are you enjoying that ice cream cone, Peter? It’s almost as big as you.”

He nodded vigorously. The ice cream wobbled and threatened to topple to the ground.

“How is your shoulder feeling?”

“It’s fine!” he said, switching his ice cream into this other hand so he could make windmills with his hurt shoulder. He stopped and looked at me quizzically. “What’s wrong, Coach?”

“That was Jack Dunklee, the Catamounts coach,” I pointed to my phone. “The Catamounts won today.”

Peter looked up at me with ice cream stains on the upper lip of his smile. “That’s okay, Coach,” he said. “So did we.”

Once again, I did not drive straight home from the baseball field, instead taking a little drive up the October River to Jefferson. The sporting goods store was not on the agenda this time, though. I parked in the shopping plaza and took a deep breath before getting out and walking into the jewelry store.

Jenn was being typically insistent in knowing where I was going to take her during her last week of summer vacation—or, administrative leave. When I told her that I wanted to take her to dinner in the town of Meredith, New Hampshire, she also insisted on meeting me there, rather than having me pick her up in Portland. We often practiced this strategy, and considering that I was hoping for something of a surprise, I agreed to meet her in Meredith. Despite this, I still had a suspicion that she knew exactly what I was doing.

I arrived an hour early and passed time by sauntering around a quaint series of shops set beside an old mill's waterfall. A few people ate dinner on a patio in the humid afternoon above the waterfall, from which they could view Meredith Bay just a hundred yards away. An impressive array of small sailboats floated in the bay, prodded along by the gentle southeast breeze coming off Lake Winnepesaukee, of which Meredith Bay is a part. I crossed the street and walked through the deep-green grass of a small park on the lake's shoreline. The lowering sun was behind me while I sat on a bench and looked across the bay, trying to get my nerves in order. There was a boardwalk over the shoreline to the south that led to a restaurant with a loud clientele, and then beyond toward a series of docks as it wrapped around the end of the bay. On the small knoll that hemmed in the bay sat an old inn with a large field overlooking the lake.

Jenn arrived fifteen minutes ahead of schedule and I nearly fell off the bench when she tapped me on the shoulder.

"Sorry! Didn't mean to startle you," she laughed.

"Wow," I said, looking her over from head to toe. She wore a simple summer dress, but she looked terrific. Her blonde hair trapped the late afternoon sunlight and seemed to be glowing.

"Wow what?"

"Wow wow. You look amazing."

She smiled but no words formed. She leaned in close so that I could put my arms around her.

"So now what?" she said.

"Now we wait twenty minutes until dinner. Sound good?"

"It sounds perfect."

We sat on the bench and chatted for a while, until our reservation time, when she took my arm and we strolled to an old world Italian restaurant that sits right on Meredith Bay. The sun was setting and a rosaceous glow rimmed the quiet waters of the lake.

"This is a wonderful spot. Who knew you were so romantic?" Jenn said.

"I have my moments every now and then."

"You certainly do."

“Besides, it can get lonely being at home all day. What else am I going to do besides think of ways to impress my girlfriend?”

“You really should think about getting a dog,” she said.

“I don’t need a dog.”

We sat well past sunset, drinking port and sharing our meals; I had the chicken marsala and Jenn had veal parmesan. I pushed my peas over to her plate.

After dinner, we strolled along the boardwalk, over the waters of Meredith Bay. The night was cool and still and wonderful; Jenn tucked herself tightly under my arm as we walked. There was a birthday celebration underway at the loud restaurant, but we walked past silently, smiling and rolling our eyes at each other. The sound carried across the bay, but it only served as a backdrop to the water lapping at the rocks on the shoreline and the boats bouncing rhythmically at the docks.

We came to a gazebo that stands over the water at the edge of the field behind the old inn on the knoll. The gazebo was, as I had hoped, unoccupied. We sat in silence, listening to loons call to one another in the distance.

“Jacob, have you—” she turned to me, but stopped when she saw me on one knee.

The lights of Meredith behind me reflected in her eyes. Jenn froze, mouth still agape. I felt the wood of the gazebo under my right knee and could hear the water lapping beneath. With my left hand I reached for hers while trying to unstick my tongue from the roof of my mouth.

“I love you, Jenn,” I stammered, forgetting what I had planned to say. “I know I love you more than anything else. I would do whatever it takes to be with you. I want to be with you forever. I just want... you.”

The full poignancy of what I had wanted to communicate was lost in my trembling words. All I wanted was her. Forget the “from this day forth” talk; I just wanted her, now and forever. I did not and could not imagine living another day without her. I held her hand in mine, and with the other presented the ring.

“Will you marry me, Jenn?”

All was quiet for a few moments; I could hear the rustle of oak leaves above, like they were impatient for an answer. Though Jenn was looking straight down, I could see a tear, and then another, form in her eye and trickle down her cheek. I looked at her, waiting for her to lift her head and meet my gaze and agree to be my wife. She raised her head, with more tears falling as she did. There was no smile on her face, and she kept her eyes lowered.

“I’m sorry, Jacob,” she said. “I just can’t do it.”

My breathing stopped. Even the waves and wind stopped. Her trembling hand was still in mine and no words formed on either of our lips. Jenn’s chest rose and fell as though she had just finished a long sprint, but she was completely silent. Then she looked straight into me and, on the verge of a sob, whispered, “I just can’t. I’m sorry.”

She withdrew her hands from mine and immediately felt a thousand miles away. She stood and took a step toward the old inn, and then another. A cold north wind arose and pushed her hair into her face. She turned away from the wind, but never turned back around, leaving the gazebo and running across the field into the darkness.

“Let’s go, let’s go, let’s go!”

Music blared from every dark corner of the bar and people shouted just to make themselves heard. It was warm, and the smell of revelry hung in the air as thick as the hops. I pushed my way past a crowd at the entrance, pulling Aaron, Derek, and Jesse into the room.

“Let’s fucking go!” I grabbed Derek and yanked him past the crowd and strode toward the bar, finding two empty barstools with enough room around them for the four of us to sidle up. I waved to the bartender, who came right over.

“What can I get ya?”

“Seven and seven,” I yelled back. “Boys?”

Aaron looked at the beers on draft. “I’ll take the Murphy’s Pale Ale.”

“Pale ale? Are you trying to stay sober or something?” I said.

“Just pacing myself.”

Derek leaned in. “I’ll have the amber,” he said, then, turning to me, “Sober, yes. And keeping an eye on you.”

“Pale ale for me, too,” Jesse said. “Blow off some steam if you want, Jacob, but don’t blow up altogether, okay? Not this time.”

“Let’s find a table,” I said, ignoring their comments. After all, I was in my mid-20s and just hitting my stride.

We got our drinks and found an empty table with a good view of a television playing college football. A group of guys were hanging around our regular pool table, very casually playing a game of eight-ball, but mostly hitting on a couple of saccharine college girls who gushed over every routine shot. They would take a shot, make some dumbass remark, and not-so-subtly gaze down the shirt of half-drunk coed. A waitress delivered a round of lite beers to the boys. I wanted to ask them if they were as sissy as their beer.

“Lot of head on this one,” one of the girls cooed.

“Can’t have too much head,” said one smug-looking asshole.

They all laughed and the one tramp put her hands on the side of the pool table and leaned into them, squeezing her breasts together so that they nearly burst out of her tight, low-cut shirt. Other than her ample breasts popping out of her shirt, she was an awkward-looking girl who talked like she had half a brain. I just stared at her breasts instead.

“Hey guys, I’m Brianne. I’ll be serving you tonight. Can I get you another round or something to eat?”

“Not just yet, thanks,” Aaron said.

“I’ll have another.”

“Geezus, Jacob! You done already?”

“Seven and seven,” I nodded to our friendly waitress. “Yeah, I’m done. I’m in a hurry.” I smiled and half-winked at Brianne as I handed her my glass. I recognized her from plenty of previous visits to Murphy’s, but I never knew if she remembered me from Adam. Waitresses like her must have dozens of guys a night staring at her ass and pretending to be friendly when they just want to catch a glimpse of her when she was unaware. I thought about asking her out, but I would just look like another dime-a-dozen

fool hitting on a hot waitress. Besides, she was probably dating some frat boy. Brianne hustled off to another table and my eyes followed her to the bar where she placed my order.

“Man,” I sighed.

“I know what you mean; the girl is smoking,” Derek said.

“Nice selection on the table, Jacob,” Jesse added. “You always seem to manage to get her as our waitress.”

“I have a sixth sense for these things. Too bad they all wear black outfits, though,” I said. “Black pants, black shirts in a bar? How am I supposed to check her out?”

“I don’t know. Somehow you’ve managed, I suspect,” Aaron said.

Despite her attire, Brianne was far more inviting to look at than the tramp at the pool table making more stupid jokes about oral sex. Brianne was classy. At least, I always thought of her as more classy because she didn’t show off her breasts in public, and she worked at an Irish pub that was a bit removed from the filth of the college drinking scene. Then again, she was a college girl, and surely that counted for something. Maybe she was every bit the tramp, just not while on the clock.

“Here you go,” she said, handing me my drink.

“Thank you, Brianne.”

“You’re welcome,” she said, keeping me unsure if she was being waitress-friendly or flirt-friendly. I needed a few more drinks before I could properly discern.

“What else can I get for you guys?”

We ordered some wings and held off ordering our meals so that we had another excuse to call her back to the table—our well-rehearsed strategy. “It makes us assholes,” Aaron would always protest, futilely.

Aaron, Derek, Jesse, and I were four years out of college, the remnant of the old cabal who not only stuck around town to find work, but who also managed to remain unmarried. Our visits to Murphy’s were becoming less frequent, but I had been wound up recently and needed a big night out, just like old times. Times were different, though; we were more or less responsible adults. I wanted to turn back the clock for just one night.

“Hey, there’s not as much head this time!” the stupid ogre at the pool table said to Brianne as she delivered another round. She smiled politely and moved on. I was hoping he would continue to be an idiot so that I had a good excuse to deck him, though I rarely waited for such an opportunity in the past.

“Come on, Aaron, tell me you wouldn’t want to squeeze that ass.”

“Jacob, I’ve got a girlfriend. You squeeze random waitress’s asses if you want.”

“You’re only saying that because Laurie would beat you if she found out. And this waitress is definitely not random,” I said.

“Look, you might be on a first-name basis with her, but she doesn’t give a rip about you,” Aaron said. “Get over it.”

“Besides,” Derek said, “she could take her pick of a lot of different guys. Why would she want your ugly mug?”

“Derek, I’m shocked,” I wiped a fake tear. “You don’t think I’m good-looking?”

“Well,” he said, “I wouldn’t fuck you.”

We managed to stop laughing before Brianne arrived with our food.

“One more, please,” I pointed to my glass.

“I don’t think she’s all that impressed with your tolerance level.”

I casually raised my middle finger in Aaron’s direction.

Brianne faithfully came by every few minutes to check in on us and to bring my fourth and fifth seven-and-sevens. She continued to straddle the fine line being waitress-friendly and flirt-friendly, playing it just right so that I couldn’t help but wonder if I might actually have a chance with her. I guess she knew I would tip accordingly. She was good; she was real good. By the time we were finishing our meal, some no-name band du jour was starting up in the far corner of the restaurant, drowning out the late West Coast football games on television with overbearing percussion and shitty lyrics. The pool guys and their accompanying tramps had moved on, so we decided to play a round before taking off.

“Here’s the check, guys. Have a nice night.”

“Thanks, Brianne. You did a fabulous job.”

“Thank you. You can just call me Bri, by the way. Brianne still sounds a bit like my father or a professor.”

“Brie? Like the cheese?”

“Like the cheese,” she laughed.

“Thanks, Brie. You have yourself a good night.”

“Good night, fellas.”

Once she was out of earshot, Derek wasted no time. “‘*Like the cheese?*’ Dude, that was weak.”

“What the hell did I just say?” I said, slapping my forehead. “Shit. Maybe I should do my small-talking before my fourth drink.”

“Fifth,” Aaron said.

Derek said, “Man, you had some momentum there and just *killed* it. Here she is, telling you to call her by her nickname and then you trot out *that* line?”

Jesse chimed in, “At least she’s the queen of cheeses.”

“Shut the fuck up.”

“Whatever,” Aaron said. “Let’s shoot pool.”

We got up from the table, but not before I left Brie a nice tip. A good-sized crowd had gathered near the stage. People wandered back and forth to the bar, laughing and swaying to the band’s music. The colored lights of the stage shone on the crowd that was pulsating with the anticipation of the weekend.

“Should we draw straws to see who gets stuck playing on Jacob’s team?” Derek said.

“What’s that supposed to mean, asshole?”

“Can you even walk right now?”

I tapped my head and pointed to the pool table. “I’m just perfect.”

After a few shots, Jesse, who drew short straw, was shaking his head at my ineptitude. Billiards is a problematic game when the corner pockets are not stationary, and especially when it feels like playing on an inflatable raft during a nor’easter.

“Hey, watch it!” I yelled to some guy at the next table who nearly hit me with his cue stick while lining up a shot.

“Sorry man,” he said. “Didn’t see you.”

I shrugged and tried to line up my shot, or at least to see straight.

“Jacob, what are you doing?” Jesse asked me out of the corner of his mouth. “You walked right into him.”

“I did not.”

“You’re belligerent. You walked right into his stick.”

“I did not.”

“Whatever, just shoot; he’s waiting for you.”

Sometimes the answers to life’s questions are more daunting than mucking around in the dark. Even the cold unknown can be more appealing than the weight of glory. No really thinks that they will find comfort or answers at the bottom of their drink, but they can at least put off having to face reality for a little while. When life starts slipping away, a big night out for nostalgia’s sake can slow the process a bit, but it can never really turn back the clock; once the whiskey wears off, we hear it ticking all the louder.

The cue ball smacked into the 4-ball and sent it into the corner pocket. Aaron and Derek started laughing.

“Nice shot, moron. We’re stripes.”

Aaron and Derek doubled over as I scratched my head, trying to make sense of the situation. I caught a smirk from the guy lining up his shot at the next table.

“What’s so funny?” I asked my friends.

“Sorry, Jess,” Aaron said. “Guess we can’t count this one against you.”

Aaron’s joke loosened up the other table of guys and they chuckled openly. I turned to them, clutching my stick.

“What’s so fucking funny? Sober, I could kick your ass at pool. Drunk, I could kick your ass, period.”

“Jacob, easy,” Jesse said, getting between me and them and turning me around.

“Come on, just play.”

The other guys all shut up in a hurry and turned back to their table.

“Maybe we should just go,” Aaron said.

“Stupid fuckers.”

“They were just laughing with us. Don’t go there again,” Jesse said. “Your shot, Aaron.”

“What do you mean ‘again’?” I said. “Come on, just like old times...”

“Don’t goad me, Jacob. Old times are over. Why do you still want to go around picking fights?”

“Why are you so uptight? Are you getting too old? Fine, don’t fight, but why are scared to have more than a drink or two?”

“Look at you,” Jesse said.

“What?”

“You look like a clown. I don’t want to look like you, that’s why. We’re not twenty-one anymore, Jacob.”

I put my hands up in a peaceful motion and stepped back, leaning against the wall, watching both games at once. The jackass who hit me with his stick wore a green golf shirt and blue jeans. He was probably an inch or two taller than me, but his friends were a little shorter. He had a tattoo on his tricep that probably went all the way around his arm. Preppy little cocksucker. Brianne was working her cute little ass off where we had been sitting earlier. She had already forgotten me; she took her tip and took her

smile to someone else. The assholes on stage were playing bad covers and worse originals, wailing on and on like a bunch of no-name losers. Three chords and unoriginal angst, swaying to the rhythm of the whiskey in my head.

“What the fuck!”

“Did I knock your beer over?”

“You knocked it all over the pool table, you idiot,” the preppy little cocksucker said.

I threw my stick down and stood face-to-face. “You want to hit me with your stick again? Go ahead, asshole. Go ahead.”

“I don’t want to hit you. What’s your problem?”

I bumped him with my chest, and he kept backing up. Aaron, Derek, and Jesse ran over and grabbed me, calling for me to shut up.

“We’re leaving,” Aaron said. “That’s it—we’re leaving now!”

They apologized profusely to the three guys and offered to buy them a drink, but they told them to just get me out of here.

“Fine! Let’s leave!” my voice was in a frenzy, and I tore away from Aaron and charged the green golf shirt, tackling him square in the chest and pushing him backward through a breakaway door and tumbling into the alley. I sprung to my feet with surprising dexterity and grabbed him by the collar and threw him against the wall. Yelling nonsensical profanities, I punched him in the stomach, twice, three times, and then smacked his face, sending him down. His two buddies jumped on me and brought me down. Wrestling the one and pinning him quickly, I elbowed the other in the gut, then head-butted the first. The toe of a boot struck my temple and I somersaulted backward. Adrenaline exploded throughout my body and I showered him with blows, mercilessly, until Aaron and Derek pulled me away. Jesse ran to the street and called for us to follow. It took Jesse’s help to drag me from the alley, though.

“I’ve had it,” Aaron yelled. “I’m so done with this, Jacob. I’m done!”

“You wanna go already? I’m just getting warmed up.”

“You see what I mean, Jacob?” Jesse said. “This is why I don’t want to go out with you anymore.”

“I didn’t realize we were dating.”

“Fuck you.”

The three assholes struggled to their feet, tending their wounds and meandering back inside. Blood ran down from my forehead, but whiskey is a good painkiller. I leaned heavily on Jesse, my arm around his shoulder.

“Just like old times, eh, buddy?”

He turned away, disgusted. “You smell like shit; you look like shit; you act like shit. You know that? If I didn’t know you for the better part of a decade, I’d kick you in the face, too.”

“Whatever. Let’s go to that party at the Rock House,” I said.

“Are you fucking outside your mind? No fucking way,” Aaron said. “We’re taking you home before you kill someone, or yourself. You need at least a bandage on your head, if not stitches, and you definitely need to sleep it off before you wind up in jail.”

“I’ve got to say it, I feel foolish going in here,” Aaron said, standing on the sidewalk, looking at the Rock House.

“Don’t feel foolish,” I said. “I keep telling you: it’ll be just great.”

I smiled, but Aaron didn’t smile back.

“I don’t know how you talk us into this shit,” Aaron said. “When are we going to grow out of this?”

“Talk to me when I’m thirty,” I said. “Actually, I don’t care. Talk to me tomorrow. Just don’t talk to me right now. I don’t want to think about anything right now.”

“I wasn’t asking you, Jacob,” Aaron said.

“Yeah yeah.”

“And you’re still bleeding.”

“No, I’m not,” I said, and walked toward the house.

The party had spilled into the front lawn where people were milling about, many of them holding ubiquitous plastic cups. We worked our way through the small house, known for years as the Rock House. There were crowds of gyrating young women and stupidly happy young men crammed into the small, sultry place. In the backyard there were three kegs of cheap beer set up. We helped ourselves and found some other people we knew.

A blonde caught my eye when I was coming back from yet another trip to the bathroom. She was standing against the wall, on the edge of a conversation in which she did not seem too interested. Our eyes met and I squeezed through the crowd to her. We had to yell above the din to be heard.

“I’m empty,” she said, holding up her cup.

“I’m not,” I said, “but I can be in the time it takes to get to the keg.”

The crowd kept me propped up as I brushed past on wobbly legs. She was slender and soft; her bare shoulders glowed in the dim light, and her brown eyes were magnetic. When we got the keg, I filled her cup and we talked for a few minutes before she had to use the bathroom herself.

“Jacob, are you nuts?” Jesse said, appearing over my right shoulder.

“What are you talking about?”

“Beer goggles, man,” he said. “You have serious beer goggles on.”

“What? She’s got a nice body. And it’s going well, you know what I mean?”

“Shit! You are totally lit up; you know that? I’m telling you, you have beer goggles on like you wouldn’t imagine. Don’t do it.”

“I’m agreeing with Jesse,” Derek shrugged. “Jacob, you’re smashed; trust us. You can’t even speak without slurring. Beer goggles. And whiskey goggles, for that matter.”

“Come on, Jake, ditch her. Let’s go. Aaron’s leaving anyway.”

“What? Where are you going?”

“Home. It’s late,” Aaron said.

“It’s supposed to be late. It’s Saturday.”

“Jacob, it’s past midnight, and I am not the one having the quarter-life crisis and getting drunk and getting into fights. I’m going home.”

I rolled my eyes, exaggerated because I was barely able to keep my head upright. Jesse and Derek were not ready to leave, but they certainly sympathized with Aaron's decision.

"Fine. I'll catch you later."

"Don't do anything too stupid."

"Hey, you know me!" I smiled and spread my arms out wide, nearly falling over.

"I sure do," Aaron said, and disappeared into the crowd.

"You sure you haven't had enough, Jake?" Derek asked.

"Just a little longer."

"How about thirty minutes, then we get out of here?"

"Great. I need another beer," I said.

My feet struggled to move in a straight line as I walked across the lawn. The world was a seesaw and I was standing in the middle, leaning too far one way one minute, and too far the other the next. I operated the keg more by feel and memory than by sight.

"Can I top you off?" I said to a group standing next to me, but mostly to the set of legs that belonged to a brunette.

"I'll take a little more, since you're pouring," she said.

She handed me her cup and took a step away from the group.

"Are you friends with the guys who live here?" she asked.

"Friends of friends, actually. I don't know them all that well. You?"

"Same thing really. I kind of got dragged down here."

"That happens," I said, and took off my cap to scratch my head and unintentionally exposing the cut above my eye, of which she took immediate notice.

"Oh my God! What happened?"

"Nothing. Just tripped on the curb in the dark back there. Didn't want to spill my drink, so I landed on my face."

I put the cap back on, pretending that I did not want her to continue to talk about it.

"Damn, it looks horrible. Is it still bleeding?"

"I don't know. I don't think so." I took the cap off again and touched the cut. No blood. She reached carefully for it as well, but I winced before she actually touched me.

"Does it hurt?"

"That's part of the reason I'm drinking."

"You need to clean it up and put something on that."

"I didn't bring my first aid kit tonight."

"I live a block away. Why don't you walk over with me and I could give you something."

It seemed way too easy. Unlike Brianne, I knew she was genuinely into me.

"Does it really look that bad?" I asked, touching it again.

She stepped closer to me and raised her hand to my eye, her breasts brushing against me as she did so. She touched the wound gingerly and whispered, "I could make you feel a lot better."

Derek and Jesse were nowhere to be seen, and I left with my new nurse straight from the backyard, not bothering to go through the house again. These were no beer

goggles. She wore a too-short skirt for the cool, November weather and a loose-fitting white blouse that was half-unbuttoned over a tight-fitting spaghetti-strap blue tank top. It was tight enough that the neck of the shirt did not even touch her skin, her chest pushing it away and giving me the chance to catch large glimpses of her. Her chestnut brown hair was pulled back into a ponytail. She had a wide nose and high cheekbones; her eyes were wide with energy for such a late hour. She said her name was Julia and she had just graduated from college last May.

“Did you really just fall on the sidewalk?”

“I was, falling that is, and my buddy tried to catch me, but instead hit me with a beer bottle. He’s noble, but an idiot.”

She laughed and pointed to her apartment in a large complex. We walked up the stairs to the second floor, and she fumbled with an oversized key chain before opening the door. It was a standard three-bedroom apartment, quiet and dark except for a streak of light cutting across the living room through the window.

“Here it is: home sweet home. Take your shoes off and stay a while. You sit on the couch while I find something for that cut,” she said, hurrying to the bathroom but not turning on the living room light. I sat in the middle of the couch and tried to sit upright. My mind spun and the liquor and beer drowned out my friends’ admonitions.

“Here we go. Hold still.”

Julia took off the blouse she was wearing and looked intently at the cut, revealing her lithe shoulders and delicate neck. While she was focused elsewhere, I looked down at the rest of her body. She cleaned the wound with alcohol and then put a nice bandage strip over it. Screw Aaron and Derek and Jesse.

“No one will even notice,” she joked, sitting beside me on my right with her legs curled underneath her and her hand on my face. “Feeling better?”

“Quite a bit better. Thank you.”

In her position, her skirt rode up her thighs even higher. Her legs were athletic, curving perfectly into her hips. Her complexion was still dark from the summer, and her skin shimmered in the pale light coming in through the window from the streetlamps. She leaned into me again and gave my wounded eye a quick kiss.

“A kiss always makes it better.”

The dark room hid the fact that I could barely focus my eyes as it was. My hand had been resting on my lap and I slowly extended my fingers to touch her knee, which was resting on mine. She didn’t react. I ran my index and middle fingers up her leg a few inches, relishing the supple skin beneath them.

“You make a good nurse,” I said.

I leaned forward a few inches and she did the same, our lips meeting in the middle. It was gentle and slow. The apartment was incredibly quiet. My fingers traced their way back down to her knee, and then back up a few inches farther than before. Our lips parted and we regained eye contact. The whiskey and cheap beer sloshed around inside my head.

“Did you want to go back to the party?” I asked.

She shook her head and kissed me. She threw her arms around my neck and pressed her chest into mine, slowly sliding down the couch until I was on my back. Her wet lips were on mine and I felt like I was drowning. She un-did her ponytail and her

hair fell around us. We rocked in rhythm, floating on a sea under the moon, lost, beyond the sight of shore and beyond any rational hope of coming back.

Fuck. A fire alarm was clamoring in my head. I picked it off the floor, but I had no idea where I was. I rolled over and my head nearly exploded. A shaft of light came between the blinds in the window and slashed right across my face. I deliberated between running for the bathroom and passing out again. A stain of vomit covered the sheets and the carpeted floor, right next to a nearly-empty bottle of Jack Daniels that I couldn't remember. I was not wearing any clothes and there was a bed beside me with a naked young woman passed out on top of the sheets. She didn't look familiar, and not at all how I remembered Julia looking the night before. She had ugly teeth that I had run my tongue across a few hours previous. Her hair was disheveled and her skin pockmarked up and down her chubby legs.

"Fuck."

I gathered my clothes and stumbled to the bathroom to clean up. Turning on the bright lights in the bathroom was like jabbing a knife through my eyes. The cut was neatly bandaged, at least. She had been sober. I got dressed and left as soon as I could.

The morning was still young and crisp. The sun was shining like fancy wrapping paper on a shitty birthday present. I could barely walk erect with my head hurting. Summoning all of my focus, I walked down the sidewalk beside a small lake, only hoping to get home, throw my clothes in the laundry, take a shower, drink a gallon of water, and pass out on the couch until a football game came on the television and I could spend the rest of the day eating greasy food. A young man and woman were heading toward me and I tried my best to step aside, but I nearly fell while stepping onto the grass.

"Hey there," he said, helping me to steady myself. "You okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine," I muttered, hoping it was nobody that I knew.

"You need a hand?"

"Does it fucking look like it? I'm fine."

There was a moment of stunned paralysis for all three of us.

"If you want, you can come with us," he said.

"I'm fine," I said, and shrugged him away.

I stumbled to a bench beside a small lake and collapsed on it, barely able to hold my head up. The band at Murphy's was still in there, jumping up and down on my skull and giving me a splitting headache that throbbed all the more every time I moved. I dabbed at the cut above my eye and looked at my hand, not exactly sure what this was supposed to accomplish. The couple continued on, followed by another couple a minute or two later. It slowly dawned on me that it was early on a Sunday and nobody in their right mind was walking to class or out for a leisurely stroll. They were well-dressed, too, but young, definitely college-aged. They each carried a large book, running off to church, heaven being their fucking oyster.

The previous night was still ringing in my ears, so I stumbled onward, pushing through my apartment door and dropping my keys on the floor. I kept the lights off because every noise and light hurt. Rummaging through my dresser, I only wanted to

take a shower and wash away the memory of the previous night. My clothes, and even my whole body, felt dirty, tainted by another round of chasing the wind with a bottle of whiskey in one hand and a bloodied middle finger saluting the world with the other.

From the corner of my eye, a photograph on my dresser caught my attention. Mom and Dad and me. I was standing in my high school cap and gown with all the promise in the world. Mom—who had come to every one of my baseball games, and patiently taught my Sunday school for years—stood beside me with a radiant smile. Dad—who did everything with such grace that I wanted to please him more than anything else—had his arm around me.

It had been eight years since they were struck by a car and killed. I really hoped they could not see me from above that Sunday morning.

I turned the picture around, but I had forgotten about the note Mom had written on the back: “We’re so proud of you!” My feet carried me quickly into the bathroom where a haggard, lost face greeted me in the mirror, flecked with puke and blood. I turned away and jumped in the shower, which was still cold. I shuttered at the thought of my parents and shivered in the cold, but I ducked my head under the cold stream of water, hoping the tears would wash away and never return.

The drive home from Meredith was too long to prevent the disappointment from recalling dark scenes from old times. The thought of the Thomas Farm seemed so ridiculous that I thought it might not even exist, instead swept away like Brigadoon when I drove across the October River. For all intents and purposes, the dream was dead, and I might as well leave Swiftwater behind.

The car needed gas and there was a small liquor store next to the Mobil station. Its open sign called more loudly the longer I stood stupidly at the pump, fueling up for my next great adventure to nowhere. My brain began to walk to the liquor store, but my feet were planted at the pump, where my shaky hands fumbled with my wallet like a teenager buying his first girlie magazine.

All the memories came back, the ugly scenes from my roaring 20s, the emptiness of long nights in dark bars. I knew the bottom of a bottle had no answer and no freedom, but I started walking across the parking lot anyway, becoming more numb with each footstep, walking back into a past that took so much to escape from. I could almost hear the revelry and the hungover mornings, and Jenn's face.

I stopped. Halfway there, my car waited to bring me home to my empty bed, my inhospitable town, and my indifferent garden. My feet mechanically brought me to the front door of the store. My gaze stayed low, and casual, like I wasn't worth talking to and had no story to tell. I paid in cash. No receipt.

The brown bag of whiskey stared at me from the passenger seat for the forty-five minutes it took to drive home. It gazed at me from the dining room table while I sat and considered. The rush of the forbidden, the sting of guilt, the numbness of caring about neither. My fingers held the base. It was 2:13; my eyes were tired. I picked up the bottle, opened it, and poured it down the kitchen sink. Halfway done, I stopped and brought the bottle to my face, smelling the whiskey while half the bottle gurgled down the drain. It smelled like despair. Then the rest of the bottle found its way down the kitchen sink.

I woke up with a hangover without having had a drop of alcohol the night before. I groaned out of bed and stumbled to the kitchen for a glass of orange juice. An empty whiskey bottle stood on the kitchen counter. The clock told me it had been twelve hours since I watched Jenn run off into the night, leaving me standing on a gazebo with a stupid look on my face, wondering whether or not to throw the ring to the bottom of Lake Winnepesaukee, and whether or not to join it there.

The weather had turned cold again and a stiff wind spat pockets of rain. Rivulets hurried around my feet as eager to get to the October River as I was eager to get out of the house. I walked down the driveway, glancing at the soggy garden—a miserable mess of mud and stunted plants. The lawn needed mowing, again, and the split-rail fence still threatened to topple over with a stiff breeze. Circles of raindrops appeared and dissipated on the still surface of the October River downstream from the covered bridge. The rain dripped from the roof of the bridge and a few swallows fluttered from rafter to rafter.

The church steeple poked above the tallest tree branches at the river's edge, and the doors of the old church were unlocked as always. As soon as I stepped inside, the rain seemed miles away and the silence was potent. I shook the water off my jacket and stepped into the sanctuary. Rows of wooden pews lined either side of the aisle and stained-glass overlooked them all. On the left, Pastor Jaitieu's pulpit stood above the invisible congregants. I could almost hear echoes of Nicholas belting out a doxology as I slid into a pew and rested my hands on the rail in front. No other person seemed to exist, as though I had God's undivided attention.

My breathing settled into rhythm with the rain falling against the stained-glass. I fingered an old hymnal while a rush of chills passed over my body. The cross hung behind the pulpit on the wall, looking like an orator rising supreme over the congregation, arms wide and inviting, staring down on little Jacob Thomas—proof that the King of Kings would condescend to listen to my petty problems, that He would care about my pain, and that He would weep beside me.

I had no idea how to make sense of that.

"Jacob," Pastor Nicholas Jaitieu said. "Sorry I'm a bit late."

"That's okay. Thanks for coming on short notice."

"What's the matter?"

I slid back in the pew and slumped my shoulders, sighing hard. He sat beside me as I told him about my plans in Meredith, our dinner, the walk along the shoreline, and how she ran off the gazebo.

"I would have been less shocked if you said she was dead," he said.

"Me too."

"She didn't give any reason at all?"

"She just ran away." I shook my head. "I just keep thinking about how perfect everything was. I remember thinking as we were walking along the boardwalk how rare it is that my plans actually work out the way I intend. I really thought it was going to be a perfect night."

Nicholas leaned back against the pew and looked up, to the pulpit or cross I could not tell. His eyes were dark and sad and he sighed deeply. I crossed my arms in the chilly church and stared at my feet.

"Have you tried calling her?"

"No, I just felt sick," I said. "What would I say? What is there to talk about? 'Hey, are you positive you don't want to marry me?' I can't just call her up."

"I suppose not," Nicholas said. "Not yet anyway."

"I want to talk to her more than anything. I just want to know why. Why did she—you know. I can understand I have my faults. But why? She doesn't want to live in Swiftwater? She doesn't want to settle down yet? She thinks I'm too... something? Why did she just leave?"

"I don't know."

"I've never felt so helpless, standing on that stupid gazebo, waiting for her to come back, wondering if I had dreamt the whole thing. Should I chase her down? Call her? Throw myself in the lake? Get drunk at the bar?"

"What did you decide?"

"I probably just stood there with my tongue tied and feet nailed to the ground for fifteen or twenty minutes. Then I walked across the lawn, thinking I might find her

crying and thinking it over, but there was no sign of her anywhere. I still have no idea what happened or what she thought or said or did after she ran away. I walked along the road, then down by the shoreline again. Nothing. I think I sat and stared at the water for a while. There were a lot of people eating outside and having a grand ole time, like they were all rubbing it in.”

“Then what?”

“I drove home and fell asleep.”

“You were able to sleep after all that?”

“I was numb, and exhausted. I woke up and came down here. I didn’t even eat breakfast because I was too much in a daze to even think about it.”

“What’s your next step?” Nicholas said.

“I have no idea.”

Nicholas dropped his head while I looked around at nothing in particular. Empty churches, especially in a chilly rain, are spectacularly eerie. Every notion of supernatural haunting is exacerbated in an old, low-lit church like Swiftwater Congregational, but there is also an exceeding serenity that comes with insulation from the world. For much of my life, I would have been incensed at God’s apparent silence in regard to my suffering, but sitting alongside Nicholas and listening to the sounds of raindrops patter against the roof and the windows, the silence was a welcome respite in a world that too often doesn’t know when to shut up.

“This is a good place when you have no other ideas,” I finally said to Nicholas.

Nicholas nodded and gave me a reassuring smile.

“Did Rachel hesitate when you asked her to marry you?”

“No,” he smiled. “She didn’t hesitate.”

“Not at all?”

“No,” Nicholas said, as though he was embarrassed. “Not at all.”

“Have you ever known a married couple whose engagement began so inauspiciously?”

“I’ve know plenty of inauspicious beginnings, yes, but to be honest, I have never known one where the bride-to-be ran away crying.”

“I have a way with women,” I shrugged. “What did Rachel do?”

“I don’t really—”

“Come on, just tell me, Nicholas. I need a good story right now,” I said, leaning back, as though waiting for the show to begin.

He looked around uncomfortably, like he thought somebody was eavesdropping from somewhere in the building. “You don’t need to beat yourself up over this by comparing it to other people’s stories. We don’t know what God has in store for you and Jenn just yet.”

“Just tell me,” I said, crossing my arms. “I promise I won’t sue for emotional damages.”

Nicholas leaned back and looked up, chuckling quietly. The noise reverberated off the stained-glass windows.

“We were down at Cape Cod for a few days with some other friends, and one night I took Rachel out for a walk on the beach, somewhat clichéd, I know, but that’s what beaches are for. It was pretty warm that night and the moon was out. When I asked her to marry me, she was so excited that when she went to hug me, she knocked me clear

over onto my back. We laughed and hugged and kissed and I had a lot of sand in my shirt.”

His eyes looked straight ahead, and there was more than a hint of pleasure on his lips. I could see every ounce of joy that his marriage had brought in his face, and, of course, I could not help but think that those memories and pleasures could have been mine that morning.

“Later,” Nicholas said, “we were walking on the shoreline, letting the waves crash at our feet. She was holding the ring and admiring it sparkling in the moonlight. When I looked up at the moon, she slipped the ring into her pocket and pretended to bump into me and drop the ring in the surf. I bought it hook, line, and sinker and she had me furiously searching in the wet sand and waves for the ring, with her yelling, ‘I can’t believe you knocked it out of my hand,’ the whole time. She had me pretty good for a few minutes until she started laughing hysterically.”

“Rachel did that?”

“It’s one of her endearing qualities.”

“I didn’t realize that she was such a practical joker. She seems so—”

“She’s the mother of three children now,” Nicholas smiled.

“There’s that, yeah,” I said, and smiled for the first time, but it quickly retreated as soon as I was conscious of it.

“It’s okay to smile,” Nicholas said, but I looked at him and then looked away. “It doesn’t mean that you are indifferent to Jenn or in denial. Life still has humor in it.”

“I know. I thought about so many different possibilities about what I would do and say when I proposed, and how she would react. I probably envisioned a thousand different scenarios. This was never one of them.”

We were both silent for a few minutes. I thought about everything I still needed to do for my job and around the farm. All of it seemed incredibly distasteful; it was a good day to crawl under a blanket and take a nap while listening to the rain.

“This town seems a lot smaller all of a sudden. My whole life seems so pointless now. I don’t think I ever realized how much of moving to Swiftwater was with Jenn in the back of my mind. I wanted us to live together and work together and raise a family together. There’s just no appeal to living and working alone.”

“Life will regain its flavor in time. And who knows what role Jenn will play,” he said.

I shook my head at the mention of her name.

“I’ve thought of a thousand possibilities and none make sense. I’ve thought of a thousand different resolutions and none are plausible. She’s gone. She’s just plain gone and I have no idea why. I don’t know what happens next, or how or why or when.”

“There is still a God,” Nicholas whispered, “and He still might have a greater plan in store, with or without Jenn. And He still loves you and can comfort you for as long as you live in this fallen world.”

“I know,” I said in a faltering voice while tears formed in my eyes, though I held them at bay as best I could.

“And it’s okay to weep,” Nicholas said.

The tears spilt onto my cheeks. I dropped my head to my hands and Nicholas put an arm around me.

“After all,” he sighed, “we don’t weep as those who have no hope.”

I felt like I had been kicked in the stomach. Nicholas's arm around me while we sat in a quiet church reminded me that I was not alone, at least not quite, despite losing Jenn. I wept until I felt foolish and then only managed to keep from blubbering.

"When does it get easier?"

"Not in this world," Nicholas said. "You get married, you get other problems. When those problems resolve, you get others. God promises us trials and pain, but Jesus offers us comfort in the midst of it."

"But..."

"But what?"

I shook my head. "I don't even know any more."

"Give us this day our daily bread, Lord," Nicholas said, words that I found myself clinging to. "We don't know Your plans; we don't know Your ways and means. You promised never to leave or forsake us, and You promised that You will use this pain to the benefit of Jacob. Let us never forget. Give us strength just for today, and give us hope for tomorrow."

The rain picked up by late morning, becoming steady, but never hard. It was not particularly cold or foggy or windy; it dripped and dropped and ebbed and flowed, not remarkable in any way. I placed a few phone calls, ran some test analyses, and looked over some dull emails. It was just a stupid job that I had—there was nothing glamorous or meaningful about it, except that it allowed me to buy a house and move away from the city. I considered puttering around the garden, pretending to know what I was doing, or grabbing my scythe and pretending to accomplish something other than venting my fitfulness. Even my enthusiasm for working outdoors was gone; it was nothing more than continual work among weeds and rocks, and all my work never amounted to anything greater than me.

I picked up my phone to call Jenn but froze. My stomach felt like it was on a roller coaster and I set the phone back down. Visions of her laughing, of her car wrecked on the side of the road, of us kissing, of her crying, all ran through my head. I stood up and walked in a small circle and stared at the phone again. I placed the call but hung up before it even rang.

“What would I say?” I said aloud.

The rain stopped around dinnertime, and by sunset a few stars appeared. Moonlight illuminated some breaks in the clouds, and I stepped onto the damp wood of the deck with a glass of water in my hand and breathed in the moist air, pungent with pine. Restlessness got the better of me and I grabbed my sneakers to go for a walk.

The driveway was still damp and the grit stuck to the bottom of my shoes. There were puddles here and there and the culvert that ran beside the road and under my driveway was running high. The lights of the small downtown glowed in the thin fog that had not yet dissipated. A cool breeze drifted slowly down from the hills in the north, feeling a bit like spring. The October River was audible already, spilling over rocks en route to the Atlantic. The water was not unusually high or unruly, but the dark of night lent it an ominous air.

I stopped on the covered bridge and watched the whitecaps swirl beneath me. Images of childhood days playing on rocks and swimming holes came back to me and I found myself smiling at the memories of being a teenager again, without any cares on a summer afternoon at the river, cleaning off the sweat from a bike ride in cool water and sitting in the sun with nowhere to go.

For no good reason, I spat into the water, but the river washed it away and looked good as new, as though the offense had already been forgiven and the anger swept downstream toward pleasant waters.

Headlights dropped down the hill from the center of town and crossed the bridge, rumbling the structure as the truck passed. There was a mound of something in the back of the pickup truck—dirt or rocks, I could not quite tell. The taillights climbed the hill eastward, but they slowed just past the bridge, as though preparing to make a turn, though my driveway and the Newmarkets’ were the only turns available for nearly a half-mile. The taillights came nearly to a stop before swinging to the right shoulder and then the entire truck made a 180-degree turn, using the two driveways to create a large enough turning radius. The headlights crept down the hill and I turned back to the river.

The truck came to a stop on the shoulder just before the bridge, headlights shining directly on me. It idled and the driver-side door remained shut. I was not sure if I was supposed to go to the truck to greet a neighbor, or whether they were planning on greeting me. The truck continued to sit there, blinding me and idling.

At last, the headlights went out and the engine stopped. A creaky door opened and a pair of blue jeans slid out of the truck. A silhouette came toward the bridge with heavy work boots thumping on the wooden walkway. Twenty feet away, my eyes finally adjusted to the light and my memory clicked. My heart skipped a beat and my hands clenched the rail of the bridge.

Randy Waterman was avoiding eye contact and his face looked tired. He walked slightly hunched over and fumbled with his hands. When he reached me, he breathed deeply like he was about to say something, but remained silent. His eyes looked at mine briefly and then darted to the side. He turned so that we were shoulder to shoulder and looked into the same water.

“Don’t throw yourself in,” he said.

His voice sounded tired. I waited for something else to happen.

“Excuse me?”

“I said don’t throw yourself in, all right? I don’t want to have to drag your sorry ass out of there.”

I saw what almost looked to be a slight grin on his face. My face just had a blank stare on it, and I propped my elbows on the wooden rail. Randy followed suit, not even a foot away.

“I heard about your girl.”

“What?” I turned in disbelief. “How the hell do you know about that?”

“Basye told me. I was delivering some firewood to them.”

“How the hell does *she* know about that?”

I could not believe that Basye Newmarket would gossip to this man about my embarrassment and hurt. I was sure Randy had come just to throw salt in the wound.

“Sorry to hear that,” Randy said, without a hint of sarcasm or mockery in his voice. “She’s a nice girl.”

I stared at him in abject disbelief while he kept looking at the river.

“What do you mean?”

He shrugged, “She’s a nice girl,” as if that cleared up any confusion.

I turned back to the river, nauseated, but the swirling water refused to explain the situation. Never in my time in Swiftwater had I suspected that Randy Waterman would become a confidant, or that he would offer sympathy in any form.

“Yeah, she is,” I mumbled.

He took a deep breath and I hoped that meant he was ready to leave, fulfilling whatever obligation he felt he had to say something to me.

“When I was twelve,” Randy said slowly, “my mother always had me look after my kid brother, Henry, who a few years younger. Me and Henry and a couple other guys came out here in February, daring each other to walk across the river. Of course, with all the ice and the rapids that never quite froze, none of us ever dared; we just liked busting each other’s chops. But Henry, Henry was different. Always felt he had to prove himself, being the youngest one and all.”

Randy kept his elbows on the rail and his eyes down on the water.

“Henry goes down there and we’re telling him to stop, or at least be careful. Well he’s starting across, walking on stuff obviously frozen, but you can’t tell what’s underneath—rocks or water or a thin layer of ice. Henry, he stepped once and broke through and got his foot wet. I thought, ‘That’s it. He’ll get scared and wise up.’ But he wouldn’t stop. A few steps later—Bam!”

I flinched when he said it.

“Henry fell into the current and started floating downstream. We were going crazy, but what could we do? Finally his foot got jammed between two big rocks twenty yards downstream. Broke his fucking ankle.”

Randy glanced at me and then went back to staring at the river.

“He was screaming bloody murder, stuck between two big rocks with the current pushing against him, lodging his ankle even worse. We panicked. We couldn’t get out there to get him because the river was open water and there was ice everywhere on the shore. He was pinned. The water was only up to his chest, so he wasn’t drowning, but he’s soaked in frigid fucking water and can’t move. I yelled at the other guys to find help, or a rope, or anything. I tried to figure out how to get out there, but it was impossible to reach him without getting swept away myself.”

Randy looked up at the sky for a long, still moment.

“By the time some adults came with a rope, Henry was bouncing up and down in the current like a buoy. His face was blue. Son of a bitch froze to death and I was standing twenty feet away on the shore with my thumb up my ass. Too afraid to save him, too dumb to know I couldn’t. I was twelve fucking years old.”

The October River churned along as though it remembered that day clearly and did not care in the least. The rocks looked menacing. Randy finally drew a deep breath and took a step toward his truck.

“I’m sorry about your brother,” I said.

He looked back with bitter eyes.

“Me too.”

He took a few more steps toward his truck and stopped. He looked down at his feet and put his hand on his hip and stayed that way for an awkwardly long time.

“Look,” he finally sighed, talking over his shoulder. “Steven loved playing baseball this year.”

“He what?”

“Best damn time of his life. You know that? Talked about you all the time.”

I didn’t say anything.

“Well, I gotta go dump this mulch at the Newmarkets.”

I looked at him and could not see an ounce of irony anywhere on his face. He stared into the river like he was looking for something.

“Don’t throw yourself in,” he said, and walked away.

His taillights rose up the hill and into the Newmarkets’ driveway. They flickered as they passed behind the trees and then disappeared altogether.

Standing on a bridge above a rocky river is not the best place to mope. The water rushes downstream, carrying the snowmelt and ice floes, then driftwood and leaves, but the sorrows always wash up on shore. Sorrows can’t drown in the deepest pool or the fiercest rapid or the largest bottle of whiskey. They always rise back up like a lifejacket. Questions don’t disappear at the river’s edge either. They rest for a time, but creep back

as persistent as ever in the quiet moments—in bed at night in the dark, in the early morning, even while walking down the street.

I could see Randy and his friends standing helplessly on the shore and I could hear his brother's panicked screams. His brother was left to die in the river. Randy was left to die more slowly, after years of hard work and mortgage payments and cold winters with long memories. Randy must have crossed over the October River hundreds of times since his brother died.

I walked back up the hill toward home. Randy was shoveling the mulch from his pickup truck onto the lawn. He worked alone; there was a small light on in one of the bedroom windows, but the moonlight gave Randy enough light to shovel the mulch into a pile. My own lawn needed mowing, but it would have to wait until it dried out.

As soon as I stepped in the door, I noticed that I had a message on my telephone and my heart stopped beating. I froze and stared at the blinking orange light, nervous to hear Jenn's voice. Would she be tearful and remorseful? Would she want to talk about that night in Meredith, analyzing it endlessly?

I deliberately avoided the phone, putting my keys and wallet away and getting a glass of water. I took off my shoes and brushed my teeth and shut the blinds and did everything I could think to do before falling asleep, then stood five feet in front of the phone and wished that it would stop blinking at me, mocking me, teasing me, torturing me. Once, and then twice, I stepped forward to play the message, but withdrew my hand like I had almost touched a hot stove.

"This is ridiculous," I said, walking forward and hitting the Play button. The automated voice told me I had one unheard message, taken an hour earlier. My mouth went dry and my breathing all but stopped.

"Hi Jacob," the voice said, "this is Kathleen with Kohl's giving you a courtesy call to let you know about a 30% sale we are having this weekend. We would appreciate—"

"Oh, shut up," I said and punched the delete button.

As soon as the automated voice ended, I thought about calling Jenn. After all, we still had not spoken and I still wanted to know so many things about the night in Meredith. On the other hand, the ball was in her court. She rejected me and if she had any interest in reconciliation, she would have called by now.

The breeze rustled the leaves outside my bedroom window. The house was more empty than ever before; it had the same number of inhabitants, but fewer dreams, which take up a lot of space in our lives.

Even though it was nearly 11:00, I got out of bed and held the phone in my lap, staring at it for fifteen minutes. I longed to hear her voice again, but I feared her telling me that things really were final, or that something terrible had happened on her drive home to Portland. I wiped my hands against my shirt and dialed her number. The phone rang and I hoped that she would not answer. Finally, her voicemail kicked in and I realized I had no idea what kind of message to leave. I hung up, thought about it for a few minutes, and called again, still without any idea.

"Hi, Jenn, it's me," I said, my voice trembling like a thirteen-year-old. "I... I hope you're okay. I'd love to talk sometime. I just want... to talk, I guess. Please call me."

I hung up and rolled my eyes, wishing I could erase that message. Then again, I wished I could erase that night on the Meredith gazebo.

Sunlight streamed through the window well before the alarm clock suggested it should. The blinds were still open after several days of overcast weather, but the sunshine was energizing. I threw off my covers and went downstairs for breakfast. The memory of Randy on the bridge seemed like a dream, but not even scrambled eggs and orange juice on the deck watching the sun ascend in the eastern sky could detract from the reality of what had transpired.

Since I was on a roll, I decided to walk to the post office as it opened at 7:00 to mail off a package to the main office. A productive day of work seemed preordained, which was good, considering that I had not spent much time in my office of late. I put on a long-sleeved shirt and stepped into the crisp air. The grass looked greener than ever in the morning sunlight after a good rain.

As early as I thought I was, Basye was already meandering to her mailbox when I reached the road. I stopped in mid-wave when I saw Randy, pitchfork in hand, chatting with Percival.

“Good morning, dear,” Basye said.

“Good morning, Basye. Looks like a beautiful day today. Good day for yardwork.”

“Randy’s helping me mulch my shrubs,” she said, motioning to him. “Actually, he is doing it pretty much on his own. All that work is too much for my back, or Percival’s.”

“I see,” I said. “Nice that there’s someone in town to hire for that.”

“Hire? Oh no, dear. Randy does it all without charging us a cent. I do make sure some homemade pie finds its way to his house, though. Randy was a classmate of one of my sons, you know. He’s always been a good neighbor.”

I bid farewell to Basye and watched Randy prepare to throw mulch around the lawn per Basye’s instruction. They were quickly out of sight as I walked down the hill toward the river. When I returned from the post office, I walked down the Newmarkets’ driveway rather than up mine. Randy stopped when he saw me and stuck his pitchfork in the ground and put a hand on his hip. Basye and Percival must have been inside.

“What are you doing here?” he said gruffly, looking like he was concerned that I might try to hug him or have a heart-to-heart. “I need to get this done so I can get to work.”

“Then I’ll ask Percival if he has another pitchfork; if not, I’ll get mine.”

A few minutes later, I emerged from the garage with a pitchfork in hand. Randy looked me over, but the agitation had left his face.

“Basye wants all this mulch spread throughout that flower bed there, and then in those bushes there,” Randy said.

I nodded, dug in, and started throwing mulch. We worked hard for twenty minutes, even breaking a sweat despite the cool morning. Once the mulch was thrown into the appropriate beds, we grabbed rakes and evened it out. We never spoke. Basye tottered out of the house, clasping her hands.

“Wonderful, just wonderful, my dears. I can’t thank you enough. You run along to work now, Randy; I know you have a lot to do.”

Percival came outside, too, and put the tools away.

“I’d better get going, too,” I said, though I suspected my work did not carry the demands that Randy’s did. Randy was owner of King’s Feed, which had evolved into a feed store and hardware store and lumberyard and home appliance store all in one since Ronald King died ten years ago and Randy bought the place. There was no need to change the name of King’s in a town like Swiftwater.

Randy drove away, across the October River and into town. The morning air was getting warm.

“Would you like some breakfast, dear?” Basye said.

“No, thanks, Basye. I need to get some work done myself.”

“Of course. Thank you for helping. I know Randy appreciates being able to get back to his life a little sooner, too.”

“How often is he out here, doing chores for you?”

“Oh, I would say a few times each month, especially in the spring and fall. He helps get the garden ready in the spring and everything ready in the winter. He will be back tonight to stack the firewood we have sitting beside the garage. I do wish he would bring his family so that we could chat, but his wife took the kids on vacation for the week, to visit her parents. I guess that’s why he is helping out so much this week—no family to come home to. It’s hard to keep him from his wife and kids when they are around.”

I nodded and gave a weak smile. “I need to be getting back,” I said.

“Of course, dear.”

I was ten steps down their driveway when Basye added, “I’m so sorry to hear about Jenn.”

Tears welled up at the sound of her name. My feet stopped and I turned to Basye. I wanted to yell at her and punch my hand through the car window, but I also wanted to cry on Basye’s shoulder and tell her how much I envied having my own family, like Percival had Basye and Randy had Elizabeth. I wanted to stack firewood for my own home, not merely for my survival, but for the community of a shared house on a cold winter day, to watch Jenn huddle around the woodstove after coming inside and seeing her beam as she rubbed her hands together while I threw another log on the fire. I missed Jenn puttering around my flower beds, loosening the soil and doing what she could with neglected plants.

“I’m sorry, too,” I said, and walked away.

Most of the Newmarkets’ wood did not need splitting; it just needed to be stacked behind the garage so that it would be closer to the woodstove. Randy had dumped it beside the garage because there was not enough space to back a truck around. Picking up, carrying, and stacking four cords of wood could be a summer-long project for Percival and his aged back.

I heard Randy’s truck pull into the driveway, so I put my gloves back on, picked up the axe, and set another piece of wood on the chopping block. A bead of sweat trickled into my eye just as I swung the axe into the wood. I wrenched the axe free and propped it against my leg to wipe the sweat.

“Hey, Percival, I—”

Randy walked around the corner and froze when he saw me. I looked at him with the sleeve of my shirt still pressed to my grimy face.

“What’re you doing here?”

“Chopping wood.”

He looked annoyed for a minute, like I had discovered his secret. He looked around at the woodpile and opened his mouth to say something, but caught himself and shrugged his shoulders.

“There is a lot of wood, I guess. I wanna get home to my family.”

Basye had already told me that his family was out of town, but I had no intention to call him out on his lie. I knew I would have done the same in his shoes.

He grabbed an armload of wood and walked it to the wood pile, stacking it neatly, cross-hatch style. There was plenty of wood that did not need splitting, and only one chopping block besides, so he took straight to carrying wood while I continued to split for a time. We did not speak for fifteen minutes, until I set the axe down to wipe my sweat and Randy said, “You wanna switch?”

We did, and went about our business wordlessly. We switched about every fifteen minutes, usually with less verbosity than before. Basye came out once, after about an hour, and offered lemonade; we both refused. He stacked and I split; then I stacked and he split. The sun got lower, but the back of garage faced southwest, so we took advantage of every remaining minute of daylight, past 8:00. My stomach groaned and my arms grew heavy, even without an axe or wood in my hands, but I resolved not to stop before Randy did.

“Hey there, fellas,” Percival said, walking onto the deck like a ship captain. “That sun’s getting pretty low. How about calling it a night?”

“Do you want some lemonade?” Basye said, seemingly appearing from under his arm.

Randy and I looked at each other, covered in sweat and dirt and small pieces of bark. The sunlight had waned so that I could make out his eyes and little else of his expression. We both shrugged an indifferent glance at each other. We had well over a cord done, and the rest could wait for another night.

“That’d be great, Basye,” Randy said.

We stepped onto the deck and sat with the Newmarkets, saying very little—nothing, actually—to one another, but conversing with them. The sun dropped beneath the distant horizon and left streaks of raspberry-colored clouds in its wake.

“Gentlemen, I think we shall retire for the evening,” Percival said. “Please stay as long as you like. There’s plenty of lemonade.”

“Good night, dears.”

Randy and I simultaneously stood to leave as well. The Newmarkets disappeared inside with the lemonade and our glasses, so Randy and I had nothing left but to walk around the side of the garage to the driveway. We both shuffled across the trodden grass, around the woodpile, and past the unstacked wood. We got to Randy’s truck and he hesitated a minute before getting inside. He opened his mouth but seemed to think better of saying anything.

“Guess we can keep going on it tomorrow,” I said.

“Okay,” he shrugged. “I don’t need your help, but I’ll be here tomorrow.”

“Well, I guess I’ll see you then.”

“Yep.”

He nearly stepped inside his truck when he stopped and half-motioned to the passenger seat.

“I don’t need a lift; I’ll just walk across the street.”

“Okay.”

Randy got in and threw his work gloves on the passenger seat. I tucked mine under my arm and walked up the driveway. I saw his windows were rolled down and before I knew exactly what I was doing, I called to him through the open window.

“I’ve got a couple of Long Trail beers in my fridge. I know you have to get back to your family and all, though.”

Randy looked at me, and then to the remnant of color on the horizon.

“Well,” he sighed, “the kids are in bed by now anyway. I suppose I could have a quick beer. It’d taste good right now.”

“You want to just leave your truck here?”

“I don’t want to wake the Newmarkets up later, so I’d better move it now.”

“Okay,” I said. “I’ll just walk across the street.”

I really did not care to ride shotgun in his truck; it was bad enough I had invited him into my house.

“Let me call my wife first. I’ll be there in a minute.”

We stared at each other for a long moment until I nodded and walked away. I think he realized that I knew he was fibbing about his family being in town, but I could not blame him.

You do that, I thought, and think of an excuse to not stay for a beer.

Randy’s truck came up my driveway just as I stepped onto my porch. He got out and looked around the property like he had never seen it before, though I was sure he knew the previous owner.

“I can stay for one,” he said.

“Great,” I said. “Come on in.”

We entered the house and he looked around at everything like he was trying to memorize the details for a later report. I went straight to the fridge to grab the beers.

“I. P. A. or Hefeweizen?” I said.

“Hefeweizen,” Randy said. “So you work from home, I understand.”

“Yeah. I have an office set up in the loft.”

“What do you do?”

I opened the bottle and handed him a Hefeweizen; I took an I. P. A. for myself. I did not want to explain my job to him and try to justify an existence that involved sitting around on my butt all day. His hands were dirty and calloused from years of physical work, even though he largely managed the store now.

“I look at what programs businesses use to conduct sales and analyze ways to make our system better accommodate their needs.”

The words felt silly as soon as I had said them, like I was pretending to be a grown-up by saying rehearsed lines. Randy looked at me like he wished he had not asked and took a long drink of beer.

“You want to sit outside?” I said.

He nodded. The night was cooling off nicely. There was just a hint of light remaining in the west and the moon was reflecting off the few clouds that floated above us. We sat in deck chairs overlooking the field and my measly garden.

“So you figure the particulars of the store’s needs and tailor your program to best suit them?”

His comprehension surprised me.

“Yeah, that’s pretty much it. If they buy our system, I help install it and follow up with them to make sure it’s doing what they need it to do.”

He nodded and took another long sip.

“How’s the garden?”

Thankfully, the garden was largely hiding in the dark.

“The first year is always tough, you know. Another year of working with it and I think it should be fine next year.”

We each looked around the yard and up at the sky—anything to avoid eye contact. We took regular sips of beer and listened to the birds and crickets and bullfrogs serenade the night.

“Good to see someone keeping the place up,” Randy said, almost to himself.

“How do you mean?”

“Good to see you at least trying to keep the place up.”

His compliment was tempered by the “at least,” as though I had not quite succeeded in keeping the place up, but I made an honest effort, considering the ignorant city slicker that I was.

“Thanks.”

“The old owners never really did anything with the land. It was getting pretty overgrown. They didn’t live in the house long enough for that to fall into disrepair—lucky for you.”

He took another sip of the Hefeweizen.

“I hate to see the land just go to waste. They got rid of most of the junk before they moved out. They had a few broken-down cars on the lawn that they were never going to get around to fixing and a bunch of half-assed, half-finished projects.”

“I didn’t know that. I never met the old owners. I guess they had already moved into some new place in Rhode Island by the time I even looked at it.”

“Yeah,” he said slowly, peering off into the field and holding his beer to his lips, “the Webbs, that was their name. They really let the place go. But now they’re off to Rhode Island. Guess they have family in Providence.”

He tipped his head back and finished the last of the beer. He set the bottle down on the table and let out a satisfied sigh.

“Good beer,” he said. “Thanks.”

“You’re welcome.”

“Well,” he said, standing, “guess I should be getting back home.”

“I suppose your wife will be waiting.”

“Right.”

I set my half-full bottle down and stood up as Randy walked down the steps of the deck to the driveway. He got in and drove off, leaving me with my beer and my thoughts, wondering how it ever came to pass that Randy Waterman was more of a comfort and a friend than Jenn. I sat on the deck for a long time.

“Mornin’, Jacob!”

“Good morning, Mr. O’Conor. Medium coffee and a blueberry muffin, if I could.”

“Comin’ right up. Have yourself a seat and I’ll bring it out to you.”

I grabbed a newspaper and my usual table overlooking the river and barely had enough time to check out the weather forecast and the Red Sox box score when Mr. O’Conor brought my muffin and coffee to me.

“Sox blew it in the ninth last night,” he said, pointing at the newspaper. “I bet they beat Kansas City tonight, but still lose the division.”

“You have no faith, Mr. O’Conor.”

“Not in the Red Sox, I don’t. I’ve lived with them for too long. Summers end, leaves change color, and the Red Sox drop out of the pennant race. It’s all part of turning the calendar.”

“I don’t know. I think this is our year,” I said.

“How many years have you been saying that?”

“Ever since 1986.”

He laughed out loud and scuttled back behind the counter to wait on another customer. Randy Waterman pushed through the door and looked indignant to have to wait behind someone. I buried my nose in the newspaper and turned toward the river. A few minutes later, Randy approached my table.

“Sox blew it in the ninth last night,” he said.

I looked up, startled, thinking that Mr. O’Conor had put him up to it, but Randy looked perfectly serious. To my further surprise, he sat across the table from me, releasing a big sigh as he did, as though he had been on his feet all day.

“Schilling will win tonight, but I bet they still lose the division,” he muttered, looking at the river.

I folded the newspaper and set it down on the table.

“How old were you in 1986?” I said.

“Ten years older than you,” he said. “Were you even old enough to stay up late watching baseball then?”

“For watching baseball, yes, but not for anything else. And especially for watching the World Series. Baseball was the exception to many rules in my father’s house.”

“You wouldn’t remember ’78 then. Or ’75. If you had, then you’d know why they won’t win the division this year either.”

“We’ll find out in a few months,” I smiled.

He actually smiled back. It was more of a smirk mixed with a snort.

“You planning on finishing up that woodpile tonight?” he said.

“I’ll be there. 6:00?”

“I’ll be there at 5:30.”

“Okay. I still have a few beers left.”

“I don’t know about tonight. Let’s see how quick we get through that wood.”

“Family night?”

“Something like that, yeah,” he said.

We nodded at each other, making tentative eye contact. I took another sip of coffee and Randy looked at the river.

“Hey there, Randy,” Mr. O’Conor said, “when are the wife and kids coming back? This weekend?”

Randy eyes shot wide open and he looked first at Mr. O’Conor and then at me. He put both hands on the table like he was going to jump up and run, but eventually his shoulders relaxed and he muttered, “Yeah, this weekend.”

“Great!” Mr. O’Conor said and stepped to another table to wipe it down.

Randy looked at me with a mean, defensive look on his face. To see him so vulnerable was such a strange juxtaposition that I burst out laughing and threw my head back and slapped my hand on the table.

“I knew they were out of town,” I struggled to say through my laughs. “Basye told me yesterday.”

“Basye...” he said, shaking his head and bringing his coffee to his lips, feigning indifference. “How does she know this stuff?”

I reigned myself in and took a deep breath, resting my elbows on the table. I looked at Randy and he almost smiled back, but caught himself and tried to glower at me.

“I thought Basye knew everything,” I said.

“If you ask her, she’ll say a little bird told her. She must have one helluva network of little birds.”

He took one last gulp of his coffee and looked at me as gruffly as he could manage. “5:30,” he said, setting his cup down with a clang and standing to leave. “You bring the beer.”

There was still a remnant of chill in the air when I left the coffee shop and walked down the street to the Fairmont Deli. The hint of autumn invigorated my steps and for a moment I forgot all about anything that could have bothered me. Michael Fairmont sliced some white American cheese and honey-roasted ham—a pound of each—and grabbed a half-gallon of milk. He rang me up at the register and I was off, through the covered bridge and up the hill.

Basye was puttering around her shrubs in the front of her house, which were newly-covered in the mulch that Randy and I had put there. She waved to me and stood up straight as though she was beginning to converse, though we were seventy-five yards apart. I looked down at the milk, cheese, and ham, and decided I could speak briefly on a cool morning without worrying about getting to the refrigerator right away. Besides, there was something on my mind.

“Good morning, dear. How are you?”

“I’m well, Basye,” I said, motioning to the plastic bag hanging from my fingers. “Just something for lunch today.”

Basye told me about all her outdoor plants that she was readying for the coming winter. I did not interject a single word and just kept staring at the grocery bag dangling from my fingers.

“What’s on your mind, Jacob?”

“Basye, when you talked about Jenn the other night... How did you know that Jenn and me...?”

“Did she not tell you?”

“Tell me? She hasn’t told me anything. I haven’t even spoken with her. Tell me what?”

“You haven’t spoken with her?”

“No, I haven’t. What did she tell you?”

“She called the night you took her to dinner in Meredith.”

“She called you that night? Before dinner?”

“No, quite late; it was after dinner.”

Basye shifted uneasily.

“What did she say to you, Basye?”

“She asked me to make sure that you got home okay. She was worried you wouldn’t get home, I guess. I had Percival check to make sure the next morning. He knocked on your door, but you didn’t answer. Your car was in the garage, so he figured you had come home and were still asleep.”

“That’s all she said?”

She fidgeted and looked down at her hands.

“What else did she say?”

“Now, dear—”

“I just want to know how you and Randy Waterman knew about me and Jenn.”

The plastic milk jug was sweating in my hand. I switched the plastic bag to my other hand because it was beginning to cut into my skin.

“Basye...?”

She dropped her hands and shook her head gently.

“She was crying, dear. She was sobbing on the phone, so of course I asked her what was wrong, especially at that hour. She said that you had asked her to marry her, but she said no. Then she kept crying.”

My irritation with Basye vanished. My eyes were glued to my shoes and I wanted to drop the half-gallon of milk and throw myself into the October River. Randy was right to warn me.

“Did she say why?” I said, gritting my teeth.

“No, she didn’t. She just kept crying.”

“Okay,” I said, barely audibly. “Thank you.”

Sisyphus returned to his rock with more enthusiasm than I returned to my work. The day passed like a fog. More than one of my co-workers, hearing my voice on the phone, asked if I was okay. Scenes from Meredith passed through my mind—the summer breeze blowing off the lake in the dying sunlight, the echoes of her laughter, a gazebo above the shoreline.

When 5:00 finally rolled around, I hurried downstairs and changed into some work clothes. I grabbed a few beers and walked over to the Newmarkets’. It was 5:15, but Randy was already there.

“I thought you said you’d be here at 5:30,” I said to him.

“You said you’d be here at 6:00,” Randy said. “Besides, I have a family to get home to.”

“That’s what I hear.”

He gave a half-grunt, half-laugh and threw down the axe.

We probably had three-quarters of the pile stacked when we decided to call it quits. Randy threw down the axe and rolled his head from side to side, stretching his neck and upper back.

“You have those beers?” he said.

“In my car. Let me go get them.”

Basye appeared on the deck, turning on an outside light and carrying a tray.

“Gentlemen, how would you like some brownies with milk?”

I involuntarily wrinkled my nose at the thought of a pale ale chasing brownies and milk. Randy turned around and gave me a funny look.

“Shoot,” Randy said under his breath, so only I could hear it. “Brownies sound terrific, Basye,” he said.

We sat in the patio chairs and rested our tired bodies. The sky had clouded up in the west, turning the high clouds a pale orange.

“Do you think we can polish this off tomorrow?” I said.

“What’s tomorrow? Friday? Can’t do it tomorrow; it’s the last softball game of the year. Elizabeth and the kids come back Saturday around noon, so I could maybe do it in the morning, but we’ll have to see.”

“It’s only August, fellas,” Percival said, emerging from the house with four glasses of milk. “No rush to get it done, none at all.”

“I might come over tomorrow and finish it up,” I said. In the back of my mind, I was already determined to finish stacking the wood by Saturday evening at the latest.

“On a Friday night, dear? You should go enjoy yourself on Friday night.”

“Doing what?” I laughed.

“You could go watch the softball game. Is it being played in Swiftwater, Randy?”

“Yeah, here in town. You play baseball or just coach it?”

“I played a lot growing up,” I said.

“Did you play in high school?”

“I played in college, too, for a while.”

“In college? Then what—couldn’t hack it?” Randy said, her gaze never wavering

“Knee injury,” I said, looking right back at him.

“It didn’t heal?”

“Not well enough to play every day again.”

“Oh,” Basye said, “that’s too bad. Have you played at all since then?”

“Just here and there, but not in a league.”

“At least you didn’t lose your livelihood,” Randy said. “For some of us, a knee injury could be more serious.”

“True. I did lose my scholarship, though, and the chance to go pro.”

“Wait—you were on scholarship? A full ride?”

“Is was either that or go pro out of high school, but my parents wanted me to get a degree, just in case,” I said, taking a long sip. “I guess they were right about that.”

“Wait a minute,” Randy said, dropping his brownie. “You’re telling me that you could have gone pro out of high school and got a full ride to play college ball?”

“Yep.”

“Why haven’t you been playing softball with us on Friday nights, then, if you’re so good?”

“It was always date night with Jenn. If I wasn’t in Portland, she was here, and playing softball never really entered my mind.” It was a true response, but only half-true. I had heard about the Friday night games, but I had never been asked, either, and I purposely did not tell Jenn about them, for fear that she would insist on going. The thought of being so close to the game but not actually in it did not sit well with me. Besides, it always seemed contrived to ask to play, like a grown-up version of begging to be included in the kickball game at recess.

“Well now that she’s gone, come play ball,” Randy said without flinching.

“Randy!” Basye said. “For goodness sake, show some sympathy.”

Randy shrugged. “What else is he gonna do? Besides, we’re playing Jefferson this Friday. I hate losing to those guys.”

Part of me wanted to play ball, to run around in the sun and get dirty and sweaty like I was a kid again, but part of me knew that it was not that simple, that those days were gone, and that every day forward would be mixed with a nostalgia that could never be satisfied. Mom and Dad were gone, and Jenn was impossibly far away, but my neighbors were nearby, planning to gather on a Friday afternoon to play a ballgame.

I tried to think about the game as I went to sleep that night, but every time I envisioned it, whether a strike out or a home run, Jenn was watching in the crowd.

4:45 on Friday morning and I was wide awake. The knot in my stomach made me wonder if I should go into the bathroom and vomit. I didn't feel like moving, though. I didn't feel like playing softball that evening, I didn't feel like talking to anybody or eating or drowning my sorrows in alcohol or watching television. I was too sick to feel anything but alone.

After fifteen minutes of staring at the ceiling, I slid my legs out of bed and stumbled to my closet, clutching my ribs in the sudden cold. I wanted to get out of the house, the big, empty house that was intended for a family. I put on my sneakers and walked past the old couch in the living room from where Jenn and I had watched rain fall after dinner, sitting under a blanket and holding hands in the quiet. The air was chilly for August, with a mist hovering above me. It took me a few minutes to recognize that I was shivering, so I went back inside, arms crossed and back hunched, and grabbed a fleece sweater from my closet.

My sneakers took me down the damp driveway, avoiding the dewy grass of the field. When I got to road, I was surprised to find my feet unconsciously taking me away from town, instead moving up the hillside to the east. No cars passed, and the sky hinted that it was about to dawn. The sound of my sneakers scuffling against the pavement and the sandy shoulder were the only noises I heard; I was quite aware that I was walking alone and I wondered where Jenn was. I prayed so hard that she was okay, and I prayed that she would know how much she had hurt me. Tears of frustration grew in my eyes, but, before they could fall, I just went back to feeling lonely.

There is a small lake a few miles outside of Swiftwater; a handful of houses dot the shore and there is a small public beach that allows for swimming, with a pier for launching kayaks and canoes and fishing boats. I had it in mind to walk the three miles to the lake. Jenn and I had been there once, talking about what it would be like to live in a lakeshore house. The dark mists had turned to a soupy gray fog by the time I arrived at the lake. Sunlight tried to burn the fog away, but it was still early, and the sun too low on the invisible horizon. As the road crested a hill and came down to the water's edge where the lake was too still to even lap, the opposite shore was lost in the gray soup that wafted just above the top of the water. A loon's call carried across the waters from some unseen place, and I could hear several of them landing in the middle of the lake as though they were only fifteen feet away.

A few more curves in the road, past a few more houses, and I was at the beach area. Four picnic tables adorned the grassy area between the parking lot and the water, with harebells and goldenrod off to the side, heavy with dew. The sandy beach was twenty feet wide and ran along the shoreline for about seventy-five feet. At the far end was the pier that extended well into the water. I walked across the quiet sand. Even the loons vanished into the fog.

I stepped onto the pier. The piles ran away from me, nearly invisible at the end of the pier. Out, across the water, the fog danced and swirled in slow-motion. Beyond that, the unknown. There was a shore beyond the fog, I was certain, but it was hidden from me. The water looked ominous, and still, like there was something lying in wait, beyond my sight and my hearing.

I walked to the end of the pier and sat down with my feet dangling over the edge, just inches above the water, staring into the fog, seeing nothing but gray sweeping mists and the matching gray water below, the distinction between the two blurred. I glanced backward to the beach and was barely able to distinguish cattails sticking out of a marshy area. I felt adrift, not quite sure to what I was anchored anymore, and feeling so dizzy that I had to lie on my back for a minute, which made the knot in my stomach all the more pronounced.

No other human seemed to exist. It was more lonely than a dorm room over Thanksgiving break when everybody else has gone home to visit family; more lonely than a quiet one-bedroom apartment after a long night of drinking; more lonely than walking the streets of a small, unfamiliar town before sunrise. I thought about going home, but its emptiness frightened me. An early morning lake was supposed to be empty, and felt somehow right, somehow appropriate for what it was; the Thomas Farm was supposed to have her. That had always been the plan. Instead, it was full of photographs of people who had left—Mom, Dad, and now Jenn.

I sat on the pier for nearly an hour, intermittently dozing and staring into the morning gray, before I got up to leave. The sun was burning off the fog and I had a long walk home.

Friday night, date night. Or, for the first time, Swiftwater softball night. Instead of getting out a bottle of wine, I grabbed my water bottle. My baseball glove was stiff, and my cleats were old, but without much wear. I had planned to take Jenn to dinner in Jefferson, followed by star-gazing up at the old firetower for our first Friday as an engaged couple, but those plans had sunk to the bottom of Meredith Bay. Instead, I took my sweat-stained baseball cap off the shelf in the closet and headed toward the baseball field to play alongside Randy Waterman and the rest of my neighbors.

I was not sure how to introduce myself. Recreational softball teams lament lost games, but rarely lost loves. The dugout was not a forum for dealing with painful memories; the diamond was not going to heal existential disappointment. It was only a ballgame, but at least it made sense.

I walked to the dugout tentatively, not knowing who I would encounter. I recognized a few of the adults and a few kids that I had coached. Nicholas was there, calling me “the ringer,” and so was Randy, with a case of beer.

“Last night as a bachelor,” he said.

I met the rest of my new teammates; a few of the old-timers viewed me apprehensively, asking me repeated questions about living in the city. I answered their questions while stretching and putting my cleats on, and tried to incorporate the fact that I grew up in rural Vermont as often as I could. When they seemed satisfied, Randy and I jogged out to the outfield grass to toss the ball.

“I was born there,” he nodded in the direction of the hospital.

“Oh yeah?”

“And my great-grandfather and grandfather and father are buried there,” he said, looking toward the cemetery. “A few uncles and aunts, too.”

An overthrown ball left the infield and rolled toward us. Randy retrieved it and threw it back to the first baseman.

“And you’re right here in the middle,” I said.

He nodded, “Still playing ball.”

We looked around at the people taking fielding practices, stretching, and hitting fungoes. The grass looked as green as April.

“What about your brother? Is he buried there, too?”

“Yeah,” he said, catching the ball and throwing it back to me.

“Okay, everyone, bring it in,” Walter Spaulding called from the dugout. He was the de facto manager of the team, and had been for several decades.

“And are you Jacob Thomas?” he asked me.

“I am. Randy said I could jump in if you had a spot open.”

“It so happens that Sam Woodbridge is out of town. He’s the best fielder we got. And do you play shortstop?”

Randy eavesdropped from a few feet away.

“I mostly played second base, but I’ll give it a shot.”

“You played second in college?” Randy said.

“Yes, I—”

“You played in college?” Walter said.

“Some.”

Randy and Walter exchanged looks. I gave Randy a questioning look, but he slapped his glove and stepped onto the field with a smirk. I trotted out to the left of second base and kicked the dirt with my cleats. It was hard and gritty; dives would be paid for in abrasions. My ear caught Percival's voice and I looked over to the first base bleachers to see the Newmarkets cheering and calling my name. I tipped my hat.

Derek Burlage, our first baseman, warmed us up by throwing grounders to my fellow infielders. Derek was the father of the Dragons' scorekeeper and sometimes-catcher, Dominic, who was in attendance with his mother, two sisters, and a scorecard. The bleachers were overflowing behind both dugouts while lawn chairs and blankets worked their way down the right field foul line. I took a deep breath as Walter Spaulding, our fifty-eight-year-old pitcher, hurled the first pitch toward the batter.

The softball bounced in the dirt between the plate and the batter. Ball one. Randy threw it back to Walter. I dug in and slapped my glove a few times, hoping that I would not let my first play go through my legs.

The batter heaved into the next pitch and it sailed to center field where Nicholas made a nice running catch for the first out. I trotted into the outfield as the cutoff man, took the throw, and lobbed it back to Walter, and with just that simple motion, many of my nerves were quelled.

Elizabeth Jaitieu stood and cheered her husband, with Benjamin, Anna, and Peter beside her. I thought how nice it would be to have someone in the crowd cheering for me, and of course I thought of Jenn.

The next batter dug in and I could see him talking with Randy behind the plate. He nodded his head in my direction. I had heard a few questions about the "new guy" during warm-ups and I searched Randy's face for a hint of how I was described among my new teammates. Whatever he said, it was terse, and the batter shrugged.

Jefferson put one run across in the inning, which is not much to leadoff a slow-pitch softball game, and all I had to do was be a cutoff man on some routine plays.

"I have you batting sixth," Walter said to me. "Didn't know where to put ya, so I put ya in Sam's spot, since you're taking his spot in the field, too."

"Works for me."

Michael Fairmont, owner of the deli on the green, popped up to start off, but Nicholas lined a double in the gap and Tom Delaney squeaked a single between the shortstop and third baseman, bringing Randy to the plate. The outfielders, who had undoubtedly faced this lineup dozens of times, moved back, and the infield was almost on the outfield grass. Randy's thick arms swung the bat like it weighed nothing.

On the first pitch, Randy swung hard and the ball zipped off his bat so fast that I could not follow its movement. The shortstop, though, stuck his glove in front of his face and the ball smacked into the web. He took a few steps backward and almost fell over, but the ball stayed put and Randy was out.

"Come on, Randy," I yelled, "him 'em where they ain't."

It caught him by surprise, as it did many others, since it was a rocket of a hit and just unlucky, but I knew from Randy's look that I voiced his exact thoughts.

Bertie Courchesne was next up, the father of the Dragons' stout catcher, Martin, who was in attendance. Bertie walked on four pitches, the last one being a foot inside.

I strode to the plate with two outs and the bases loaded. The fielders were not sure how to play me and looked at each other for hints. Some took a tentative step

forward, some backward. I saw a Jefferson player in the dugout mouth, “Who is this guy?” to his teammate.

“Come on, Thomas,” Randy belted out from the first base coach’s spot. “Gotta get at least one run outta this.”

I heard the first baseman say, “Hey Randy, this guy any good?”

“Says he is.”

Randy stood down the line like Pop Fisher of the New York Knights.

“All right, Thomas, knock the cover off the ball.”

Many of the kids that I had coached, and their parents as well, serenaded me with encouragement. The kids scooted forward in their seats, eager to see their coach in action. The parents looked on with curiosity as their children pointed to me. Other townfolk looked around at one another and shrugged, clapping and hoping for a base hit.

The first pitch was inside. Since each batter started with a ball and strike, it was 2 and 1.

Wait for a good one and drive it. Base hit scores two. Just knock it over the shortstop’s head for an easy single.

The next pitch came in fat and headed right for my wheelhouse. Years of muscle memory and instinct took over, my hands tightened and my balance drove off my back leg. The bat struck the ball and raced over my shoulder in a graceful arc. The infielders stood up and stared, following the ball’s path against the sky. Eventually, it crashed into the hillside, nearly all the way to the road.

The crowd gasped as much as they cheered, but most of the players had recovered in time to high-five me after I rounded the bases. I shot Randy a quick glance as I walked to the dugout. He never cracked a smile or even budged.

He turned slightly to the first baseman and shrugged, “Guess he’s all right.”

Tom Delaney, our second baseman who scored on my home run, sat beside me on the bench while the next batter, Derek Burlage, took his turn at the plate.

“You live across the river, right?” he said to me.

“Yeah, right across from the Newmarkets. You know them?”

“Oh yeah, I know them,” Tom said. “The old owners of your place are the ones that moved to Rhode Island or something, right?”

“I think so.”

Tom nodded and he seemed to mull over the great importance of this statement. Finally he leaned back and crossed his arms to watch the game.

“Good to have you playing with us, Jacob.”

In the second inning, the leadoff batter singled and the next batter sent a shot to left-center. I ran out to cutoff the throw as the runner sped around second, intent to score. The relay got to me and I wheeled from twenty yards onto the grass and threw a bullet home. The batter held at third. Randy took two steps to his left and caught the ball waist-high.

“Come on, Thomas, throw it on a line,” Randy growled. “You’re lucky he wasn’t running.”

I smirked at him under the brim of my cap. He was right; my throw had been off-target.

The next batter sent a chopper over the pitcher's mound. I raced to my left, snagged the ball, spun, and threw home. Randy was standing on home plate and the ball hit his glove knee-high. The runner was out by three steps.

The next batter hit a grounder to the second baseman who threw to me at second. I caught it, grazed the bag with my toe, and fired to first in time for the double play. Jogging off the field, I heard the first whispers of "Ringer" coming from the opposite dugout.

"Remember," Randy said, grabbing my elbow, "each team only gets two home runs in a game; the third one is an out."

"Looks like he took one of yours already, Randy," Walter said, and the dugout erupted in laughs.

"Just don't go for a hat trick, is all."

"Randy doesn't want you to make him look bad, that's all," Walter said, clapping me on the shoulder. "He already has fifteen more years on him."

"Ten," Randy said, but the dugout was laughing again.

"I'll remember this next time you come into my store looking for lumber, Tom," Randy cracked. "I'll be sure to add on the pain in the ass tax."

"Randy, you're pain in the ass enough without the tax."

Nicholas was grinning at me through the laughs from the other end of the dugout, and Michael Fairmont knocked the back of my head with his glove. It was different than the usual camaraderie of the dugout. It was better.

Jefferson's bats came alive in the middle innings, spraying hits all over the field. It was 12-8, their lead, entering the bottom of the sixth, six outs from defeat. I had managed a double and a single to right field, but we popped out with runners in scoring position in every inning.

"I hate losing to these guys," Randy said in the dugout, pacing and kicking at the dirt.

Randy led off the bottom of the sixth by driving the first pitch over the outfield fence, but foul.

"Don't waste a home run when there's nobody on base," I kidded, but Randy scowled.

He lined a shot down the line and hustled into second base with a double. Bertie followed with a single, but Randy was not able to score on it.

"Come on, Thomas," Randy yelled from third. "It wouldn't be a waste now."

I did not acknowledge him, but the crowd, knowing I had three hits in three at bats, had learned my name. I heard cheers from unfamiliar voices as strange faces called my name, encouraging me to drive in a run or two.

I swung at the first pitch and drove it as far as I could. I was too eager, though, swinging too early and sending the ball into foul ground, about fifteen feet farther than Randy's. Even Randy looked impressed. My timing was better on the next pitch and I sent it to the maple trees behind the center field fence. 12-11, Jefferson.

A number of the kids had gathered behind the fence between the dugout and home base and they were shaking the fence and yelling, "Nice hit, Coach!" and, "Way to go, Coach!" Several others cracked jokes about where I had been all year and gave me a nice applause. Randy greeted me with, "You should've been playing all season."

We grounded out with the bases loaded to the end the inning without scoring again, and entered the final frame down a run. Jefferson threatened in the seventh inning, loading the bases with one out, but a pop up and a routine grounder that I gloved ended their at bat.

Tom Delaney led off in the bottom of the seventh and promptly drew a walk. Randy was next up.

“Got em rattled, now, Randy, give it a ride,” Walter sang out from the dugout.

“No homers left,” he said over his shoulder and strode to the batter’s box.

Randy whipped his bat around and the ball cracked against it. The ball skipped off the infield dirt like a sniper had hit the spot, and rolled into right field. Tom sprinted over to third base and Randy stayed on first.

Bertie flew out to shallow left field, not deep enough for Tom to tag up and score the tying run. The left fielder threw the ball in and I walked to the plate. The catcher ran out to the pitching mound and had a quick conference with the pitcher.

The outfield played deep. Though I could not homer, they were preventing a game-winning double. The crowd rose to its feet. The pitcher, though, had no intention of letting me hit the ball. On successive pitches two feet off the plate, I walked to first, loading the bases for Derek Burlage with one out.

The Swiftwater crowd gasped when Derek hit a weak grounder to the second baseman. He scooped it up, but instead of throwing to second to start a double play, I made sure he noticed me, close by, and as he tried to tag me out, I took a few steps back toward first base. He paused for a minute, confused as to why I wasn’t running on a force out, and then panicked. Tom sprinted home and the second baseman realized he had waited too long for a double play. The shortstop yelled at him to throw to second base, which he did, but Derek easily made it to first base safely. Tie game; two outs. Randy, standing on third base, yelled and pumped his fist.

“Come on, Terry! Base hit wins it!”

Terry’s wife and son were standing on first row of the bleachers, hopping up and down. The outfielders played shallow, but Terry poked the first pitch over the second baseman’s head and in front of the right fielder. Randy jogged home with his arms raised high and Derek scooted into second base easily. Once Terry got to first base, I ran over to him to join the fray.

After we shook hands with Jefferson and everyone met up with families, several people shook my hand and remarked about going 4-for-4 with two home runs.

“And I ain’t never seen an intentional walk in slow-pitch softball before,” Walter told me. “And I’ve been playing and coaching for thirty years. Never seen it.”

“Thanks for letting me play. It was fun.”

“It sure was,” Tom Delaney said, shaking my hand. “Always good to beat Jefferson. We’ve split the season series with them five years in a row now.”

“Glad I could help,” I said.

As Tom stepped away, Randy emerged from the crowd and saw me. He stepped forward with his hand extended.

“Good game.”

“Good game,” I nodded. “Too bad your family couldn’t see it. You scored the winning run.”

“Yeah, but no homers tonight,” he said, and then smiled. It was the first genuine, boyish smile I had ever seen that was not sarcastic, just the pure enjoyment of playing—and winning—a baseball game. “Your baserunning saved the game, not the homers. You’re a baseball man, you know that.”

“Yes, I—”

“Coach!” Martin Courchesne rushed in, pushing his way through the adults.

“That was awesome!”

“Thanks, Martin.”

Randy smiled at me again and walked away, letting Martin jabber at me. I half-expected to see Elizabeth and Steven and Sarah, Randy’s teen-aged daughter, but then remembered that they were out of town. He moved through the crowd of families quietly, grabbed his things, and slowly walked toward the parking lot. For a minute, I thought I was looking at myself, moving anonymously through the crowd, unmarked and unnoticed, unannounced at home. I wondered what he would eat for dinner, and if he would be eating from a can of soup watching the Red Sox on television, letting his tired muscles slowly slide into sleep. I wondered when that smile would disappear and if the contentment would slip away when he walked into an empty house, and whether it would well up again as he recounted the game to his wife. At the moment, I watched him move silently, like a passing shadow. A few minutes later, after talking with Martin, I did the same.

The sounds and visions of the game kept me buoyant during the ride home, thinking about the Newmarkets and Delaneys and Martin Courchesne, wishing the Dellays had been there, and wondering about Randy. I playfully tossed a few pop-ups to myself in the quiet driveway, despite carrying a duffel bag of baseball gear over one shoulder. The sun was getting low to the west and a nice breeze carried across my field, reminding me of a being ten years old again, and staying out until the last possible moment when Mom would call me inside.

Just as soon as I dropped my duffel bag on the floor inside, the phone rang. I slid across the hardwood in my dirty socks, thinking that it was Nicholas calling, since I had not had a chance to speak with him after the game. I picked up the phone without looking at the number.

“Hello, this is Jacob.”

“It’s me, Jenn. Can we talk?”

I was too surprised to answer.

“Can we talk?” Jenn said again.

“Of course,” I said. “Let me put my stuff down; I just walked in the door.”

“Where were you?”

“Playing softball down in town.”

“Oh,” she said.

“Oh what?”

“I thought maybe you were screening my calls.”

“No, Jenn,” I said, shifting my weight. “I’m the one who has been trying to call.

If there are any accusations of call-screening, they should be mine to you. I’ve been waiting for a week to get a hold of you. Sorry if I got tired of waiting and decided to play softball instead.”

“I’m really sorry, Jacob.”

“What the hell happened last week? Did you get home okay? Why didn’t you call me back sooner?”

I flipped my glove on the couch and sat down to take off my dirty socks.

“I got home okay. Thanks for your call,” she said. “I’m sorry I didn’t call back sooner; I just didn’t know what to say. I guess I’m still confused; I don’t really know what to say other than that I just got scared and I’m real sorry.”

“Scared? You are the most self-confident woman I’ve ever met. Two minutes before I proposed we were laughing and chatting and everything was fine. You got scared in that short a time? You didn’t expect it?”

“I did expect it. I had a good idea what you were going to do when as you said you wanted to take me to dinner in Meredith.”

“Great. I’m glad I’m so predictable.”

“I didn’t say that.”

“Is that why you wanted to drive separate then? Because you knew you were going to say no?” I said, yanking off one sock.

“No, not at all. I really didn’t. I really just didn’t want you to have to drive all the way to Portland twice the same day. I was looking forward to Meredith.”

“Really? How come it doesn’t seem that way to me?”

“Please don’t be mean,” she said, her voice breaking. “I know you’re upset, but please don’t be sarcastic.”

“Don’t be mean? Leading me along and then dropping me at the last minute, and then never calling me to say what the hell happened isn’t mean? This week was hard enough without being left totally in the dark and not ever hearing from you. Don’t tell me about being mean. You were cruel.”

“I’m sorry,” she said, sniffing, “I know. I’m so sorry, Jacob.”

I took a deep breath and looked outside to the last of the daylight.

“What happened, Jenn? Please just tell me what happened.”

“I don’t know. I got scared,” she said. I heard her blow her nose and take a deep breath. “When we got to the gazebo, I was so nervous that I froze. I couldn’t think straight, so I started panicking. My brain screamed at me to say yes, but I couldn’t make the right word come out of my mouth. After I ran away, I wanted nothing more than to

run back, to start over, to have the whole night over, to appreciate what a wonderful night it was, how wonderful you were, and to enjoy you proposing to me, without the anxiety, without the worries, because I really longed for that night for a long time.”

She sniffed and wiped her nose before continuing, “But I was so ashamed of myself, not just for saying no but for getting scared when it was the best thing that could possibly happen to me. I want to marry you, Jacob, I do.”

Neither of us spoke for several minutes. I threw my dirty socks at my duffel bag that was still sitting by the front door. My mind spun through every conceivable response, unsure whether to cry or scream. On some level, I realized that I never really cared what had happened in Meredith; I just wanted to hear her say that she was sorry and that she still loved me.

“I’m sorry, too, Jenn.”

“Why is there hesitation in your voice?”

“I’m sorry for what happened and I’m sorry you’re beating yourself up over this. I wish that night had never happened either.”

“Yeah, but, do you still want to marry me?”

“Are you proposing to me? You can’t do that.”

“No, you proposed. I’m just changing my mind.”

“You can’t do that, either.”

“Why not?”

“You can’t just change your mind, Jenn. You said no last week; you can’t just say yes this week.”

“Jacob,” her voice fell flat, “do you mean—”

“The offer is off the table,” I said, though the words rolled off my tongue without any forethought whatsoever. The words surprised me and all the blood rushed to my head. I bowed my head and ran my hand through my hair. I wanted to retract, but the words were already out there. It was the first time I had had control of any situation in a long time. It hadn’t been an easy road for me; I didn’t want it to be easy for her.

“What do you mean?” she said, her voice rising.

“You can’t just come and go at your fancy.”

“I’m not coming and going. I’m coming. To stay. I screwed up last week. I was scared and I’m sorry. It was a mistake of mine to say no. I want to marry you, Jacob.”

“Calm down, Jenn. I understand, but you can’t just say, ‘Oops, sorry,’ as if that makes everything better. This isn’t throwing a fucking marshmallow onto the carpet—a little singed but a great joke after the fact.”

My stomach dropped as soon as I said it, knowing I had crossed some sort of line. Jenn whispered, “Jacob, I’ve never heard you swear before.”

“Well,” I said, realizing just how difficult it is to suppress the deep-rooted bitterness that lives in our heart, “Now you have.”

“I know not everything’s better, Jacob, and I’m sorry I hurt you. I want to marry you and live with you in Swiftwater. I’m sorry about Meredith.”

“Jenn, people don’t just freak out and accidentally reject marriage proposals. If you were really longing to get married, wouldn’t that overcome the fear of the proposal?”

“Do you think I’m lying to you? I really just got scared! I have no other explanation and I’ve been thinking about it for a week.”

I was sitting on the edge of the couch, with my free hand in the air. I heard her take several deep breaths and a long sniff before she spoke softly, slowly, in a voice that seemed like it would shatter with one harsh word.

“I know you’re upset, Jacob, but don’t you still want to marry me?”

Her voice was close, as though we were standing on the same gazebo, but the dirt stains on my baseball pants testified to a day spent with neighbors and new teammates. There was a time when Jenn was my girl and Randy was my enemy; Swiftwater was idyllic and simple. Swiftwater turned out to be neither simple nor idyllic, but I had a growing affection for it nonetheless. Randy and I did not exactly share affection, but respect and admiration—an unsaid amity. I could not imagine life without Jenn, but, then again, my imagination had never considered the Newmarkets and Nicholas and winning a softball game that meant more than it should have. In the end, I was perfectly honest to her.

“I don’t know, Jenn,” I said.

Saturday morning was dark. The second placemat on the kitchen table was empty. I sat down with a bowl of cereal. After breakfast, I put on my work clothes and walked out the door, ambling down the driveway under overcast skies, keeping my eyes on my feet. I half-expected Randy to already be at the Newmarkets' already, swinging an axe and grumbling about wanting to get home as soon as possible, or maybe even indirectly referring to the softball victory. The backyard was empty, though. *Good, I thought, I don't feel like talking today anyway.*

I grabbed the closest logs, walked them to the woodpile, and stacked them neatly. The conversation with Jenn replayed in my head; sometimes it concluded with a stinging barb, sometimes it never ended and just looped back around. Disappointment has a way of morphing into mean, bitter thoughts, as though settling for the pleasure of an insult can fool the heart into forgetting what we really want. Before I looked up, half of the remaining pile was already stacked.

Percival and Basye walked onto the deck and greeted me. I wanted to say that Jenn had finally called, but I declined. Percival hobbled down the steps and began grabbing wood to stack.

"I'm not in that bad of shape," he said. "I'm certainly glad you boys did as much as you did, but I can still haul firewood."

I shrugged but otherwise did not respond.

"Looks like rain today, doesn't it?" Basye said.

"Yep."

"I'll leave you gentlemen to your work. I have some cleaning to do," Basye said, disappearing into the house.

As soon as the door closed behind her, Percival set a log on the woodpile, put a hand on his hip, and looked at me.

"You talked to Jenn, didn't you?"

"What makes you say that?"

"It's written all over your face, my boy."

I nodded and set my logs on the woodpile.

"It didn't go as you wanted, I guess."

"I don't know what I wanted, so I guess not."

Percival thought for a minute, then smiled, put his hand on my shoulder for a minute, then walked away to grab more wood. I expected him to offer some inane platitude, but instead he slowly but steadily stacked firewood, humming from time to time. Basye did not poke her head outside for several hours, by which time we were nearly done. After a short break for water, we kept on. Though Percival was tiring, I was determined to finish the pile before lunch and increased my efforts. Basye was just as determined to feed me, so after I stacked the last log, an hour past noon, I sat with the Newmarkets to eat, though I dreaded that the conversation would turn to Jenn. I kept my remarks as limited as possible and left as soon as I could.

There was a voicemail waiting for me at home. I sighed loudly and stepped back outside. The air was still and the sky was a solid overcast of low clouds. I sat and stared across the field, looking at nothing in particular, like I was expecting something to happen. It began to rain.

The light rain felt good at first, but I finally succumbed and went inside. The voicemail was from Nicholas, asking me to give him a call at the church office, though not saying why. I deliberated for a minute, and decided to take a shower instead, losing all track of time until my fingers were wrinkled. It was late afternoon when I called Nicholas.

“Hey buddy, how are you?” he said.

“All right.”

“Did you go for a hike today?”

“No, not today,” I said.

“You sound like you’ve had a long day.”

“I was stacking firewood at the Newmarkets.”

“Did the rain drive you inside?”

“No.”

I had nothing to say, and I did not particularly feel like listening either, but having Nicholas on the phone did keep the house from feeling quite so empty. I knew what he wanted to talk about, and I could not think of a way to prevent it.

“So have you spoken with Jenn yet?”

“Nicholas, you couldn’t think of a better segue?”

“I guess not. Sorry, pal, but I do want to know how you’re doing.”

“Did Rachel make you call?”

“No, I—”

“I’m just kidding, Nicholas.”

He mentioned again how tired my voice sounded, which only made me more aware of how pathetic I felt. There is nothing that saps the confidence and self-respect from a man like a confusing relationship. I sighed as demonstratively as possible and told Nicholas about the conversation that Jenn and I had had the previous night. I recounted the story as well as I could recall, as much to inform him as to convince myself that it had actually happened.

“Do you think I’m crazy?”

“Crazy in a specific way?”

“I mean, am I crazy to not take Jenn back?”

“It depends. I don’t think so, though. I know you can’t convey to me every nuance of your relationship with her, or every thought bouncing around your head, so I have to leave the decision up to you,” he said. “Do you want to take her back?”

I paused a while before answering, “I really don’t know.”

“Then you probably shouldn’t just yet.”

“But when will it be okay?”

“I can’t tell you that, Jacob. If you ever decide to marry her, it will be because you would rather love her than resent her.”

I let out a loud sigh and walked to the refrigerator. I rummaged through the food, though I had nothing in mind and was not hungry.

“Let me ask you this,” Nicholas said, “Did you forgive her?”

“I guess so.”

“Did you actually say that you forgave her?”

“No, I guess I never actually said the words. Not to her anyway.”

“Do you still harbor resentment in your heart?”

I paused awhile before responding, “I keep thinking of mean things to say to her, and I almost enjoyed frustrating her on the phone. It’s stupid, I know.”

“Then you didn’t forgive her.”

“I guess not,” I said.

“You don’t have to take her back, that’s another issue altogether. But first things first: you have to forgive her. That’s a command straight from Scripture. Taking her back and marrying her is something else altogether.”

“How can I just forget about it, though?”

“You don’t need to eradicate it from your memory, Jacob, but you do need to forgive. You can’t count her sins against her and move forward in any significant way. Love doesn’t do that. Love covers over a multitude of sins. You may not feel like loving her as a husband, but you must love her as a fellow human being, especially as a fellow believer in Christ,” he said, on a preacher’s roll.

I sighed deeply. I wanted Jenn back, there was no doubt in my mind, but I wanted the Jenn that I knew before Meredith, the Jenn that did not run off into the night. I wish I could take her back, forget the whole thing, and plead ignorance.

“This isn’t like someone being five minutes late for a meeting,” Nicholas said, “or accidentally dropping and breaking a dinner plate. Those are easy to forgive. This time it’s going to be hard; that is what makes it forgiveness. Forgiving Jenn is going to cost you, Jacob, but as long as you hold this over her, you will never have any friendship with her, much less a marriage. Those are the stakes. I’m not telling you who was right or wrong or what she should have done or whether or not you should marry her, or even if I would call her actions sinful or not. Either way, what’s done is done and you need to forgive it, and move on.”

“I wish I could just pretend none of this ever happened,” I said. “I guess I don’t even know what it is I’m supposed to be forgiving. Because she hurt me? Because things didn’t go as planned? Because she was malicious somehow? I don’t think she was malicious; it just feels... wrong. And it pisses me off.”

“I know how you feel,” he said. “We’re better at expressing anger than love.”

“How can I stop being angry? I can’t make myself be anything but. I can recognize and know that it’s wrong, but I can’t stop being bitter.”

“The heart is deceitful above all else, and desperately sick. Who can understand it?” Nicholas said.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It’s Jeremiah, chapter seventeen, verse nine.”

I shut the fridge. “I guess I should have known that.”

“It means our hearts are lying and perverse and we can’t even figure out how it is we can be so vile, even when we know it’s vile. And you’re right—we can’t make ourselves to be better, only God can give us new hearts, a totally new nature. So I guess my only suggestion is to pray about it. I know that sounds typical, coming from a pastor and all.”

I laughed gently. “Yeah, it does, but thanks.”

“Would you fight for her, Jacob? At least, would you have a few weeks ago?”

“Fight? Literally, as in a fistfight?”

“Either way. Would you do whatever it took to protect her and make her yours?”

I thought for a long moment, trying to remember back to the days before Meredith, almost nostalgically.

“I think so.”

“That didn’t sound too assertive,” Nicholas laughed.

“No, I guess not.”

“What is it, Jacob? There’s something in your voice.”

“It’s just that…”

“What?”

I slouched and then tilted my head back and rested it against the back of the chair. I took several deep breaths before continuing.

“I used to be assertive, really aggressive. I used to enjoy taking any possible situation and pushing it as far as I could. I found it almost addictive. I would do crazy things with alcohol and cars and women and brawling. I just pushed and pushed and even after falling on my face, it was too much to resist. When I was sober, I realized how sickening and stupid it was.”

“Your whole life you’ve been like that?”

“No, I was a goody-two-shoes before college.”

“What happened in college?” he asked.

“Well, it wasn’t until I was twenty,” I said.

“Is that when your parents—”

“Yes.”

There was not a long pause in the conversation, but it was long enough to remember the first time I ever drank alcohol, as a sophomore in college who no longer had anyone looking over his shoulder. I remembered the immediate sensation of numbness, and how it was preferable to the pain. The memories got fuzzier after that, a whirlwind of confusing nights that only led to greater emptiness.

“I’m sorry,” Nicholas said.

“I’ve had enough of those nights,” I said. “Staying up too late, waking up with a hangover and cuts and bruises from fights I couldn’t even remember. Sometimes I feel the rage or the lust or even just the playfulness welling up and it reminds me of those days. I don’t want to go there again.”

“I understand,” Nicholas said, “but don’t mistake aggression for violence, or mistake passivity for holiness. Jesus was aggressive inasmuch as He was passionate. It isn’t the aggression that is the problem; it’s the beating people up and getting drunk and whatever. I think you will find that there are very few base desires that are not holy, Jacob. Lust? It isn’t a bad thing, but our sexual desire is to be manifest in a particular way. Only when we misuse it, outside of God’s will, that it becomes a bad thing and winds up hurting us. Same with money or power or aggression. Use your aggression to pursue the things of God. Love is just as aggressive as hate. Maybe you don’t love enough because you aren’t aggressive enough. Two weeks ago you would have done anything for her. Prove it, by forgiving her.”

“Hi, Coach! How ya doing?”

“I’m great, Peter.” I pointed to the church and said to Peter Sr., “I don’t think I’ve ever seen you here before.”

Sunday morning meant my routine of waffles and church, something I did for the first eighteen years of life in my parents’ house. Now at home in Swiftwater, I was doing my best to emulate those days, using my parents’ homemade, from-scratch recipe that was written on an index card and taped to the canister of wheat flour.

Peter Sr. looked at the church and then back to me and shrugged. “Nicholas has been giving me a hand.”

“Oh?”

“He knows some people at the community college in Jefferson, as well as folks at Plymouth State. There’s a couple of Assistant Professor positions available.”

I nearly laughed out loud and jumped up in delight, but reined myself in, knowing he would not want the attention. Melissa smiled faintly and Peter Jr. gave his typically broad grin.

“That’s great,” I finally said.

There was dew on the grass and two of the maples that surround the green had a few red leaves already, shimmering against the blue sky. The white church looked pristine in the early morning sunlight.

“Yeah,” he said, shrugging again. “We’ll see what happens. Anyway, I figured the least I could do was come hear the man preach sometime.”

“Ah, I thought maybe he forced you to come as a consulting fee. He’s sneaky that way.”

I chuckled, but none of the Dellays reacted whatsoever, so we just kept walking to the church. Twenty pews lined both sides of the aisle, each of them with the capacity to hold about ten people. The Dellays followed behind the Courchesne family, who they knew from baseball. Peter Jr. looked around unabashedly at the people and furnishings; Melissa tried to be inconspicuous. Peter Jr. followed right behind Martin Courchesne, who looked delighted to be able to sit next to a friend in church. Melissa followed, and I sat between Peter Sr. and the end of the pew.

Peter shuffled and re-shuffled, leaning forward, wondering what to do next. Melissa seemed to wonder whether or not she ought to quiet Peter Jr., who was talking with Martin, but she saw that Mrs. Courchesne did not seem to mind, so she leaned back and put her hand on her husband’s forearm.

“Ever been in this church before?” I said to Peter.

“No. Well, yes, but not on a Sunday morning. Maybe for a wedding or funeral, but that’s it. I went to church when I was a kid, but not since I moved to Swiftwater.”

“When did you stop going to church?”

“When I went to college.”

“Oh,” I said, turning away. “Me too.”

“Good morning,” Nicholas said from the lectern at the front. “Welcome to Swiftwater Congregational Church, and a special welcome to any visitors we might have today. We just have a few announcements...”

Peter leaned into me and said, “He sure looks different when he’s all dressed up. I’m not used to seeing him without a ballcap on.”

“I know,” I said, “but he’s still pretty intense either way.”

“Jesus Christ said, ‘I am the way, the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through me.’ Let’s stand and sing to Him this morning.”

There was a rustling throughout the building as people reached for the hymnals and stood to sing.

*God, be merciful to me;
On Thy grace I rest my plea
Plenteous in compassion Thou,
Blot out my transgressions now;
Wash me, make me pure within;
Cleanse, O cleanse me from my sin.*

I glanced across the center aisle and saw Mrs. Brown from the corner of my eye, a sixty-two-year-old widow who always made sure to give Jenn a hug when she was visiting. Mrs. Brown’s face was wrapped up like a question mark, unsure why I had replaced Jenn with the three Dellays. Peter and Melissa shared a hymnal, and she looked even more uncomfortable than usual to be singing. It was not until the last stanza that I finally heard a murmuring singing voice coming from their mouths. I wondered if Nicholas had seen the Dellays.

*My transgressions I confess;
Grief and guilt my soul oppress.
I have sinned against Thy grace,
And provoked Thee to Thy face.
I confess Thy judgment just;
Speechless, I Thy mercy trust.*

It was one of Jenn’s favorite hymns; she often hummed it while in the car. I envisioned her driving with the windows down, her blonde hair sailing behind, dark sunglasses and a bright smile. I caught myself smiling, almost laughing, until I remembered where I was and shook the image from my head, only to be replaced by an image of Meredith and standing alone on a gazebo, her blond hair sailing behind her as she ran away.

*I am evil, born in sin;
Thou desirest truth within.
Thou alone my Savior art,
Teach Thy wisdom to my heart;
Make me pure, Thy grace bestow,
Wash me whiter than the snow.*

Nicholas strode to the lecturn again.

“The prophet Jeremiah writes that the heart is deceitful and sick, and rhetorically asks, ‘Who can understand it?’ The apostle Paul wrestles in his letter to the Romans, saying, ‘For what I am doing, I do not understand; for I am not practicing what I would like to do, but I am doing the very thing I hate.’” Nicholas stopped for a dramatic pause. “Despite our lofty ambitions and all our talk about morality and holiness, friends, our hearts are wretched, so fallen that we rarely do as we know we ought. You, Christians, know the feeling all too well when you live with the guilt that you should have done better, keenly aware of your selfishness, your petty desire to serve only yourself.”

Nicholas was in perfect form again, his voice rising and falling, passionate and deliberate.

“Today we will look at Christ’s admonishment in John, chapter fifteen, that we are to love one another as Christ loved us. And how did he love us? He laid down His life. And how much more! While we might possibly be brave enough, selfless enough, loving enough, to lay down our lives for those whom we call friends, Christ laid down his life—Romans tell us—while we were yet sinners! How can we then cling to our wants? How can we let such gossip and malice fester in our hearts, against the very children of God who Jesus Christ purchased with his blood? My friends, this should not be.”

His voice echoed off the back of the church and resonated in every pew. A few heads nodded. I glanced down the pew; Peter Jr. looked bored while Martin was attentive. Peter Sr. and Melissa’s eyes were open as wide as possible. If I was not sitting at the end of the pew, it would not have surprised me to see them slink into the aisle and out the back door. Nicholas was a very good preacher, but not a safe one.

“We will be looking at this passage in detail today, looking carefully at what God would teach us through His Word. First, turn in your hymnals to number three-thirty-one.”

The service moved along as it typically did, except that it was a communion Sunday. The bread was dispensed throughout the congregation on plates. We all sat as one, listening to Nicholas’ words, and then eating as one—a chorus of chewing and swallowing and remembering. The practice was more than formality and routine; it was a community moving together, standing together, sitting together, drinking wine together, confessing together—all like a rehearsed performance. Far from being a contrived recital, though, it was an appropriate congregation of a community who, outside the walls of the church, awoke at the same time and slept at the same time and planted and harvested and stacked firewood at the same time and celebrated and mourned together, too.

Sitting beside the Dellays in church was like watching a familiar movie with someone who has not seen it. The sea of faces and the songs and the flow of the service were all familiar to me, and I found myself watching Peter Sr. just to see his reaction to things. It was a little odd to take pleasure in his discomfort, especially in church, but sometimes it just feels good to be more at home someplace, anyplace, than somebody else.

Later that afternoon, I strolled through the garden, where the tomatoes were finally promising to produce and the bean plants were sagging under the weight of green

beans that were ready to be picked. I stepped over the chicken wire fence and into a row of elbow-high corn. From the corner of my eye, I saw the peas; the disgusting plants were nearly dripping with plump pods. I could hear Jenn's delight ringing in my ears about her favorite vegetable. I stood and glared at the one vegetable that had managed to survive my agricultural skills, and before I knew it, the garden hoe was behind my shoulder and then smashing into the first pea plant. Several pods dropped to the ground and I hacked at them, and then moved on to the next plant. After destroying three feet of pea plants along the row, I stopped, catching my breath. The fallen plants were at my feet, the innocent victims.

My face went red, this time with shame. I dropped the hoe and picked up the plants and pods and carried them to a compost pile at the edge of the garden and breathed a large sigh, and went back to the tomatoes.

The phone rang inside the house, and then again. After the third call, I heard the answering machine pick up, so I went inside to see who it was. It was Jenn. A wave of defensiveness and fear and excitement rolled through me at once.

She choked down a sob and said, "Mom's in the hospital."

My head felt heavy. Hospital waiting rooms are not good places to sleep. Dragging my body into the bathroom, the clock read 2:13 in the morning. The hallways were eerily quiet, with just a faint beeping or clicking every now and then, and the stale aroma of sterilized bedsheets. As soon as I pushed through the door, the automatic lights flickered to attention, making me squint and rub my eyes.

The face in the mirror was weary. Long, unkempt hair flopped over a scar on the forehead and bloodshot eyes stared back at me in a trance. Spending a night at Massachusetts General Hospital wasn't my plan for Thanksgiving break. I wanted to be eating turkey dinner with my parents, not waiting around to hear if they had survived.

The doctor had told me over the phone that he was afraid he might have bad news. That jackass wasn't afraid of anything and there was no "might" about it. A pickup going fifty miles an hour hits them as they were walking across the street and it *might* be bad news? What would *definitely* be bad news? He wasn't the one afraid of being orphaned at age nineteen. He wasn't the one afraid of losing his only family. His only fear was being late for Thanksgiving dinner.

I bunched up my jacket again and rested my head on it. Bystanders said that the pickup's tires squealed coming around the corner. Dad had looked up and instinctively leapt to push Mom out of the way. The driver had slammed on his brakes, but it sent the truck into a fishtail and clipped Mom's side, shattering her femur and pelvis. They rushed her straight to the ICU; Dad died on the spot.

The residual light from the hallway made it hard enough to sleep; the bench with thin cushioning was little comfort. My dorm room came to mind, and my friends who would be chumming around in a few days, back from break, ready to stay up late, talking about life and love and sports.

My dreams were dark and brief.

An arm prodded me awake. The light reflected off the metal clipboard in his hand and made a silhouette of his body and glasses. The room was cold and still.

"I'm afraid I have some bad news. It's going to be tough for you to hear."

My fingers tingled like they were falling asleep and my tongue seemed to drop into my stomach while chills raced over my body. He didn't have to say anything more. He didn't have to tell me all the doctor words and medical terms. There were no more evening discussions about baseball, sitting around the living room in our matching caps. There were no more smells of cookies coming from the oven when I got home from school. There were no more family photographs to put on the mantle. There were no more Christmases. There were no more Easters. There was no more turkey dinner for Thanksgiving that year, and there wouldn't be one next year either.

I buried the speedometer driving to MaineGeneral in Augusta. Highway 202 brought me past a string of chain restaurants near the Interstate whose neon glare burned my tired eyes. I passed through the older part of town, seeing the dome of the state capitol building poking above the other buildings. There was a confusing roundabout before the bridge, which spanned the Kennebec River. MaineGeneral rose above the trees on the opposite shore like a lighthouse. The night was dark, but light emanated from the hospital windows, five or six stories above the treetops.

After another roundabout on the other side of the bridge, the road plodded through a tired, dark neighborhood to get to the hospital. Once-proud houses were now multiple-unit apartment buildings, with precarious fire escapes and overflowing dumpsters in the alleys.

I shook away a yawn as I parked the car and walked to the covered main entrance. Massive concrete pillars supported the building above, and concrete planters lined the roadway. After passing through automatic doors, the hallway opened into a cheerful, well-lit lobby with a wood-paneled information desk. For a place that hosted the most traumatic of human dramas, the entrance of the MaineGeneral Hospital was eerily calm. A few people strolled by, oblivious to the dead, dying, and mourning all within the same building. The foyer resonated with the necessity of happy ignorance. A large painting of what I presumed to be Augusta adorned the wall behind the desk. I recognized the long bridge spanning the Kennebec. Verdant trees lined the Tahoe-blue river, which matched the sky above.

I rubbed my eyes and tried to straighten my collar. An older man sat behind the information desk and directed me to the waiting room. I took a deep breath, not knowing whose face to expect, or how distraught it might be. I could not imagine the prescribed etiquette for dealing with an ex-girlfriend in such circumstances—much less Madeline, Erik, and Jenn's parents, presuming her mother was even conscious. The elevator doors opened and I tentatively stepped into the hallway, curious and stricken with fear. The waiting area was down the hall to my left, only about ten feet away. I took a few steps toward it, then stopped.

Jenn was slumped over the arm of her chair, with her face drooped on the palm of her hand, upholding her crooked neck. Her elbow rested on the flimsy arm of the bench; her eyes were glazed and red, frozen open and staring at the floor. Her jacket, draped around her torso, rose and fell in shudders.

I stopped moving, and nearly stopped breathing. Madeline was curled up, apparently in fitful sleep. I took a step forward, then stopped again. Jenn's eyelids fluttered and she looked up at me, squinting. Her forehead furrowed, but her face otherwise remained blank and silent.

I walked slowly toward her, still unsure what to do. The seat had room for two people; Jenn was slumped on the edge of one seat, while the adjacent seat was empty. As I moved toward her, she never budged and gave no indication what she wanted me to do, so we just looked at each other in silence. After a long moment, I broke my gaze and sat beside her. She brought in her legs and sat upright so she could turn to me. She looked ashamed; she opened her mouth to speak, but closed it again and looked down without saying a word.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered.

Her eyes were wet. “It’s good to see you again.”

Her father came around the corner, carrying a grocery bag from Hannaford’s. Madeline stirred awake at the sound of Mr. Sharp’s heavy footsteps.

“Mr. Thomas?” he said, in earnest surprise. “I didn’t expect to see you here.”

“Hi, Jacob,” Madeline said groggily, wiping crust from her eyes.

“The vending machine downstairs isn’t worth a crap,” he said, “so I went over to the store a few blocks down.”

Mr. Sharp handed a Snickers bar and a Coke to Jenn and sat on a bench that was perpendicular to us. Madeline propped herself up, though not sitting upright altogether, like she was not quite committed to staying awake.

“How much do you know?” he asked me.

“Not much. I know your wife was in a lot of pain and they rushed her to the hospital.”

“Yeah, that much is true,” he nodded, looking down.

I had never seen the man without a wry smile. He could feign indifference to every situation in which I had ever seen him. Always ready with a sarcastic barb or off-putting joke, he took everything in stride. Even in a hospital at an ungodly hour, sitting with his two daughters, waiting for the doctors to report on his wife in the Intensive Care Unit, he ignored any hint of worry beyond that of not having enough Coke.

“She hadn’t been feeling too well for a few weeks; she had been tired a lot. I don’t think I’ve ever seen her take a midday nap in our whole life. It was weird. So...”

He looked out the window and shrugged. His clasped his hands together and began squeezing and rubbing his fingers.

“We both thought it was no big deal, probably just some bug, but then she was having some pretty severe bloating.” He motioned to his stomach. “You know, how women do. Only it lasted for three or four days and that’s really unusual for her, and especially to be so lethargic. Last night, she woke up at about three in the morning and couldn’t go back asleep because she was in so much pain.”

“Did you drive straight here?”

“No, this place is over an hour away, so we went to a place in Farmington first. We had no idea what it was. We thought it might be some kind of stomach bug, but they told us we should come here where they have specialists, gynecologic oncologists, or something like that. I guess we were pretty sure it wasn’t just a bad stomach bug then.”

Jenn looked down at her hands, like she could not bear to hear the story again.

“They brought her in and started doing these tests,” he said and then leaned in and lowered his voice, “that I’m not even going to try to describe with my two daughters here. Much worse than turn your head and cough stuff. Then they stuck some needles into her... well, into *her*. What do they call that?”

Jenn looked up and flatly said, “Culdocentesis. They withdraw fluid from around the ovaries.”

“So, um...” he turned and looked outside again, hands on hips. “They found something they think is cancer on her ovary. They wanted to do surgery right away.”

I crossed my arms and looked out the window, though there was nothing to see. I wanted to just throw up. I tried a few times to say something, but each time the words stuck in my throat.

“They hope it’s just on the ovaries, but they’re going to check the lymph nodes and other organs, too,” he said.

“If they can remove it, it shouldn’t be a big deal, right?”

Madeline’s small voice spoke up, “If it hasn’t spread.”

“But they don’t know yet,” Jenn said.

“When will they know?”

“A few days,” Mr. Sharp said. “Maybe a week. I really don’t know. I guess removing the cancer or whatever on the ovaries is the first thing.”

“They might even have to do a total hysterectomy if it’s real bad,” Jenn said.

“Only if it’s real bad, though,” Mr. Sharp said. “That’s a worse-case scenario.”

Jenn shrugged. “It’s still a scenario.”

Mr. Sharp took a deep breath and looked around before sitting. He looked over at Jenn and I, sitting beside one another and raised his eyebrows. “Well, at least you two seem to be on the mend.”

“Dad...”

“What?”

“Don’t tease me right now,” Jenn said.

“Jenn—” I said.

“I’m just trying to lighten the mood,” Mr. Sharp said.

“No, you’re making jokes about me.”

“Do you guys know what time it is?” Madeline said, but neither of them seemed to hear her. “Can this wait?”

“Why not?” Mr. Sharp said. “Why can’t I make a joke right now, Jennifer?”

“Because Mom’s in the other room in surgery and we’re sitting here in public...” Her weary voice trailed off. “And we’re not on the mend, whatever that means,” Jenn said.

“Excuse me for asking about how you are doing, Jennifer.”

“You weren’t asking about me; you assumed, you made light of it, and you embarrassed me.”

“Jenn, it’s okay,” I said, putting my hand on her arm, our first physical contact since Meredith.

“I didn’t embarrass you, Jennifer; you just get all riled up about nothing some times. If you want to get so sanctimonious about your mother being in the hospital, then just let it pass and don’t let me disturb you from your vigil.”

“See? This is why I don’t tell you things. This is why I tell Mom and not you.”

“Why what? What did I say that was so terrible?” he said.

“I never have a good enough explanation for you. Whenever I try to tell you *anything*, you expect me to tell you *everything* and you never show any hint that you actually care about *me*, you just want your curiosity satisfied. My answers are never good enough and you just dismiss me and scoff at anything I say that you don’t understand.”

“Jenn—” I said.

“Jennifer, don’t even try to pretend—”

“Do you guys have to fight right here? Right now?”

“Madeline, stay out of this,” Mr. Sharp said.

“Jenn, just stop,” I said, tugging on her arm.

Jenn stood up in huff and took two steps toward nowhere before stopping and putting her hands on her hips. Madeline shook her head with disgust and put her head back down to sleep.

“Jenn,” I started, not knowing what to say, “it’s late. Let’s just... can we go for a walk?”

I stood up and walked tentatively toward her, but she never turned around.

“See?” Mr. Sharp said. “Jacob knows how silly this is.”

“I’m not—” I started, but Jenn whipped her head around and gave such an indignant look that I froze. Then she marched away as quick as she could.

“Where are you going?” Mr. Sharp said.

“To the bathroom, Dad. Is that all right?”

“The bathroom is right here,” he said, pointing to a door to the side of the waiting room.

“Then I’m going to find a different one.”

He threw up his hands and looked out the window. I sat back down, literally on the edge of my seat. Part of me wanted to yell at her father for spending his life wishing Jenn were somebody else. He looked over at me, the smugness absent from his face.

“She’s something else, huh?” he said softly.

“Yeah, she is,” I said.

“I don’t know,” he said, shaking her head. “I don’t know how to talk to her. After twenty-six years, I still haven’t figured it out.”

“I don’t understand how, either, but...”

Jenn was as enigmatic to me as she was to him. She was nowhere to be found on that floor, so I took the stairs back down to the lobby and stepped outside. She was sitting on a wooden bench, looking miniscule next to the imposing concrete supports and ceiling.

“Hi,” she said, angrily wiping her nose with a tissue.

“Hi.”

She glanced at me and looked away.

“I’m sorry you had to see that. I wish you hadn’t.”

“Why not?”

She turned back to me. “Because I don’t want you to know how messed up my relationship with my father is. I’m not exactly proud of it.”

“You’re just really stressed out right now,” I said. “So is your father.”

“Me and my father arguing isn’t news.”

Her eyes dropped like she was watching her voice fall to the concrete sidewalk, wondering how to pick up the shattered pieces without causing more damage.

“Want to go for a walk?” I said.

She crossed her arms and nodded. “This isn’t the best neighborhood for walking at night,” she said.

“Do you know where we could go for a walk then?”

“There is a park down by the river and it’s well-lit, but we have to go under that sketchy underpass.”

“I’ll keep my eyes open,” I said.

The highway passed above us as we strolled down Arsenal Street toward Cony. City offices sat on the left side of the road, with well-lit parking lots. Down the hill, on

the edge of the river, Old Fort Western still maintained its presence, as it had since 1754. It was twenty minutes before either of us said anything else.

“Why don’t you stick up for me? Do you agree with my Dad that I’m silly and sanctimonious and get riled up about nothing?”

“No, I don’t. I don’t think he really means it either.”

She rolled her eyes and wiped her nose gruffly.

“I still want you to stick up for me. Even if it’s a joke, it hurts me to hear him say those things and to have you sitting there saying nothing in my defense.”

“What did you hope I would say?”

She shrugged and shook her head.

“I’m sorry,” I said, though it sounded feeble.

“Why did you come to Augusta?” she said.

“Because you asked me to.”

“Why did you respond to my asking?” she said.

I turned from her and looked up at the night sky, remembering sterile hospitals and cold doctors, and wondering just how much I wanted to be open. I thought about my parents, and how they would have responded to Jenn, how they would have welcomed her into their house as the daughter they never had.

“I know what it’s like to lose a parent,” I said. “Both of them.”

She looked down at her feet.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to bring that up.”

“It’s okay,” I said, continuing our slow walk to the park. “I remember waiting all night, hearing the news that Dad was dead and Mom wasn’t looking good, and then waking up on a bench by some doctor telling me that Mom had died, too. He didn’t seem to care; it was just his job.”

Jenn turned and looked at me; I looked away.

“I’m not saying that’s going to happen with your Mom,” I said. “But I remember the feeling of helplessness and being alone. I didn’t want you to be alone.”

“Thanks for coming,” she said. “Do you think about your parents often? I mean, other than tonight?”

“Sometimes something will come up and it makes me think of them, or something makes me think of growing up in Webster, my little hometown, and I wish I could go back. It’s been ten years, but I still think about it.”

Jenn reached over and took my hand, squeezing it.

“Why did you ask me to come?” I said.

She tilted her head away from me and her walk slowed until she stopped altogether. We were standing in the grass outside the fort. A few cars passed on Cony Street, fifty feet away, headed over the Kennebec to the old downtown.

“Because I want to cry on your shoulder, not anybody else’s.”

Her eyes were red but dry. In one motion, I stepped to her and put my arm around her waist and pulled her into me.

By the time Jenn and I had returned to the hospital, Madeline and her father had decided to stay in a hotel in Augusta for a few days, since a doctor had assured them that Mrs. Sharp would not be cogent until morning anyway. There were a number of hotels near the interstate exit, across town on Route 202, so we made our way back and settled on a Best Western that had adjoining rooms available.

Madeline's husband, Mike, and Jenn's younger brother, Erik, arrived the next morning, Tuesday. I was not sure what my role was, or how long I should stay in Augusta. I hoped that we would receive two thumbs up from the doctors and I could be on my way. Jenn's eyes, though, implored me to come with them to the hospital.

Erik asked question after question, as though he could do something beyond sit in a waiting room and wait. His exasperation grew as he paced around the room, realizing how helpless he was to help his mother. Mr. Sharp settled into a chair and began reading again while Erik looked out the window, shifting his weight from leg to leg.

"Can we go for a walk?" Jenn asked me.

We strolled out of the hospital and headed toward the Kennebec again, down Arsenal Street. Jenn was silently fidgeting with her fingers. After I made a few casual comments, which she seemed not to even notice, I asked her if she was okay. She tilted her head to one side and shook it gently, almost imperceptibly.

"Worried about your Mom?"

"Yes," Jenn said.

"Something else?"

She nodded. We stopped walking, in broad, midday sunlight, just outside the shadow of the bridge. She was looking down at her fingers, picking at her cuticles. I looked down to her face, but could only see her forehead and the ridge of her nose.

"Jenn?"

She clasped her hands together and brought them up to her chest, nearly touching her chin. She lifted her head so that her eyes looked into mine.

"I think I know what happened in Meredith."

My heart stopped momentarily, afraid of what words would follow—afraid that she had concluded, decisively and finally, that I just was not the one for her. We walked along a rail trail to Eastside Park. There was a plastic playground painted bright teal and several trees in a grassy area that led to the banks of the river. Above us and to the south, the high bridge of Route 202 crossed the river, headed back to the interstate. The downtown sat across the river, with another park mirrored on the west bank. We could see rusty fire escapes dangling from the old brick buildings. We walked down nearly to the river itself. Three herring gulls took momentary interest in us, until they realized we were not offering food, and they waddled away, showing off their gray backs with black tips.

We sat side-by-side. I leaned forward, hugging my knees, staring across the river and waiting for Jenn to speak, and dreading every minute. Her head was down, and silent, for many minutes. When she finally spoke, I nearly jumped.

"I was thinking about what happened with my Dad last night," she said, not picking her head up. "When you were there, and we yelled at each other. Again. I said something about never telling him anything, and it was true, I never tell him anything. I

always go to Mom. I don't know if I've been a bad daughter by not trusting him, or if he's a bad father for never gaining my trust."

I leaned my head in her direction, looking at the ground beside her leg, and sneaking a glance at her face, hoping to make eye contact, but her eyes never met mine.

"Everything I've ever done or said, he makes into a joke. He's never taken me seriously; he's never bothered to get to know me. At some point, I just gave up. I learned to just be bubbly and fun, mostly to irritate him, I think. Guys always liked that, too. Before long, that became who I was. I've always been able to play everything off with a wink and a smile and nobody thinks there's any more to me than that."

"All because of your Dad?"

"Whenever I even think about trying to talk to him about my heart, I can already sense the sarcastic comment. Every fault I've ever had, he manages to point out, which either embarrassed me or killed my self-esteem. I've spent a lifetime trying to cover up all my stupid insecurities and trying to hide anything that was less than perfect about me."

She finally looked at me with her dry, but heavy, eyes.

"That's why I had to leave the waiting room last night after I fought with my Dad; I don't want you to know me like that. I don't want you to know that side of me—the side that has a lifelong feud and is petty and mean and immature."

"I guess I know you now."

She shook her head. "You know me *better*. But there's so much more junk."

"I would have taken your junk, too," I said to her.

"I know." Her voice fell to a whisper as she said, "I just got scared, Jacob. That's really what I think. Getting married means you would find me out, and if you're anything like my father, you wouldn't like me, you wouldn't help me. I couldn't take that from you. And I couldn't take a lifetime of pretending to be somebody else."

"I'm not like your father."

Jenn leaned against me and reached for my hand, whispering, "I know."

Another herring gull waddled up to us, with its pure white chest. He bobbed his head a few times at Jenn and made her smile. The gull looked at us from the corner of his eye, then waddled off as if we were too uninteresting to hold his attention.

She took a deep breath like she was going to say something, but her cell phone went off. She searched through her purse for it.

"It's Madeline," she said to me. "Hi, Madeline... I'm not far... Of course... Okay, be right there."

She turned to me and said, "We have to go. The surgeon wants to say something, but Madeline told them to wait until I got back so he could tell the whole family at once."

Jenn and I hustled into the hospital and raced up the stairs to the waiting room, where everyone looked up at us eagerly when we arrived.

“I’ll let the doctor know you’re here,” Erik said, and hurried out of the room.

“What’s the news?” Jenn said tentatively.

“Don’t know,” her father said. “We were waiting for you.”

I was worried for a minute how Jenn would react, but she dropped her eyes and stepped into the room. In a minute, we heard two sets of footsteps and Erik’s voice. The surgeon appeared in the entranceway and motioned for us to follow him. He wore glasses and a moustache that hid his upper lip. He stood rigidly as he surveyed us like a grade school principal before turning and leading us down the hall to an empty room with a small couch in it. He shut the door behind and invited us to sit down, though nobody did. I searched his face for a hint of what was to come, but his professional demeanor never waned; it was one of a hundred conversations he had to have with his patients’ families.

“Is she going to be okay?” Madeline said, but he only took passing notice of Madeline’s question.

“We were able to remove the tumor on the ovary, that’s the good news. We also found tumors on the uterus, which is common with ovarian cancer, so we performed a hysterectomy.”

“You had to do a total hysterectomy?” Jenn said.

“It’s the best method.”

“The best method for what?” Jenn said, her voice rising and becoming almost hysterical.

“For removing the tumor,” he said with a slight roll of his eyes. “We also have good reason to believe there might be more tumors in her body.”

“What if you find more?”

“Surgery is the quickest option, but chemotherapy might be necessary. It depends very much on what we find, and how advanced it is. We took a CAT scan and will send the tumors that we removed over to pathology to determine if they are cancerous.”

The family stood silently, blinking, trying to comprehend what had just been said.

“What does this mean, though?” Jenn finally said. “Is Mom okay or not?”

The surgeon shrugged, “Right now she is okay. She is very tired from surgery, but if we got all of it, there is no reason that she should not make a full recovery. Until we get the test results back from pathology, though, the long-term prognosis is pending.”

“How long will that be?” Jenn said.

“Probably three or four days.”

“Can we see her?” Madeline asked.

“You can. She just woke up, so she is going to be very groggy and maybe not entirely lucid, but you can see her for a little while. Let me walk you down to her room.”

He led us back down another long hospital hallway, which seemed designed to increase anxiety. After what seemed an interminable slog, he turned to us and reminded us that she was just coming out from sedation.

The room was dimly-lit, like an overcast morning. None of the machines with their switches and flashing lights, none of the monitors with their dials and digital

readings, and the persistent beeping, none of them were able to instill any hope. Emma Sharp lay under a maze of wires and tubes, broken and tired, and her face ashen and spent. She had an IV in her arm and her eyes drooped, but she managed a slight smile at the sight of her family. Jenn took one of her hands, Madeline and Mike went around the bed to the other. Erik stood beside Jenn and Mr. Sharp was at the foot of the bed.

“Hi, Mom,” Jenn smiled meekly. “How are you feeling?”

Mrs. Sharp’s voice was very soft, and she closed her eyes for a long moment before answering. “I’m okay, honey. I’m mostly very tired.”

Jenn looked like she forgot her lines and could not think of anything to improvise. After several moments of silence, Erik said, “We love you, Mom,” and the others murmured their agreement.

“Is there anything we can do for you, Mom?” Madeline said.

She closed her eyes again, longer than usual. Her chest rose and fell several times in long intervals. I glanced at her husband, who looked like he was going to be sick. He held the foot of the bed with one hand and stood bent over.

“Pray for me,” she finally said. “And be with me as much as you can. That’s all I really want.”

The door opened and the surgeon poked his head in.

“Mr. Sharp, could I speak privately to you for a moment?”

Jenn’s father looked stunned, like he could not imagine why he would be singled out. Mr. Sharp turned back to his wife and gave her the best smile he could muster, though his forehead was wrinkled with worry. Jenn watched her father disappear out the door as if she would never see him again. Her eyes turned back to her mother and began to well up. Her lip trembled.

“Mom,” her voice cracked, “why does he want to talk to Dad? What’s wrong?”

“I don’t know, honey,” she replied, her voice tired, but calm. “Don’t worry.”

“But why wouldn’t he tell all of us?”

“Jenn,” Madeline said, “maybe it’s just something about insurance.”

Mrs. Sharp rolled her head toward Jenn and squeezed her hand as much as she could.

Jenn said, “What if it’s not? What if—”

Jenn swallowed hard and sniffed, looking back and forth between her sister and her mother, but she could find no comfort in either face.

“Jenn, honey,” her mother finally said. “I’m in good hands.”

Jenn looked down at her mother’s hand that she held and caressed her fingers, then she put her mother’s hand between both of her own.

“The hospital’s treating you well? Are they good? I don’t know this surgeon; is he well-known? Are there other places we could—”

“Jenn, calm down,” Madeline said.

“But what if—”

“Jenn,” her mother said, “I’m not in the hospital’s hands. I’m in the Lord’s.”

“But I don’t want you to...”

Jenn’s mother did not offer any reassurance. Instead, she looked at me and said, “Jacob, could you please find my husband and tell him to see me before I fall asleep.”

I nodded and stepped quietly out of the room. As soon as I closed the door behind me, a few medical personnel hurried past in the hallway. I leaned against the wall and let

my eyes follow after them. Not knowing where to look first, I went back to the waiting area, hoping to find him.

Mr. Sharp was there, sitting in the corner, very alone, turned toward the window. His eyes were big and sad, looking down at his fingers that he was rubbing together. When I looked closer, I realized he was caressing his wedding ring.

I drove Jenn downtown to Front Street, across the Kennebec River from the hospital, which rose above the tall Memorial Bridge. I parked on the street and we began walking up and down, trying to find somewhere decent to eat before I drove back to Swiftwater. The weather was muggy and we were both tired, so we settled on a bar & grill that advertised Allagash Brewing Company on its storefront.

The restaurant sat on the corner of Front and Winthrop Streets. Winthrop dropped down the hill and ended in about fifty yards at Waterfront Park, which sat on the bank of the river. The buildings lining Front Street were separated from the river by a parking lot in the back. While Front Street had been well-preserved, the rear of the buildings loomed five, six, seven stories above the parking lot and the river shore with dirty brick facades, rusty fire escapes, and crumbling concrete overhangs.

Most of the tables were occupied in the restaurant, and about half of the bar stools. The atmosphere was convivial, but not rowdy, and the hostess seated us at a table next to the bar. There were three guys at the bar who were laughing uproariously at every other line they spoke. One in particular seemed to be the ringleader, and he was drunk as could be—at 8:00 on a Tuesday evening. The other two looked a bit like Derek and Jesse from my college days.

As we were sitting, I heard a whistle and turned to see the drunk turned around on his barstool, ogling Jenn's shoulders. She was wearing a tanktop that stuck to her in the humidity. He saw me and turned around quickly, feigning as though he was trying not to get caught. His compadres found it enormously funny. I was not sure if Jenn had even noticed.

"Hi, I'm Lianne, I'll be taking care of you guys tonight. What can I get you to drink?"

"Iced tea, please," Jenn said.

"How about you? Can I get you a beer?"

I looked over at the three guys at the bar.

"I'll just have some water."

Lianne disappeared and we looked down at our menus, not saying a word.

"Hey," the drunk called to me, "Is that your girlfriend?"

His companions watched, amused and a little embarrassed. I was not quite sure how to answer his question, though, and Jenn looked at me with imploring eyes. I had no idea what she was hoping I would say.

I mumbled back, "No, not really."

"Aw, first date? Need to pop the question still? Just ask her out, man; she's a hottie."

"Thanks," I said, raising my hand dismissively and turning back to Jenn.

"Hey," he said, but I ignored him.

"Hey, man, if you're not dating her, do you mind if I ask her out?"

I turned back to Jenn.

"Maybe we should leave," she said, looking smaller and smaller in her seat.

"Come on, man, she's got nice tits and a hot ass."

I shot a scowl back at him. Jenn looked like she had eaten something sour. She snatched her blouse that she had been carrying, and quickly put it on to cover up her bare shoulders, and then turned away from the bar.

“Whatever,” the drunk said, brushing us off. “Just another stupid bitch.”

His two buddies’ mouths dropped. A few nearby diners stopped to look up and I heard his friends say to calm down and not get them tossed out of the restaurant. Jenn looked down at the table, her mouth taut.

“Jacob,” she said, but then shook her head.

I started to say something, but stopped. I glared over at the drunk and thought about breaking his glass of beer over the back of his head.

“Do you want to go?” I said to Jenn. I could feel my voice trembling.

She shrugged. “To where? What else is around here? Mom’s stuck in the hospital, we’re stuck in Augusta.”

“We could go back out Highway 202 and find some restaurant near the hotel.”

She looked down and shook her head again. There were lines under her eyes and a wave of blonde hair stuck to her neck.

I said, “Maybe he’ll shut up now and we can just ignore him.”

Her eyes stayed on the menu. The waitress brought us our drinks, took our orders, and hurried away.

“Why didn’t you mention those jerks to her? Maybe somebody could have said something to them.”

My tongue stuck to the roof of my mouth. I looked over at the bar. The bartender was scrambling around and hardly seemed to notice them. The restaurant seemed understaffed and the only waitstaff on hand were frenetic.

“I don’t want that guy saying another word to me. Can’t you do *something*?”

My cheeks turned red. “I’m sorry,” I mumbled. “You sure you don’t just want to leave?”

We looked at each other for a long minute until Jenn sighed and shook her head.

“I’ll be right back,” I told Jenn, and stood to go to the bathroom.

Jenn was idly fingering her silverware, looking down as if into a deep well. The drunk idiot’s eyes followed me to the back of the restaurant. I wanted to tell Jenn that I stood up for fiancées and wives, not ex-girlfriends, but I was too embarrassed of myself to say anything. The face in the bathroom mirror had creases around the eyes, which had lost a bit of sparkle. An old scar remained on the cheekbone, a reminder of a scorching bad-hop grounder, and another scar above the eye that I touched gingerly, as though I expected it to still hurt. I winced, from the memory of other dingy restaurants and other drunks and other late nights that made no sense.

From across the room, I saw the drunk approach Jenn, who was sitting uneasily and trying to ignore him. She stood and said something to him that caused his two buddies to bellow in laughter. The drunk stood and held out his arms, moving closer to her, eventually putting his arms around her waist. She tried to push him away, but he had her, and he bent down like he meant to kiss her. Disgusted, she pushed his face away and tried to break away. He grabbed her around the waist and pressed himself against her body.

Every rotten scab on his cruel face underscored the menacing snarl and his putrid breath. I do not even remember my feet on the ground as I flew across the room,

oblivious to anything other than him and Jenn. His body fell to the ground in a heap. I stood above him and began to see and hear again, like I had been holding my breath. He moaned and writhed on the dirty floor, blood pouring from his nose, just as it was dripping from my fist.

He was too hammered to stand and his two buddies were paralyzed on their bar stools, mouth agape. I bent over as he was trying to sit up and pinned his back to the floor. His throat was in my hands, and I squeezed until he choked. With a knee on his chest, we looked at each other, our eyes six inches apart. The entire restaurant was watching and waiting. The waiters and waitresses were frozen in place, and the stupid-ass drunk, who hit Jenn in the face, looked at me in shock. I spoke slowly and deliberately.

“If you ever touch her again, I’ll break the rest of your ugly fucking head.”

I shoved his head against the floor and turned to Jenn, whose eyes were wide in horror, her mouth open but silent.

“Come on; we’re leaving.”

“Jacob—”

“We’re leaving.”

I grabbed her by the wrist and walked quickly to the door. The crowd was beginning to stir from its stupor and I did not want to answer any questions. Someone called after me, but we ducked and half-ran down Winthrop Street and into the dark alleys behind the buildings that line Front Street.

“But the car’s over there.”

“I don’t want them to see what car I drive. We’ll come back later.”

I led Jenn into the shadows of old buildings. We crouched low and waited. No footsteps followed us and the world seemed to slow to a halt. Gulls gathered around a streetlamp in Waterfront Park; several of them cocked their heads and looked at us for a minute before continuing to poke around in the grass. MaineGeneral towered above the park and the river and the bridge.

“I wonder if Mom is in one of those rooms,” Jenn whispered. “She would be able to see us from there.”

I looked at the hospital’s upper floors and then at Jenn.

“Not in the dark, Jenn.”

“No, not in the dark,” she said, staring off with glazed eyes. “It’s probably good she can’t see us.”

The pain in my hand rose and I saw the blood running across my fingers. She slowly turned and gave me the blindest of stares. For a moment, I thought she was going to faint.

“I’m sorry,” I said.

“For what?”

“For a lot of things, Jenn. I’m sorry I—”

A drop of blood fell to the dark ground and I shook my head. She met my eyes, but instead of the disgust I expected, I saw compassion.

“I’m sorry I dragged you into my gutter,” I said.

She shifted on her feet and fumbled in the dark for my hand. “Thank you for crawling into mine,” she said.

The quiver in her fragile voice was sincere. For the first time, I felt like her hero. I felt needed. Moreover, I knew I needed her. The futility of my Farm, the weakness of my flesh to keep from starting bar fights, and the burning ache in my heart screamed for her companionship—her tenderness and patience and care.

My hands were still trembling with adrenaline, but I took her hand and held it firmly. Her eyes welled with tears. I put my other hand to her pale cheek, trying to keep the blood from smearing on her face, then leaned in, as nervous as a first kiss.

My alarm clock sounded on Wednesday morning after just a few hours of sleep. I listened to its annoying buzzer for a minute, then slumped out of bed, stumbled across the floor, and turned it off.

Some of the green beans were ready for picking, as were the tomatoes, but a thousand other tasks cried for my attention after being away for a few days. After hitting the bank and the post office, I hustled into Fairmont Deli. The store had no customers and Michael Fairmont called out to me as soon as he picked his head up at the sound of the door opening.

“Hey stranger,” he said. “Your garden must be feeding you pretty well; I haven’t seen you in a while.”

I laughed. “Just the peas. I wish I could manage better than that, but not this year. I’ve just been out of town a few days.”

“Taking a little vacation to visit friends?”

I hesitated before answering. “Something like that,” I said, and placed my order for some smoked turkey, honey-baked ham, and white American cheese. I grabbed some milk, bread, eggs, and a few other items and brought them to the register.

“I hear it’s supposed to rain pretty good this weekend,” Michael said.

“That so?”

“Pretty strong front coming, and a lot of moisture coming in off the ocean. It’s gonna be quite a gully-washer, they say.”

“And ‘they’ never lie.”

He returned my smile and handed me my groceries in two brown paper bags.

“Take care now, Jacob.”

“Thanks, Michael; you too.”

When I got home, I did not feel much like sitting inside, despite the humid August weather. I was already sweating, so I decided to mow the lawn that was immediately adjacent to the house, leaving the field uncut. The pungent aroma of cut grass filled the air.

My thoughts traveled farther than the Thomas Farm, all the way to Maine, to Emma Sharp’s hospital bed and Jenn’s vigil. Mrs. Sharp had all the medical machinery in the world at her side, and her daughter holding her hand as she slept. The soil under my fingernails and under the tomatoes is more enriching than any intravenous fluid. The compost pile was slowly turning dead vegetation into life-giving soil, without the fuss of blinking lights and EKGs. I bent down and ripped a weed out of the earth and tossed it aside.

I worked well into the afternoon, picking what tomatoes and green beans were ready, weeding, and turning over new soil that I would be able to use the next year. I walked the perimeter of the entire field through waist-high field grass in which the goldenrod was just beginning to bloom. There were some blackberry canes standing tall, but all of the ripe berries had already been eaten by something, leaving me with just the thorns. The overcast, hazy sky made for an early twilight and I nodded off at my desk twice before succumbing and crawling into bed around 9:00.

Thursday morning started off sunny, but clouds gradually built to the west with the humidity. The air was stagnant and sticky and I passed the hours at my desk plugging away listlessly at my work, thinking of the Sharp family even when I was talking on the phone with clients. I dug a framed photo of me and Jenn out of the drawer where I had tossed it shortly after Meredith, and set it in its old position next to my computer screen.

It was well past 5:00 when I quit work for the day. Time had slipped by in a fog, leaving me not exactly sure what I had accomplished in ten hours of labor. It was too sticky to be very hungry, so I made a small sandwich and sat at the kitchen table with a glass of water. The thunderclouds had built throughout the day, but never produced any rain; the forecast said to give it one more day before the front wrung out all the moisture in the air. I was on my way toward an early bedtime when Jenn called.

“Any news on your Mom?”

“No. She’s sleeping a lot. Everyone else had to go back to work, so it was just me and Dad. We weren’t exactly chatting it up. I left this afternoon, though, so I’m back home in Portland.”

I put my dishes in the sink, leaving them for morning, and sat down on the couch.

Jenn said, “I was hoping I could come to Swiftwater.”

Several competing answers stuck in my throat.

“I need to get out of the house,” she continued. “I can’t stand being in Augusta anymore, sitting and waiting and waiting and waiting. I’ll go crazy in Portland, too. There are too many people who will want to ask me too many questions and I just feel worn out. I don’t want to talk about it anymore.”

“How long do you plan to stay in Swiftwater?”

“Maybe a few days, or until I hear about Mom. I just want to be somewhere quiet, somewhere that feels like home.”

I almost told her to go to Farmington, but I knew that Farmington was no longer home for Jenn any more than my parents’ old place in Webster was home for me. The late-evening air was still and quiet. Even the crickets chirping in the field seemed somber, warning me that I risked her leaving again.

“You’re welcome to come.”

Jenn planned to leave Portland on Friday late-afternoon, after catching up on a week’s worth of errands. Around noon on Friday, though, the front crashed into the warm, humid Atlantic air and spilled several inches of rain on northern New England. Tremendous bolts of lightning heralded the deluge. The wind brought down a sizable pine branch fifty yards from the house and the driveway gullies appeared again. Swiftwater lost power briefly, so I resorted to a battery-powered AM radio for local news.

“Have the storms hit Portland yet?” I asked Jenn on the phone.

“Not really just yet. Why?”

“They’re reporting a lot of road flooding between Portland and Swiftwater. We got hit pretty hard here, so I’m not surprised. They said Route 2 was closed around

Bethel. Anyway, I think you probably should hold off coming up here for now. Maybe it will be okay tomorrow.”

She was silent for a minute; I even checked my phone to see if the call had dropped.

“Jenn? You there?”

“We got the news about Mom.”

A loud growl of thunder shook the house and a streak of rain lashed the sliding glass door that led out to the deck. Several trees bent over in the gust and threatened to snap.

“What’s the news?” I whispered.

“Three to six months.”

“Oh, Jenn...”

“It sounds like a prison sentence.”

My legs were wobbly. I sat down at the table and my head fell to my palm. The wind tossed leaves in the air, scattering them in a hundred directions. Small branches littered the driveway and larger ones groaned helplessly, clinging as well as they could to their trunks. The storm grumbled, but it seemed very far away, much farther than Jenn’s voice and the image of Emma Sharp, cancer-ridden, lying in her hospital bed. I sat and stared at the phone on the table, knowing that there were no more phone calls to make and no more words to say. Nothing seems to make much sense when it feels like your guts have been kicked in.

The rain picked up again, so I turned and headed up the road and my driveway. A fog enveloped the town, giving the town an unearthly glow despite the moonless night. The air was damp and suddenly chilly. I made myself a cup of tea, sat on the couch, and was asleep in fifteen minutes.

My heart leapt in the middle of breakfast as a siren sounded in the direction of town, causing the hair to rise on the back of my neck. I immediately turned on the radio and was greeted with an emergency message—the October River was threatening to flood Swiftwater. Within three minutes, I was dressed and out the door.

The rain greeted Sunday morning with torrents. There was standing water in the garden and the rainwater was pouring off my roof like a waterfall. I jumped in my car and drove down the driveway, which was being washed away again. Crossing the covered bridge, the October looked frightening. The storm had created a monster of churning white water whose spray rose above the covered bridge. The power was unnerving and I was glad to get off the bridge, which seemed to be quaking at its knees. The town square was in chaos. Emergency vehicles lined the streets and people rushed around frenetically. The police chief was on a bullhorn trying to direct the mayhem. I parked in front of Fairmont's Deli and, seeing Nicholas stepping out of the church, ran over to him.

"I'm canceling today's service," he said, holding his hand to his forehead like a visor to defend against the pelting rain.

"I guess you are," I said, turning to walk with him toward the center of the action. We lost each other when a police car drove by, and a herd of people pushed past us. A police car was blocking the road leading south from the green, which drops down a hill and runs past the hospital and baseball field. Volunteer firemen and a police officer were yelling instructions over the din of the wind-driven rain. They almost choked on the rain that lashed their faces. The hectic townsfolk were gradually herded down the road, on foot. The green became a de facto parking lot.

"Sand bags and sand trucks are down at the hospital!" a fireman yelled repeatedly. "They'll direct you from there!"

I overheard that the river had nearly inundated the baseball field already and the water was reaching for the hospital's parking lot, and rising. I could see the panic in the eyes of my neighbors as they hustled toward the hospital.

"Is that Jacob Thomas?" a voice behind me said.

I turned around and saw Peter Dellay Sr. shielding his eyes against the rain.

"Hi, Coach!"

"Quite some weather, eh?" I said.

The four of us hustled down to the hospital, about a half-mile away. Several men stood with shovels in the back of dump trucks that were loaded with sand. Others held the bags into which they shoveled sand. From there, a relay line of volunteers hurried the bags to the slowly-growing wall that looked pithy against the contentious October River.

"More hands mean more sand means a higher wall. Come on, folks!"

A man in the back of one truck directed a number of us who were arriving at the same time. Most jumped into the relay lines to accelerate that process. Just then, another truck roared into the lot and backed quickly into position. Randy leapt from the cab and somehow immediately saw me in the midst of the rain-drenched crowd.

"Thomas, jump up here and start shoveling," he said.

After an hour, Randy and I hopped down to take a brief respite from shoveling. Two others eagerly took our place, and we planned to jump in the relay line after a minute of rest.

Peter and Melissa had taken their spots in one relay line; Peter Jr. tried to help, but he had to take frequent breaks after lugging heavy sandbags. There were a few other younger kids around, too, and they all had gone up the hillside from the clinic, out of the way. A few of them poked around the trees and threw acorns and pine cones at each other, but Peter wandered to the top of the knoll to look upstream.

The clinic sat on a piece of land that jutted slightly into the river. After passing under the covered bridge and downtown, the river took a slight jog to its left, the east, and then wrapped around to the right, flowing past the baseball fields. From the knob of land above the clinic, where Peter Jr. sat, a person could see upstream to the covered bridge, and downstream past the ballfields. Since we had all gathered at the health clinic and worked on the concave side of the river, the shoreline was relatively docile compared to the whitewater rushing in the middle of the river. The October had begun to claw at the sandbags, but in the excitement, nobody had noticed that the hungry river upstream was eating away at the promontory of land on which Peter rested, until a piercing scream went up, and we all looked and saw yards of hillside giving way, collapsing into the raging torrent beneath.

Entire trees slid down the hillside into the brown, frothy water, along with young Peter Dellay. The hillside seemed to shudder in slow-motion as the river slowly swallowed it whole. Peter's desperate face turned toward his parents as he realized what was happening. A gape in the hillside rent Peter's small knob free from any mooring.

Melissa screamed and the entire town was paralyzed as we watched Peter Jr. slide into the current and become just an outstretched arm reaching above the frenzied waters. Mouth agape, I turned to Randy, and my stomach dropped.

Randy was running full bore down the slope, eyes afire. He leapt from a rock outcrop into the October River. Peter's torso bobbed above the current and we could see his face momentarily, gasping for breath. Randy tried swimming to Peter, and before I knew what was happening, my feet were running downstream along the bank. I ran all the way to the playing fields, where the river was already up to the bleachers. A car had been stuck in the mud earlier and two pickups had pulled it out. The men were still there, as was a rope, tied to the hitch of a pickup. When they saw me sprinting toward them and yelling at the river, all eyes landed on Randy and Peter, who were clinging to each other in the rapids. I saw the rope and looked back to Randy and Peter, but all I saw were the crashing rapids and my stomach dropped in fear.

A figure burst past me and grabbed the rope, wrapping it around his right wrist several times, and yelling at our astonished faces to hold the other end. Then Peter Dellay Sr. leapt into the river and swam toward his son. He appeared to jump from wave crest to wave crest as though they were rocks in a stream.

There was an island, now submerged, in the river. Randy and Peter Jr. were floating directly toward the tree branches that were sticking out of the water. Peter Sr. was tossed over a rapid, but he was headed toward the branches of a dozen trees that rose above the waters like a spiderweb.

The water reaching around my feet was frigid, and Peter was tossed like a doll in a section that was normally docile. He gasped for breath after being plunged beneath a

rapid and nearly cried in pain after slamming into a rock. When he went over the next wave, he lunged for some tree branches, but they were too small and escaped his grasp. After another rapid, Peter reached for the next set of branches, missing again. He was swept right toward a larger tree and he clumsily swung his arm toward it. His hand wrapped around a stout branch, a few inches in diameter.

There were four of us onshore, feet in the mud or in the river itself, holding the nearly-taut rope with white knuckles. A crowd was rushing down from the hospital, watching the scene unfold. From the corner of my eye, I saw Steven Waterman race into the river, calling for his father. He slipped and the current pulled him under. Without thinking, I dove after him and grabbed his arm. The water was only waist-deep on me and I yanked him above the current. He hung from me, dripping and stunned.

“Steven,” I said, my heart pounding in my chest.

“Thanks, Coach,” he said, throwing his arms around me.

I squeezed him and held him tight. My eyes found their way to Randy in the middle of the river, holding Peter Jr. and looking right at me, reflecting the same scared look that was in my eyes.

By that time, Elizabeth Waterman had reached us, so I handed Steven over to her. Out in the river, Peter Jr. looked half-dead, and Randy was terrified, but gripped him like a brother. Peter Sr. held up the rope to show Randy that he had a way for them to be dragged back to shore. Randy motioned that they would try to work through the branches. Peter Sr. crouched on the branch, ready to leap. Randy reached for the next branch, careful not to lose his grip on Peter. They were just ten feet from Peter Sr. when Randy’s hand slipped from a branch.

They crashed into the water and immediately vanished from sight. I yelled when Randy’s hand poked above the waters like a periscope. Peter Sr. cried out and the name of his son pierced through the din of the crashing waters. He watched Randy’s hand sail past like a lazy fly ball against a summer sky. Peter sprung from the branch, gripping the rope in his right hand and reaching for Randy with his left. He caught him just below the wrist. The rope became taut and cut through the skin on my right hand, jerking the four of us forward.

“Pull! Pull!”

Several others jumped into the line and helped reel them in. The rapids crashed against them constantly, and dunked them underwater repeatedly. We hauled with everything we had, faster and faster. We seemed to pull on the rope interminably, and I feared they would drown right there.

“Get them out! Get them out!” Melissa yelled.

At last we yanked them over the last rapid and into the relative calm of the edge of the river. Several men waded in and dragged them to shore. Peter Dellay Sr. threw himself around his son and carried him onto the baseball field. I grabbed Randy and hauled him to shore, stumbling onto rain-soaked, but relatively dry, ground.

“You crazy fool!” I yelled at him. I grabbed him by the shirt and we stood soaking wet and panting for breath. Instead of a punch, though, we wound up hugging each other and then sitting on the ground, propped up against a truck.

“I wasn’t going to watch another kid die in that river,” Randy said, still panting for breath.

Hysterical tears ran down my cheek and hands were trembling with adrenaline. We looked at each other, shivering and coughing up river water. I looked down at my right arm where blood was oozing from the rope-burn. A number of people crowded around us, trying to help. Somebody attended to my arm with some gauze. Blankets appeared and we were encouraged to go up to the hospital for some dry clothes and first aid.

We stood to leave and Randy said, "Next time have a cup of coffee waiting for me, okay?"

"Quit falling in the river, you son of a bitch."

We laughed stupidly and jokingly punched each other in the shoulder. Just then, the Dellay family pushed through the crowd. Melissa was walking with her arms around Peter Jr.'s shivering shoulders. Randy and Peter Sr. looked at each other for a long moment before Peter embraced him. I was cold and just wanted to go home. In the small hospital, they gave me warm, dry blankets and a steaming cup of cider.

We never made the news in Boston or Manchester or Portland or Burlington. Randy went right back to filling sandbags and the October retreated by late afternoon and never touched the clinic. Clearing some driftwood from the ballfield was the extent of the clean-up.

That night, though, whenever I closed my eyes to sleep, I was the one crouching in a tree branch in the middle of the October River, and it was Jenn's hand floating by, carried downstream, and disappearing while I was too scared to reach for her.

Jenn came to Swiftwater the following Saturday morning. It had not rained since the Sunday flood, but it began to drizzle again Friday night, and was lightly raining throughout Saturday, a chilly autumn rain that fell as though the leaves were red and summer was a memory. The ground, still saturated from the previous week's rain, was sloppy and soft.

I heard her car pull up just before noon and she was already hurrying to the covered portion of the deck by the time I was downstairs to greet her. We exchanged pleasantries while she shook the rain off her clothes.

"Even the driveway is mushy," she said.

"We really had a lot of rain last week. It's hard to step in the garden without sinking in ankle-deep."

She breathed deeply and looked out toward the field.

"It's really good to be here."

Maybe it was the rainy day, or maybe the near-death in the October River six days previous, or maybe the coming-death of her mother, but I could not have agreed more that Jenn being on the Thomas Farm was good. In fact, she made my house complete.

"I'm glad you're here."

I took her small suitcase and we walked inside. She looked around like she was expecting it to be much different since her last visit. I made tea for the cold morning.

"How is your Mom?"

"Dying," she said, looking down.

I took the boiling water off the stovetop.

"She's doing better than the rest of us, though. She's going home."

"Back to Farmington already?"

"No, *home*. She'll be in heaven while we're stuck in winter. That's what she keeps saying." Jenn played with her hands and never looked up. "I still can't imagine her not being here."

"Is she going to be able to live it out in Farmington, though, as long as she is alive?"

"I think so. The medical people want her to stay at some hospice place, but once it's inevitable, what's the point of her staying in a stupid hospital? I'd rather she spend her time in Farmington, even if it's less time. I don't care what they say. They say that you can't put a price on her life, but they send you a bill anyway."

Jenn slowly raised her mug to her lips. I leaned back against the countertop.

"I know I'm not a very good guest, but I was hoping to be outside to have some time by myself. It's hard to get away from everything in Portland. I feel more comfortable here than anywhere."

After finishing our tea, we went outside, despite the steady rain that was falling with greater intensity. Jenn stepped into the garden, trying to keep on the most solid ground available. I stayed a short distance away, enough to give her some space to let her be and to think or pray or whatever she needed. I was just worried; she was so quiet and withdrawn. I guess if the road is not getting easier, it's at least nice to have some company along the way.

I grabbed a shovel and worked on deepening the trench that ran alongside the driveway, losing track of time. With my back turned to her, I heard nothing but the splattering of rain—on my head, on my jacket, on the ground—becoming white noise in my mind and I found myself completely absorbed in the simple task at hand. I could not hear the wind pushing tree branches against one another or the creaking and groaning of tall birches; a car or two drove by and they hardly registered. But I whipped around instantly when I heard Jenn give a sharp, sudden cry.

Her pitchfork was stuck in the mud and she could not extract it. After several grunts and violent tugs, she fell to her knees like a frenzied animal and began clawing desperately at the ground, muttering angry words. Clods of mud flew. She reached for the pitchfork again and it jumped from the mire, nearly sending her tumbling onto her back. She struggled for balance in the slippery mud.

Everything stopped for a minute. Her back was turned and all I could see of her face was a lock of her blonde hair and the steam rising with each breath. She was staring at the ground where the pitchfork had been, where she had been trying to turn over the soil. A gust of wind kicked up some leaves that blew into her, but she was oblivious. I took a tentative step toward her.

Without warning, she raised the pitchfork above her head and smashed it into the ground. She raised it again and smashed it against the mud. Again and again. Finally, she tossed it aside and half-slipped, half-sat in the mud in a cold rain and started to sob.

I let my shovel fall and I slowly walked toward her, having no idea what to do next. No words came to me, so I sat down in the mud beside her and put an arm around her shoulders. After a moment, I leaned over, wrapped both arms around her, and pulled her close—her rain-matted hair against my face. She never looked at me or put her arms around me or moved at all; she just sat limp in my arms, tears mixing with the rain.

I can't even say how long we sat like that; it was long after my leg cramped and my foot fell asleep. She cried until I could no longer tell whether I was wet from rain, mud, or tears. I just held her and watched her the whole time, her chest heaving. Her nose with its four freckles wrinkled with each sob. Her hair was flecked with mud and I noticed a growing blister on her left thumb. The rain formed a puddle on her shoulder and then ran down her side, across my hand and her waist to the ground. Her work pants were filthy. Broken leaves and grit clung to them and I could still see the stain from a day of raspberry picking several weeks previous.

She was beautiful.

After so long a time had passed that even the rain seemed to abate, Jenn's sobbing gradually ceased. She stirred meekly in my arms. I lifted her head off of my chest and saw that her eyes were closed and her lips were blue. She had not even bothered to shiver.

I picked her up and carried her into the house. Jenn could barely stand on her own power, so I dressed her in warm, dry clothes, put her in my bed, and fed her hot soup. I planned to sleep in the guest room, but instead sat beside the bed watching her sleep. Even after night fell, I remained vigilant, watching her breathe, losing track of time. Her hair occasionally fell across her face when she moved in her sleep, and I would gently clear it away, tucking it behind her ear. It made me smile every time.

At one point, the moonlight appeared and drew me to the window on the other side of the bedroom. The light was gentle, a promise that the driving rains were over. The light fell on Jenn as she slept, caressing her cheeks that still bore stains of dried tears.

I left the room for a moment and stepped onto the damp deck. The clouds were rent and their edges white with moonlight. Through the gaps, the stars appeared. The field was empty; the road was silent. The leaning split-rail fence ran down the driveway. I heard voices as though they were coming from the stars—Peter asking me if I wanted a simple life or a married life, Nicholas telling me to forego my right to be right, Jenn pleading for forgiveness. I heard my Mom’s warm voice and felt a breeze tousle my hair. I heard my Dad, and saw him sweeping Mom off her feet in our old house.

I returned to Jenn’s bedside and prayed until dawn crept through the window. As morning rose, I stumbled to the kitchen to make coffee and continue my vigil. The smell must have awakened her and she rolled over to see me seated beside the bed. Her eyes were blurry and red, with crust along her lashes; her face was pale. Our eyes held for a long minute until she broke the gaze. She shuffled under the blankets and her hand protruded, silently inviting me to hold it, which I did. She released a long sigh.

“I miss my Mom already,” Jenn said.

Her hand was warm and soft. I ran my fingers over hers and wished that I had some measure of power to heal her wounds.

“I miss mine, too,” I said.

“I love you, Jacob. I do.”

I walked to my dresser and picked up the ring that I had nearly thrown in Meredith Bay a few weeks earlier. The first proposal speech had not gone over well, so this time I simply walked to her, put the ring on her finger and whispered, “Will you marry me?”

She said yes.